

# With a Lowercase “S”: Scriptural Reasoning and the Religiously Unaffiliated<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Before writing the paper on which this essay is based, my experience with Scriptural Reasoning had been as a spectator. I had been to colloquia at Union Theological Seminary and The Jewish Theological Seminary where SR was demonstrated. As a Bible scholar, I was intrigued; hearing a plurality of perspectives on selected texts and themes could inform my own readings and deepen my appreciation for various religious traditions. As a student at JTS, I could imagine performing the kinds of readings I saw at SR, approaching the Hebrew Bible through the lens of the history of Jewish biblical interpretation. But I had to wonder if I would in fact be a welcome participant, since I have no religious affiliation.

The “religiously unaffiliated” are a diverse group of Americans who, when responding to surveys, do not identify with a particular religion. For this reason they are often referred to as “nones”—the imagined box they would check on a survey form. This group, though not united through any positive commonality, is rapidly growing. The American Religious Identification Survey found that the religiously unaffiliated made up 8.1% of the U.S. adult population in 1990, and 15% in 2008.<sup>2</sup> Since then, they have only continued to grow. According to an in-depth report on the nones by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, nearly 20% of U.S. adults were unaffiliated in 2012, as were 32% of adults under 30.<sup>3</sup> More recent Pew research confirms even greater numbers: 23% of U.S. adults in 2014 were religiously unaffiliated.<sup>4</sup>

Unaffiliation does not necessarily mean a lack of religious sentiment. Those who identify as atheists comprise only one third of the unaffiliated, and an increasing number of nones experience regular feelings of “a deep sense of wonder about the universe.”<sup>5</sup> Numerous recent studies explore such sentiments among the nones, confirming that the rise of secularism has not diminished

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the SBL, Columbia, MD, March 6, 2015. My sincerest thanks to Matthew Vaughan for inviting me to give it and for his valuable assistance in its revision.

<sup>2</sup> Barry A. Kosmin, et. al., “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population,” report based on American Religious Identification Survey 2008, Hartford, CT (2009), <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/publications/2008-2/american-nones-the-profile-of-the-no-religion-population/>.

<sup>3</sup> “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (October 9, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

<sup>4</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (May 12, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>5</sup> “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (Nov 3, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

religiosity.<sup>6</sup> In fact, many nones are better described as “nonsecular” than as “nonreligious.” Krista Tippet wonders if the unaffiliated are “the greatest hope for the revitalization of religion.” She explains:

The growing universe of the nones is one of the most spiritually vibrant and provocative spaces in modern life. It is not a world in which spiritual life is absent. It is a world that resists religious excesses and shallows. Large swaths of this universe are wild with ethical passion and delving, openly theological curiosity, and they are expressing this in unexpected places and unexpected ways. There are churches and synagogues full of nones. They are also filling up undergraduate classes on the New Testament and St. Augustine.<sup>7</sup>

The unaffiliated are a growing, undeniable, and influential part of America’s religious landscape. It surprised me, then, that when I asked a colleague heavily involved with SR if an unaffiliated person like me could participate, there was no definitive answer.

In light of the place of the nones in contemporary society, I believe the question is a live one. As I hope to show below, the religiously unaffiliated can be valuable partners in the process of SR and in achieving its reparative goals. This essay, however, is not primarily an argument for their inclusion. Rather, it suggests that the question of unaffiliated participation must be decided internally. It is the current practitioners and theorists of SR who must answer: Ideologically, is it permissible? Practically, is it possible? And ultimately, is it problematic, or preferable? As an outsider, I offer no definitive way forward but challenge insiders to directly address the issue of religiously unaffiliated participation in SR.

### **Rules for Participation**

Several of SR’s important theorists have laid out guidelines for participating, but none offer a clear yes or no on whether the unaffiliated are eligible. Loosely articulated descriptions of SR are characteristic, neither fully prohibitive nor fully admissive. SR must more clearly identify who is in and who is out; the nebulous nature of these rules is less than sufficient in the current religious landscape.

Peter Ochs writes that the simplest form of SR, Formational Scriptural Reasoning, requires “three or more persons of any age eager to enter into a conversational fellowship with one another and, as it were, with these three text selections [from Abrahamic scriptural canons].”<sup>8</sup> This seems to suggest that a wide variety of persons are eligible for participation. It seems clear who they are assumed to be, and Ochs writes elsewhere that “SR is a way of reading scripture, at once within and

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, eds., *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Krista Tippet, “Religion Does Not Have a Monopoly on Faith,” *America: The Jesuit Review* (Feb 1, 2017), <http://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/02/01/krista-tippett-religion-does-not-have-monopoly-faith> .

<sup>8</sup> Peter Ochs, “Re-Socializing Scholars of Religious, Theological, and Theo-Philosophical Inquiry,” *Modern Theology* 29, no. 4 (2013): 207.

across the boundaries of our Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities.”<sup>9</sup> We should also remember that there is no “single, top-down definition of Scriptural Reasoning.”<sup>10</sup>

For Steven Kepnes, the practice of SR is only possible under certain conditions.<sup>11</sup> He insists that participants must be “at once dedicated to their religious traditions, knowledgeable in both discourses of traditional interpretation and contemporary social sciences, and willing to read their scripture with others outside their traditions.” This certainly precludes the religiously unaffiliated, but it is more restrictive than that. Calling for knowledge in the social sciences precludes many others, disqualifying religious individuals without a certain degree of education and suggesting that SR is a largely academic enterprise.

Nicholas Adams offers two conditions for participation: “membership in one of the [Abrahamic] traditions” and “the desire to understand members of other traditions’ interpretation of their own scripture, and their interpretation of one’s own scripture.”<sup>12</sup> The first condition disqualifies the unaffiliated, but Adams goes on to say that they are not actually ruled out: “such people seem to be treated as honoured guests rather than as participants.” Here, again, the loosely defined nature of SR frustrates the issue. Adams offers no practical definition of “honored guest” in relation to “participant.”

These conditions are in any case problematic, because Adams acknowledges that they only seem to be in place, not that they certainly are. Here he subscribes to the idea that any set of rules or definitions of SR cannot be inflexible. Adams also suggests some other criteria for participation, among which are a desire to study scriptural texts, an attitude of friendship, and a willingness to show hospitality.<sup>13</sup> These seem attainable for the unaffiliated, and Adams does see the practice as extendable to those outside of the Abrahamic faiths.

David Ford holds that each practitioner belongs to 1) a synagogue, church, or mosque, 2) a university, and 3) a scriptural reasoning group; respectively a house, a campus, and a tent.<sup>14</sup> This excludes the religiously unaffiliated, who would in this scheme be “homeless.” But he actually does admit more kinds of participation:

In a situation...in which some participants are not in any sense members of one of the three faith communities, scriptural reasoning is only likely to work well if those in the fourth category, together with those who are Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, conform to certain norms, such as imaginative understanding and respect for how the others take their scriptures, willingness to be as vulnerable as the others in exposing their basic convictions to argument, and unwillingness to claim either an overview or a neutral vantage point.<sup>15</sup>

Even though Ford allows the unaffiliated to participate and provides guidelines that would make

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Ochs, “The Society of Scriptural Reasoning: The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning,” *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>10</sup> Ochs, “Re-Socializing,” 202.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Kepnes, “A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning,” *Modern Theology* 22, no. 3 (2006): 381–82.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 241.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>14</sup> David F. Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning Between Jews, Christians, and Muslims,” *Modern Theology* 22, no. 3 (2006): 351.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

such participation successful, there is still hesitation, a sense that SR would be better off without such participants. But it is a much further cry from the restrictions of Kepnes.

The requirement of affiliation with a university, or membership in an academic circle, is unlikely to exclude would-be participants. SR is a practice built on dialogue and the exchange of ideas; those willing to communicate across religious and cultural boundaries certainly do not live in intellectual isolation. Deep commitment to an Abrahamic faith seems another self-evident prerequisite. It is the religious who most obviously have a stake to claim, a sense of ownership over their scriptures, an impulse to guard and protect them. As religion does not have a monopoly on belief, neither does it have one on scripture. The religiously unaffiliated, I will argue below, may have a mystical relationship with scripture that justifies their place at SR's table.

### **Unaffiliated Participation: With a Lowercase "S"**

If, within SR, it is determined that unaffiliated participation is possible, then we must still ask why the unaffiliated would want to participate, and how they might do so. The main issue to be considered here is the unaffiliated attitude towards holy texts. While Pew research has done much to identify the religiously unaffiliated and to track their rise in numbers, and some to outline their belief and God and their attendance of religious services, it has done little to explore their relationship with religious scripture.<sup>16</sup>

Though they may be intensely interested in such texts, it cannot be said that the unaffiliated have the same relationship with the Bible or the Quran that Jews, Christians, or Muslims do. The distinction may be one of artifact vs. scripture.<sup>17</sup> As Benjamin Sommer explains, to see the Bible as an artifact is to see it as a written anthology that sheds light on particular ancient cultures at particular points in history. When religious persons approach the Bible as scripture it "relates to them at an existential level. Its teachings demand a response, whether in thought or action, through self-definition or participation in a community. It is a sacred text, perhaps deriving from human authors but also connected to a divine source."<sup>18</sup> In this scheme, the unaffiliated, especially academics practicing historical-critical scholarship, consider the Bible an artifact, fascinating from a humanistic perspective but not inherently more so than the classic works of Mesopotamia or Greece.

Comparativist Wilfred Cantwell Smith makes a strong case for blurring the lines between this last dichotomy, scripture and classic.<sup>19</sup> Proceeding from a definition of scripture based on the reception of a textual tradition rather than its content, Smith argues that the Greco-Roman classics

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<sup>16</sup> A 2014 survey found that 65% of Americans consider the Bible and other works of scripture to be the "word of God," and that just over half of these believe scripture should be taken literally. These figures, however, are not explained in terms of religious affiliation. See "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (June 26, 2014), <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/26/the-political-typology-beyond-red-vs-blue/>.

<sup>17</sup> See Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 11–26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 176–95.

have in fact served as “the scriptures of the Western idealist-rationalist-humanist movement.”<sup>20</sup> For participants in this movement, the classics are not merely artifacts, but objects of an existentially significant encounter. As a great cultural foundation, and as texts that play an important role in current social and personal life—texts to be learned *from* and not just *about*—the classics can and have functioned as scripture for the religiously unaffiliated.

The other great foundation of Western culture is Judeo-Christian scripture itself. This functional equivalence of the Bible and Greco-Roman classics is well-illustrated by a University of Toronto course co-taught by Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson in the 1970s. The subject of the course was biblical and classical literature, and its title was “The Mythological Framework of Western Culture.”<sup>21</sup> Such equivalence in the academy is not surprising. Sommer notes that some readers of the Bible as artifact, especially biblical scholars, can approach it with an attitude that elevates it to the level of a classic: an exemplar of its parent culture and a model for one to come.<sup>22</sup> Recall Smith’s suggestion that the classics, reverently received as formative by humanists, can become nearly indistinguishable from scripture. By this circuitous route, the Bible, a cultural classic, might actually be “scripture” for the religiously unaffiliated.

Such non-religious students of scripture, as members and proponents of a highly pluralistic society (one that promotes rather than discourages religiosity),<sup>23</sup> are likely to be interested in SR. The question remains as to what their participation might look like. As the mention of Frye should suggest, the so-called literary approaches are especially well-suited to those who might view the Bible as religiously unaffiliated “scripture.” At the forefront of such approaches in the U.S. was Robert Alter, a handful of whose works exemplified and popularized the practice of reading the Bible “as literature.”<sup>24</sup>

Alter is a scholar of comparative literature, but he does not view the Bible as another artifact. He remarks that the Bible is “not an antiquarian book or a historical document but a literature that speaks to us urgently, with the power to ‘draw us out’ of ourselves.”<sup>25</sup> In Sommer’s terms, this is a text that demands a response. Religious conviction, however, is not a prerequisite for being so enthralled. For Alter, a humanistic reader encounters the biblical text at an existential level. Fine attention to the literary artistry of the text uncovers not the true account of God’s deeds in history, but the “deep continuity of human experience that makes the concerns of the ancient text directly accessible” to the analyst.<sup>26</sup> Such a reading paradoxically continues the process of

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>21</sup> Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths: The Mythological Framework of Western Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), xv–xiv.

<sup>22</sup> Sommer, *Revelation and Authority*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Courtney Bender, “Pluralism and Secularism,” in *Religion on the Edge: De-centering and Re-centering the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Courtney Bender et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 136–58.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); *idem*, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); and *idem*, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

secularizing scripture even as it “reinstates scriptural authority in new terms.”<sup>27</sup>

The Israeli biblicist Yair Zakovitch adopts a literary approach to the Bible from an explicitly secular position.<sup>28</sup> In his thinking, it is specifically the nonreligious aspect of a literary approach that makes the Bible relevant: “by removing the coating of sanctity that has been pressed onto the Bible, the courageous reader is suddenly able to extend his or her arm to touch the human document.”<sup>29</sup> When one abandons the traditionally held beliefs in the Bible’s divine origin and its compositional integrity, one finds in biblical thought human beings confronted by radical difference and change. This secular approach allows scripture to be a model for compromise in a pluralistic society.<sup>30</sup>

Post-structural literary approaches to the Bible are also well-suited to the unaffiliated. A fine example is the deconstructive work of feminist biblical scholar J. Cheryl Exum.<sup>31</sup> She performs her analyses of narratives “in order to reveal strategies by which patriarchal literature excludes, marginalizes, and otherwise operates to subjugate women,” also recognizing that biblical ideology has historically had real and negative effects on women, and continues to do so.<sup>32</sup> Exum’s feminist approach does not apologize for the Bible’s ideology, but rather reconstructs women’s voices to find its weaknesses and offers newly empowered readers paths of resistance to it.

It is clear that the religiously unaffiliated may have specific and intense interests in scripture, whether for humanist, nationalist, feminist, or other reasons. For some, religious texts move beyond the category of classic and become another kind of scripture, with a lowercase “s.” It is for this reason that their exclusion from SR should not be taken for granted. It also seems to me that, through literary approaches, the unaffiliated may participate in SR in ways not obvious to or permissible for members of the Abrahamic faith traditions. Such readings may problematize scripture, but they also help the work of healing meant to be a part of SR’s goals.

### Purposes and Problems

The above observations may serve as arguments for including the unaffiliated in SR. But there are elements of SR’s nature that may yet justify their pronounced exclusion. As currently construed, an SR session sees one text read from each faith tradition.<sup>33</sup> If the unaffiliated reads a text from the New Testament, and a Christian also participates, then the Christian scriptural tradition receives

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>28</sup> Yair Zakovitch, “Scripture and Israeli Secular Culture,” in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 299–316. Secular Israel has a peculiar attitude toward the Hebrew Bible and should be discussed apart from the more general phenomena of religious unaffiliation; see, e.g., Uriel Simon, “The Place of the Bible in Israeli Society: From National *Midrash* to Existential *Peshat*,” *Modern Judaism* 19 (1999): 217–39.

<sup>29</sup> Zakovitch, “Scripture and Israeli Secular Culture,” 307.

<sup>30</sup> Traditional religious assumptions about scripture are of course probably not held by most SR practitioners. But this underscores a problem with the confessional nature of SR: to what extent must a participant actually believe the official statements of his or her affiliated faith?

<sup>31</sup> See J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Here is another serious problem, since a biblical text from the Jewish tradition also belongs to the Christian.

twice the attention. If the unaffiliated must participate, then the religious perspective is rendered superfluous or denied. This defeats one purpose of SR. Adams writes that the practice is one that ideally “does not require participants to bracket or suspend or conceal their traditional identities for the purpose of conversation and argumentation.”<sup>34</sup> SR is deliberately designed to be a place for participants to engage their religious beliefs—not to suppress them as they might have to do in academic settings. Unaffiliated participation might then rob the affiliated of this space to be religiously genuine.

An essential question for SR to ask itself is whether or not it is a religious practice. It has been called liturgical, quasi-liturgical, and eschatological. After all, it is an activity of religious individuals. The role of God in the practice, or the role of God in the minds of the practitioners, is fundamental to how Ford sees SR: it is all done for the sake of God’s purposes. He writes that, although there is much to recommend the practice of SR, “the intention to please God above all is distinct and primary.”<sup>35</sup> That gives the impression of worship, or ritual service (i.e. religious practice). For Adams, SR challenges Habermas’ notion of the decline of religious thinking, which cannot attempt genuine argumentation in the public sphere and should be abandoned. Adams insists that SR has the potential to do this, since it is “one form of religious practice which fosters genuine argumentation between members of different traditions.”<sup>36</sup> If SR is a religious practice, the unaffiliated may have no business in it. If, nevertheless, they participate in SR, would it lose its religiosity? It might simply become a *chevruta*, a *Stammtisch*, a coffee klatsch. Is such desacralization tantamount to desecration? Again, this is an issue that must be decided internally.

Another important issue is one of community. Regarding SR’s purpose, Ochs writes that the practice “should not simply be for personal/professional advancement, but because our efforts have social use, are communally urgent.”<sup>37</sup> SR is meant to have a profound effect on religious communities. Kepnes writes that when meetings are over, the practitioners “return to their academic and religious institutions and to the world with renewed energy for these institutions and the world.”<sup>38</sup> The unaffiliated, by definition, have no religious communities. Many unaffiliated individuals study scriptural texts because they are personally interested in them and personally improved by them. It would be unfair to call this selfish, but such activity does not have a clear social use.

Closely related to the matter of social use and urgency is one of SR’s highest goals: reparation. In fact, SR can be called a form of “reparative reasoning.” SR can heal the hurts that have long existed between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. SR theorists are aware that these wounds have historically been a source of many global, societal problems. If SR can repair the relationships between religious traditions, it can have an enormous restorative effect on the entire world. It is not evident at first how unaffiliated readings of scripture could help repair relationships between religious communities if they are the activities of non-religious persons. *Qal wa-homer*, how could they help repair the world? The answers become more evident when one considers that the

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<sup>34</sup> Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, 252.

<sup>35</sup> David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 146.

<sup>36</sup> Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, 253.

<sup>37</sup> Ochs, “The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning.”

<sup>38</sup> Kepnes, “Handbook,” 368, 376.

religiously unaffiliated are very likely to have been the victims of religiously motivated violence or prejudice. Deconstructive readings performed by the unaffiliated can help to redeem scripture for those who have been hurt by it. Conversely, if SR seeks to be truly and globally reparative, it has a responsibility to those whom its traditions have harmed, and who in turn have left those traditions behind.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has raised a number of questions, not in a polemic against a deficient practice, but as encouragement of a worthwhile one. I recognize a number of complications in unaffiliated participation, hypothetical advantages and disadvantages. Demographically speaking, an encounter with the unaffiliated is inevitable. If SR is to be taught in classrooms, then unaffiliated students must participate. If SR is to heal even nonreligious systems, then these systems must have a place in the Scriptural Reasoning network. If SR is to transcend the differences among all humanity, then it must recognize where humanity finds transcendence and admit of scripture with a lowercase “s.”

SR must simply confront the reality that the religiously unaffiliated are a significant feature of the religious landscape and still have a meaningful relationship with sacred texts. If SR decides such persons may participate, it should develop qualifying criteria. If not, it must justify its exclusivity. Answers must come from within the SR community, but it is my hope as an outsider that we can continue to consider these questions within and across our boundaries, and reason deeply together.