Scriptural Reasoning in the Context of Limited Pluralism: the Unique Challenges of a Roman Catholic Context

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The contributing authors of Interfaith Reading After Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism agree that these are three schools of thought that belong in conversation with one another. One compelling reason for this conversation is that, as Paul D. Murray explains in his chapter, the three schools of thought of Scriptural Reasoning, comparative theology, and receptive ecumenism, respectively, are all committed to pluralism. However, while Murray and others in Ford and Clemson’s volume discuss how a commitment to pluralism plays out in the context of the practices associated with each school of thought, what they do not address is how to navigate challenges that arise when pluralism is limited in the context one works within. How, for example, does one introduce the practices of Scriptural Reasoning in contexts in which little religious diversity is present, contexts which often have populations who lack awareness about other traditions and the importance of encountering other traditions in dialogue in varied ways?

In this article, I will discuss the particular challenges associated with the practice of Scriptural Reasoning in a Roman Catholic academic context. Roman Catholic colleges and universities, especially ones that are small and not urban, are one such example of contexts with limited pluralism. Unlike Kevin L. Hughes’ article, though, I will not emphasize the challenges associated with Scriptural Reasoning for Catholics because of their different reading practices associated with Scripture. Instead, I focus on the reality that while some large Catholic universities are religiously diverse, there are enough small Catholic colleges and universities that are not religiously diverse to merit discussion of the challenges faced by nearly homogenous Catholic contexts when they seek to engage in Scriptural Reasoning in particular.

I will first discuss the particular challenges that small Catholic universities face as they seek to engage in interreligious dialogue, especially Scriptural Reasoning. I will then discuss my own experience introducing Scriptural Reasoning while teaching in one of these types of universities. Since these institutions are also guided by Vatican II’s language urging increased interreligious dialogue, they are a useful example to consider in light of the broader questions motivating this article: how is it possible to embody a commitment to pluralism in a context that is not religiously diverse? What does such a commitment look like in a primarily Catholic context? And in thinking about engaging in the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, what lessons might a Catholic context provide for other contexts in which limited pluralism is an issue?

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1 David F. Ford and Frances Clemson, eds. Interreligious Reading After Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism. (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd.)
3 Kevin L. Hughes, “Deep Reasonings: Sources Chretiennes, Resourcement, and the Logic if Scripture in the years before—and after—Vatican II,” in Ibid.
Catholic Colleges and Universities: Challenges and Opportunities

The Context: Low Religious Diversity and the Challenge of Pluralism

It is important to note that religious diversity and pluralism are not the same thing. On one hand, religious diversity can only be described in numbers and, thus, has little to say beyond a factual report about demographics. Pluralism, however, need not be about numbers. According to the Harvard Pluralism Project,

‘Pluralism’ and ‘diversity’ are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, but diversity—splendid, colorful, and perhaps threatening—is not pluralism. Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that diversity. For example, on the same street in Silver Spring, Maryland are a Vietnamese Catholic church, a Cambodian Buddhist temple, a Ukrainian Orthodox church, a Muslim Community Center, a Hispanic First Church of God, and a Hindu temple. This is certainly diversity, but without any engagement or relationship among the different groups it may not be an instance of pluralism.4

If, as the Harvard Pluralism Project suggests, pluralism is the active engagement of diversity, then a certain degree of religious diversity may be a helpful factor, but without engagement, it will not lead to pluralism. On the other hand, the intent of the passage above also suggests that the amount of diversity may make little difference in whether pluralism is present. If there is active engagement of religious differences present within a community, then there is pluralism no matter how nearly homogenous that community may be.

This is good news for Catholic higher education institutions. Of the 233 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, with enrollment totaling over 800,000 students, about 65% of students self-identify as Catholic.5 While data are not readily available about the religious affiliations of the remaining 35% of the populations at Catholic colleges and universities, we can make some educated guesses based on trends in religious demographics in the United States. Recent data from the Pew Forum indicates that the United States’ population is 78% Christian, 15% unaffiliated, 2% Jewish, 1% Buddhist and less than 1% of each of the following: Muslim, Hindu, Folk Religions and “Other” religions.6 It would be reasonable to assume that Catholic universities and colleges would have a Christian population of at least 78%, given that Christians of other denominations are drawn to Catholic institutions. How, then, are Catholic institutions meaningfully engaging the other 35% of their populations? This is the question and the

challenge. If Catholic institutions can commit themselves to pluralism even with low religious diversity, they will come much closer to reaching their own missions to engage in interreligious dialogue. I will return to this point in the next section.

Does this overall lack of significant diversity at Catholic higher education institutions mean that these institutions are not committed to pluralism? Certainly, the trend towards having personnel at academic establishments dedicated to the work of diversity and inclusion at an institutional level suggests that it is at least one aspect of a university’s commitment to pluralism. Yet, just because an academic institution has an office of diversity and inclusion within its administration does not necessarily mean it is actively engaging the diversity that is inherent to its context. As the excerpt from the Pluralism Project suggests, it is possible for a neighborhood to be demographically highly diverse, but if people from different religious populations share the same street and never speak to one another, pluralism is absent.

Thus, it is important to realize that although increasing religious diversity is a laudable goal that many universities may take on, it can only become but one part of an institution’s commitment to pluralism, as engagement with others is just as necessary. In addition, it is important to recognize that low religious diversity may continue to be a reality for many Catholic colleges and universities. Given this reality, the challenge becomes how such institutions can nonetheless demonstrate a commitment to pluralism. And in particular, if such institutions are interested in practicing Scriptural Reasoning, an approach that could lead to deep, intensive engagement between people of different religious backgrounds, how should they begin? I will return to this question in the second half of this article.

When the Question of Pluralism is Avoided

One challenge that Catholic universities and colleges must always address is negotiating the mission of their founders (e.g. the mission of the specific religious order that founded the college or university) alongside changes in the broader Church and the modern world. In recent discussions regarding engaging others from other religious traditions, tensions have arisen in the form of the question, how is it possible to engage members of other faiths while staying true to a Catholic identity? As one scholar who is involved in investigating how to deepen interfaith engagement in Catholic contexts explained, “People are very hesitant to think about a concept of pluralism… because they think that means letting go of their own religious commitments.”

Yet, by itself, the challenge to stay true to mission and identity in a Catholic context need not be a source of tension in engaging in Scriptural Reasoning. On the contrary, the fact that Catholic universities and colleges are inclined to stay rooted in their own missions makes them ripe for the practice of Scriptural Reasoning. This is because Scriptural Reasoning requires that each participant remain grounded in his or her tradition, while remaining open to the views of others from other traditions and how those views might enrich his/her understanding of her/his own tradition. As Steven Kepnes writes, Scriptural Reasoning “is about serious conversation

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between three [traditionally Abrahamic] religious traditions that preserves difference as it establishes relations.”

However, it was not a given that Catholic reading of Scripture would necessarily follow the model described above: groundedness in tradition integrated with openness to other traditions. Instead, after Vatican II, according to Hughes, the Church was extolled for taking on a “modern, liberal model … [that] was helpful insofar as it was able to move Catholic thought and process into deeper engagement with other confessions and faith traditions, but this deeper engagement required a prior alienation from one’s own roots and sources.” If Hughes is correct about the point that “alienation” from tradition is a prerequisite for liberal readings of Scripture, then this factor could help explain the Catholic reticence towards interreligious dialogue as a source that might ebb away at distinct Catholic identities.

The challenge then becomes how can Catholic universities can still become more engaged in interreligious dialogue—as Vatican II urged—while not losing sight of their own rich tradition of exegesis, conciliar history, liturgy, and papal authority (to name just a few Catholic sources and traditions). One answer is Dault’s proposal of a uniquely “Catholic Scriptural Reasoning,” which would take into account the Church’s magisterial tradition in the context of dialogue. Dault’s proposal is helpful insofar as it takes into account the different means by which Catholics are taught to read and engage with Scripture. For example, he contrasts how Catholics encounter Christianity not as a “Religion of the Book,” but as the “Word of God.”

Thus, unlike Protestants who are more “book” oriented in their readings of Scripture, Catholics regard Scripture as the living, unfolding Word of God.

Yet, if Dault’s argument for a Catholic Scriptural Reasoning tells us anything, it is that context makes an enormous difference in constructing Scriptural Reasoning’s tent. A Catholic cannot set aside the magisterial tradition of the Church when s/he joins the Scriptural Reasoning table. In a similar manner, Catholics in a less religiously diverse academic context who want to engage in Scriptural Reasoning also need to acknowledge and consider the challenges raised by this kind of setting.

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9 Hughes, 40-41.

10 David Dault, “Catholic Reasoning and Reading Across Traditions,” in Interreligious Reading.

11 Dault, 52.
Introducing Scriptural Reasoning in a Catholic Context of Limited Pluralism

Challenges in the Classroom

I taught the introductory theology and religious studies course at a small, suburban, and Jesuit university with a significant Catholic population. As a Jesuit university, the university considered Theology and Religious Studies 101 both a staple of students’ exposure to the Jesuit mission within the curriculum, as well as a fundamental component of a Jesuit, liberal arts education. Thus, every student in my classes was there because s/he was required to take a section of the course by the time s/he graduated. It was in this context that I attempted to introduce the practice of Scriptural Reasoning.

Because so many of my students were Catholic, and many had little to no exposure to people of other traditions (including non-Catholic Christians), just making a strong case for substantive interreligious dialogue was major step for such students. Many of the assumptions that even beginning practitioners of Scriptural Reasoning take for granted were new and foreign to my students. For example, consider the following:

- Practitioners of Scriptural Reasoning from the Abrahamic traditions understand why there are strong historical, theological and spiritual reasons for these traditions sharing the “Tent of Meeting” that is SR. The three traditions have a shared respect for their religious texts and important overlaps—though with significant differences—in the development of their religions. Yet, for a Roman Catholic student with little exposure to other traditions, the historic relationship between the Abrahamic traditions is unknown to them. One student asked in class, “So, is it the case that Christianity and Islam are both based on Judaism?” In relation to this, Kepnes writes,

SR is neither about the roots of Christianity in Judaism nor the roots of Islam in Jewish and Christian traditions. SR is also not about academic Jewish-Christian-Islamic understanding. SR acknowledges Abraham (and Adam before him) as a source figure for the three monotheistic religions, but SR does not seek to reduce or dissolve these religions into some universal Abrahamic faith. Rather, SR is about serious conversation between three religious traditions that preserves difference as it establishes relations.13

While Kepnes is clear about the fact that Scriptural Reasoning is not about the historic relationship between the Abrahamic faiths, the acknowledgement of Abraham as a

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12 Although I do not provide formal data here, any given section of the Theology and Religious Studies 101 course was a random sample of students at the university. This is because Theology and Religious Studies 101 is a required course at the institution where I taught when I wrote this article. Since most of my students were Catholic, it can be safely assumed that the institution as a whole shares a similar demographic. This conclusion was also confirmed by Campus Ministry’s anonymous surveys of students, which provided evidence that the majority of students were indeed Catholic.

13 Kepnes, 1-2.
“source figure” requires some prior understanding that a historic relationship between these traditions exists. Only with this shared understanding is it then possible to go to the Scriptural Reasoning table with the intention of recognizing differences.

- Kepnes’s last point, the importance of preserving differences as a means of establishing interreligious relations, leads to the second challenge that my students faced: the idea that the point of Scriptural Reasoning is not to come to consensus or to draw conclusions from the experience was a new experience for them. On one hand, becoming accustomed to discussions whose objective is to share differences, and to allow those differences to provide insights into their understanding of their own tradition, is a skill that is difficult for any beginning college student to learn. On the other hand, students with more exposure to differences—religious or otherwise—in their own backgrounds have an easier time taking the leap into this aspect of Scriptural Reasoning: the fact that it encourages differences among its practitioners.

- Finally, in the spirit of inclusion and encouraging students to take ownership of their own religious education, I introduced Scriptural Reasoning not as a practice defined by academics who are also members of faith communities, but as a practice that anyone with dedication and a serious interest in studying religious texts can practice. This principle I drew from the University of Cambridge’s Scriptural Reasoning resources, which emphasize that “[n]o one needs to have a religious education or an academic background. A passion for their scriptures is all that is required.” Yet, for many of my Roman Catholic students, it was difficult for them to accept the idea that a passion for studying the religious texts of one’s own tradition was enough for them to participate in Scriptural Reasoning themselves. They are used to clergy as the holders of religious knowledge and as the access points for them if they want to understand their own tradition better.

Together, these three challenges shaped how I made decisions about how to introduce the practice of Scriptural Reasoning to my students.

**Adapting Scriptural Reasoning in a Primarily Roman Catholic Classroom**

Initially when I began thinking about how to incorporate the practice of Scriptural Reasoning into my introductory theology and religious studies courses, I hoped to have the students form Scriptural Reasoning groups outside of class and then present about their experiences. This would have required students to reach out to people from other traditions to

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15 Kepnes, 4.
form the groups, then meet together to share texts, and then reflect upon that experience in a classroom presentation. However, as much as I wanted to give the students firsthand experience practicing Scriptural Reasoning themselves, my intuition told me that this approach would be too ambitious for first-year college students, particularly in an introductory course with additional objectives to meet beyond those of Scriptural Reasoning. Further, in classes of nearly thirty students, it would be difficult to have enough time for substantive presentations while also having enough time for other aspects of the course.

Thus, if students could not themselves participate in Scriptural Reasoning groups, I had to think carefully about how to introduce the practice in my classes. I thought carefully about the ethos of Scriptural Reasoning and how to ensure that students still encountered that ethos, whether or not they gained firsthand experience with the practice. By the ethos of Scriptural Reasoning, I refer to its goals to preserve differences between traditions, to develop interreligious relationships through respect for such differences, and through these relationships to engage in repairing the world. With this ethos in mind, I adapted the practice of Scriptural Reasoning to meet the needs and challenges my students faced, including those I discussed in the previous section.

I incorporated the practice into my class in three ways: (1) my students read Steven Kepnes’s “A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning” at the beginning of our section dedicated to reading Scripture and to learning biblical exegesis. My goal was to introduce them early on to the practice of interreligious reading and the value of reading with an openness towards other traditions within a Catholic context.17 (2) I organized a “Scriptural Reasoning panel,” which included a Christian member (one semester I filled this role, and another semester a lay Catholic minister filled this role), a Jewish educator and member of a Reform Jewish temple, and a Muslim who runs a local interfaith organization. Together, the three members of the panel met and decided on a shared theme and texts. Then, in the class, each panel member would share for about 10-12 minutes about the text from their tradition and discuss ways to interpret it. We then opened up the floor for questions from the other panelists and the students in the class. (3) Students wrote a reflection paper after the panel, in which they were asked to consider how their understanding of their own tradition was changed or affected by reading their own texts alongside those from other traditions. Reading the reflection papers also gave me a way to discern whether the students had in fact grasped the ethos of Scriptural Reasoning.

While scholars have noted that Scriptural Reasoning does not take one official form18 and has been adapted in many different global contexts,19 some would probably question whether what I did in my classes was in fact Scriptural Reasoning. Arguably, the students did not engage


19 David F. Ford provides a helpful synopsis of how and where Scriptural Reasoning developed, and how its practices have shifted as it enters new contexts. See “Scriptural Reasoning and the Legacy of Vatican II” in *Interfaith Reading*, 93-119.
in Scriptural Reasoning themselves. Instead, they witnessed it. On one hand, I and the other participants in my panel practiced Scriptural Reasoning in front of the students. On the other hand, when we opened up questions to the students, members of the class were invited to share their own interpretations in contrast to the ones the panelists gave. Interestingly, we noticed that when we, the panelists, grounded our interpretations more in personal experience and storytelling, students were more inclined to open up and share their own interpretations. In this way then, students were participants at the Scriptural Reasoning table as well. And further, they learned one of the valuable lessons of Scriptural Reasoning: that each participant speaks out of his/her own prior knowledge and experience and brings that to the table.

Yet, what of the unique challenges, which I discussed previously, that my primarily Roman Catholic students faced? Certainly the Scriptural Reasoning panel with members from the other Abrahamic traditions gave my students more exposure to the shared aspects of the three traditions. The fact that someone asked in class about the historic relationship between the Abrahamic traditions brought awareness of this into the forefront of class discussion. Nonetheless, even as students became more aware of shared traditions within Judaism, Christianity and Islam, they tended to gloss over important differences. While some students reflected in their papers on differences among the traditions that came up in the panel, many did not grasp the importance of “preserving differences.”

And finally, because they did not have the opportunity to participate in a Scriptural Reasoning group themselves, it was difficult for them to grasp the idea that anyone with a passion for studying religious texts can participate in Scriptural Reasoning. While we discussed this idea in class, and I emphasized that no one I brought to participate in the panel was a clergy member, it was difficult to tell whether they really understood this aspect of Scriptural Reasoning. With more time outside the formal classroom, I would take the opportunity to invite students from my classes to participate in an informal discussion about Scriptural Reasoning, in which they would be encouraged to form their own Scriptural Reasoning groups.

Lessons for Other Contexts with Limited Pluralism

Scriptural Reasoning has traditionally flourished in environments that are secular rather than defined by a particular religious tradition. This makes sense, given that a secular, neutral environment is most conducive to facilitating an environment where members of all religious traditions may be on equal terms. However, it is also important to recognize that locations for the practice of Scriptural Reasoning should be context-driven, and not all contexts are secular, neutral environments. If a considerable desire to engage in Scriptural Reasoning exists in an environment that is affiliated with a particular tradition, such as a Jesuit university, then the practice can and should be adapted for that particular context.

Simultaneously, it is also critical to preserve the integrity of Scriptural Reasoning so as to ensure that new participants are growing and learning from its central tenets. I would argue that

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21 Kepnes, 4.
concise rendition of Kepnes’s principles behind Scriptural Reasoning would include the following two points: 1) ensuring the participants within a Scriptural Reasoning community understand that the goal is to preserve difference, not to come to a consensus between traditions; and 2) that the goal of preserving such difference is for participants together to use their unique perspectives to better, or repair, the world.

Ford explains how secular, highly diverse academic institutions, which nonetheless have large Catholic populations, are actually quite rare. With the uniqueness of such institutions in mind, he contends that “there is a case for official Catholic Church support for such settings, and for … participation in such institutions [to be seen] as a recognized form of theological vocation.”

Yet, it is possible and important for institutions with less religious diversity to participate in Scriptural Reasoning. Indeed, along the lines of Ford’s argument above, it may be worth considering that deepening engagement through practices like Scriptural Reasoning within Catholic universities will lead them towards a stronger commitment to pluralism.

As I have discussed, introducing and engaging in Scriptural Reasoning in Catholic institutions with primarily Catholic student populations requires revisiting the central assumptions of the practice and making those assumptions explicit. Despite the fact that many of my students bring years of experience with religious schooling in a post-Vatican II environment into the classroom, they may have little exposure to Vatican II’s encouragement of interreligious dialogue. Thus, some foundations in the values associated with studying theology and religious studies in an interreligious manner are necessary. Scriptural Reasoning, even if practiced in a modified form, is a valuable way to introduce the practice of interreligious learning and dialogue.

Finally, the challenge of introducing Scriptural Reasoning in an environment with low religious diversity raises questions for other environments beyond Catholic ones. Scriptural Reasoning has been extending its global reach recently, and as it enters into more unique cultural contexts, new practitioners will need to think about how to most effectively introduce the practice based on the experience, knowledge, and awareness of people within these new settings. How, for example, will it be different to start the practice of Scriptural Reasoning in a country like Afghanistan, which is 99.7% Muslim? What about Gibraltar, which is 88.8% Christian and 4% Muslim?

As Scriptural Reasoning continues to flourish, and as the global religious landscape changes through migration and changes in religious affiliation, these are questions that will arise.

22 Ford, 113.