

## **Improving the Quality of Our Disagreements: The Potential of Scriptural Reasoning for Helping to Repair the World**

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### **Background: My Introduction to Scriptural Reasoning**

I am fortunate to have spent much of my most recent sabbatical in Italy, in particular at the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome. This was a spectacular opportunity for research and writing, and reading and reflection as well. Specifically, I was the inaugural representative of an exchange program between the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Cardinal Bea Institute. Named after one of the figures most involved in Vatican II and the outreach to the Jewish people under the papacies of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, the Bea Institute is devoted to bringing understanding among people of all faiths. It sponsors graduate studies in religion, including Judaism, Islam, and Asian and African religions as well. Because of its historic devotion to interfaith dialogue, the Jewish Theological Seminary was a natural partner for the Vatican in this project.

And so, after a three-week intensive Italian course that I took at the beginning of my sabbatical, I arrived in February, 2011, in Rome, ready to take up my position in the university. Naturally, I expected to lecture in my field of expertise, the history of medieval Jewish and Christian biblical exegesis; however, it turned out that what they wanted me to teach was “Introduction to Judaism,” a subject that needless to say I am never called upon to teach at the Jewish Theological Seminary! Nonetheless, I went about preparing a course—and decided to prepare at least part of my first lecture in my newly acquired Italian. However, at the first class meeting I was quite surprised to learn that only one of my students was Italian! Among the others were a Creole-speaking priest from Haiti; a Spanish-speaking priest from Mexico; and several Muslims from Turkey and Albania! (I did have one English speaker, a priest from India.)

I must admit I was a bit apprehensive at first at being alone in such a profoundly Christian environment; how would I be treated, a lone, still mostly English-speaking rabbi?! I was truly “the other” in that place! Moreover, because of a variety of circumstances, my living quarters were at “The Lay Centre,” in a co-ed dorm... on the third-floor of a Passionist monastery situated in a beautiful private garden only a short walk from the Palatine Hill. Living there were many young Christian students, both lay and consecrated; several young Muslims, including an imam from Bosnia; and (now) one middle-aged rabbi! Again, I was more than a bit apprehensive. Moving in, I was greeted quite warmly by Dr. Donna Orsuto, the director of the Lay Centre: I had previously been in touch with Dr. Orsuto, and she had let me know that the monastery provided three meals a day, whenever I chose to eat in. I politely informed her that I was unlikely to be able to eat the food there, because of considerations of kashruth. She immediately countered with an offer: “Would it help if we acquire new pots and pans, and cook you vegetarian meals?!” Of course, I agreed to her most kind offer and regularly took meals with this wonderful religious community. One other quick story: there was no regular coffee prepared on Saturday mornings, and when my hosts discovered that I would not brew my own

coffee on the Sabbath, they took matters into their own hands: every Shabbat morning, whenever I opened my door, there was a tray outside in the hall with a coffee pot and mug, a piece of fruit and a yogurt—and a card, usually a postcard with a picture of Pope Benedict, with a greeting: “Shabbat shalom!” To say that I was truly and warmly welcomed is a gross understatement; I was made to feel at home from the get-go.

This kind of behavior followed me wherever I went, and I was regularly wined and dined by a series of religious houses, whether Jesuit, Franciscan, Dominican or Carmelite. At all of these houses, I was frequently invited to say grace, teach or preach; at first, when I hesitated—for their sakes, because I could not offer blessings in the name of Jesus—they were quick to respond that, no, they would be blessed in whatever religious language I employed. Every now and then I would ponder the difference between the mostly horrific experience of Jews under the auspices of the Catholic Church from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, and my own at the beginning of the 21st century.

### **An Eye Opening Sermon: How to Welcome the Other**

But now, I turn more directly to the subject at hand: I do not merely wish to tell stories to make my point, but at this point would like to share the essence of what must be called one of the most insightful sermons that I have ever heard. Truly, I consider it to be a *dvar Torah* (i.e., a “Torah lesson,” literally, “a word/statement of Torah”). The author of this lesson was Father Felix Körner, a Jesuit monk who is a professor at the Gregorian.<sup>1</sup> The context of his talk was a process that has come to be called “Scriptural Reasoning.” Developed, among others, by a Jewish professor from the United States, Stephen Kepnes, and a Protestant professor from Cambridge in the United Kingdom, David Ford, “Scriptural Reasoning” is essentially a series of meetings wherein representatives of Christianity, Islam and Judaism introduce texts from their scriptures on an agreed-upon topic, along with some traditional interpretative text (a commentary or a midrash or the like). After that, all of the participants “own” all of the texts and their respective interpretations—and they can then offer their own interpretations on any of the texts. This “trialogue” is modeled for a group of members of all three religious communities. And the goal of the conversation is not to convince, or persuade, or convert, but rather, as they put it, “to improve the quality of our disagreements.” As the Scriptural Reasoning web-site puts it:

SR is a practice of group reading of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that builds sociality among its practitioners and releases sources of reason, compassion, and divine spirit for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world. Thus, SR theory aims at a scripturally reasoned triadic response to the problems of the world that is motivated and sustained by the healing and divine spirit of scripture.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Körner has given me freedom to share his lesson (email exchanges, Spring–Fall, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org>. See also: William Taylor, *How to Pitch a Tent: a Beginner's Guide to Scriptural Reasoning*. <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/practical-guides>.

I was privileged to participate in several occasions of Scriptural Reasoning during my months in Rome—all of them taking place under the auspices of the Church.

On this particular evening, Father Körner spoke about the difference in expressions in three languages, Arabic, German/English and Hebrew, for “welcoming the other.” He began with the Arabic expression for welcoming, *ahlan wa-sahlan*. In Father Körner’s way of presenting it, this signifies “incompleteness,” the idea that the guest is welcomed because the host or hosts are incomplete without presence of the guest. In Arabic, the words *ahalan wa-sahalan* essentially mean “a family and a place,” or even more literally, “(You find here) a family, and (flat land/cushions) spread out,” as if to say, “we are a family but there is a place for you, we are not a complete family until you arrive.” After making this observation, Father Körner told the following story:

When I had started studying Islam, I was a member of the Jesuit community where the youngest members had their formation, the noviciate. Once, the novice master asked me to give a talk on Islam. I suggested: Let me invite a Muslim teacher of mine, we’ll do it together. Everybody felt that really made sense. It would have been strange for me to speak about Islam, when we could have a Muslim scholar do it, instead.

Thus, the Arabic idea of “welcome” is: Here is a family already; but we needed you, we have already laid out a place for you. Something was missing. You are welcome, because we are incomplete.

Father Körner then moved on to the German word *willkommen*, a cognate of our English word “welcome,” and he stated that he thought what this word indicated was the idea of insight. Moreover, he chose to see this not as a verb in the indicative mood, but rather in the subjunctive; “welcome” not as “it is well that you (do) come” but “I WILL it that you come,” i.e., “I REALLY want you to come. You bring me insight, and what you bring I have not yet known or understand: I am a better ME when you are in my life. I am a better Jew, Christian, Muslim when I understand your religion, your Scriptures.” I have come to see the wisdom in that observation: when I hear Muslims speak about the pure monotheism of their faith, I am spurred to rise to greater heights in my own comprehension of Judaism’s understanding of the Oneness of God; when I listen to Christians confess their faith in the Triune mystery, I bow at the modesty of their reflections and consider how misplaced is the utter confidence that some religious thinkers have in the presence of a truly unknowable God.

Father Körner told his own story:

Abdulhalim, my Arabic teacher, really came to the noviciate. The first thing I showed him was the chapel. I genuflected in front of the Blessed Sacrament. He asked me about it. I said, I do this, because it is the body of Christ. Abdulhalim very elegantly added a soft “For you!” I insisted, rather dogmatically: “For all!” Now he felt the need to set something right. He wanted me to be rational, so he needed this to sound less crazy. Therefore, he added: The body of Christ,

symbolically. – I said: more than that. But he had asked a good question. I myself need a better answer for that. His question made me go deeper. I wasn't able to give a convincing answer then; but now, I can say: Why am I not happy to say only: the Blessed Sacrament is a symbol? Because it is not only a symbol we set for God. It is God expressing himself. – I found: We need the difficult questions to get deeper into the mystery of faith.

The German idea of “welcome,” *willkommen*, is: we “will,” that is, we want you to come, because we need your view, your questions, your experience for our own understanding. In Father Körner's case, his *willkommen*, his fervent welcome to his Muslim Arabic teacher—and Abdulhalim's challenge to which this invitation led— enabled Father Körner to further reflect about his own faith and to refine his articulation of it. As a rabbi, I recognize that Islam and Christianity pose their own challenges to Judaism; these challenges can enrich Jewish faith when they are offered in the spirit not of polemics but of Scriptural Reasoning. “We welcome you, because we need your insight.”

The final expression that Father Körner presented was the Hebrew expression, ברוך הבא (*barukh ha-ba*), which for him embodied the idea of independence: “Blessed is the one who comes”—on your own, independent. Let us be clear with respect to the implications of this welcome blessing that Father Körner wished to tease out: neither the process nor the conclusion of interfaith dialogue of the sort that Scriptural Reasoning articulates leads to some end in which we'll all agree! Nor is it by any means the purpose to imagine that one day all religions will become one. No, Father Körner taught, *barukh ha-ba* is a true welcome when the host recognizes that the guest, arriving independently, and maintaining his or her independence, brings his or her own blessing. He illustrated his point by finishing the story of the Muslim professor who had been invited to teach in his community:

Our meeting with Abdulhalim went well. The next day I found him in awe. He told me: “I had a dream. I saw one of your novices, his beard and long blond hair, that was Jesus. He was an icon on the wall; but then he stretched out his arm and invited me: come, join.” – My first thought was: He wants to change his religion. I was moved, and happy—and worried. But he didn't want to become a Christian. His dream showed that he felt “invited by Jesus”—but not to join the Church. Of course I found the whole story puzzling; but that doesn't hinder our friendship. It is not I who can change him, God works His blessings in God's way.

This episode enables us to understand the broadest implications of Father Körner's sermon: the blessings of welcoming the other do not fall on the host alone, but on the guest, as well; indeed, we should not imagine this blessing to be static, but rather to indicate a dynamism that flows from one to the other and back again. The Hebrew idea of “welcome” is: blessed is the one who is coming. The one who is arriving has his own blessing upon him. God is with the guest; I, the host, am not working out the blessing for him. God is giving it. Most importantly, I am not

making him a part of my world. God wants to work God's own story of blessing with this person, in God's own ways—and these are surprisingly different from what I produce. Precisely because we are incomplete (*ahalan wa-sahalan*) and need your insight (*willkommen*), I must not manipulate you. I can only admire God's work in you. You are blessed, בָּרוּךְ הוּא; you are welcome because you are independent.

Thus, the three ways of welcoming—in Arabic, German/English and Hebrew—recognize three ways of encountering the other, the stranger: we are incomplete without them; we gain insight from them; and they, and we, are blessed through their continued independence. In the experience of my sabbatical days in Rome, this was repeatedly brought home to me. But I am certain that it is not only a message of religious dialogue, but that it is equally applicable however we encounter the other—whether they speak a different language from us, are older or younger than us, whether they suffer from disabilities different than the ones from which we suffer. Whoever those others may be, we are incomplete without them, gain insight through them, and are blessed by their continued presence in our midst. And we can only hope that through our recognition of this, and the generosity of spirit through which we welcome them, that we may enable blessings to flow upon them, as well.

I share this somewhat lengthy “introduction” not only because it contains compelling stories about the ways in which one can welcome “the other” and enable unforeseen blessings to enter the world, but precisely because the stories demonstrate the possibilities of interaction through Scriptural Reasoning. While I am not an “authorized” group leader, nor do I represent the organization in any official capacity, I would like to offer my own, individual understanding of the process of Scriptural Reasoning and suggest a number of texts that have worked well for me in a variety of circumstances.

### **Scriptural Reasoning: Process and Principles**

The primary point to which I endeavor to alert participants is multivalency: sacred Scripture does not now nor did it ever “mean” only one thing. I am reminded of the old rabbinic adage *shiv'im panim latorah*, “Seventy facets does the Torah have.”<sup>3</sup> The number seventy in rabbinic literature implies the concept of “infinite,” and the implications of the rule are clear: there is no end to the number of possible interpretations of Scripture. Thus, for the rabbis, Scripture was always polysemous and never univocal. I would argue that while Christianity and Islam may not have articulated an analogous formulation (and, indeed, Christianity may have attempted to fix theological and liturgical meaning), the de facto practice in both Christianity and Islam was to permit and even encourage a wide variety of interpretations of their respective sacred Scriptures. Thus, the texts (and early interpretations) that became sacred and authoritative in Judaism, Christianity and Islam may have developed interpretations that retain authority even to the present day, whereas other, once important, understandings may no longer be religiously relevant. In my professional life as an academic, my scholarship has focused on developments in biblical study in the medieval Jewish world that led rabbis to make a distinction between

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<sup>3</sup> Although the precise formulation of this observation occurs first only in the early medieval midrashic compilation, *Otiyot de Rabbi Akiva*, the rule itself is implied in the entire project of ancient rabbinic midrash and is born out in all classic rabbinic texts.

*midrash* and *peshat*, that is, between ancient rabbinic modes of “seeking in” or “drawing out of” (Hebrew *derash*) the Bible the legal, moral, and theological insights they sought to convey to their various Jewish communities (early antiquity through the Middle Ages), on the one hand, and to “read the biblical text in its ancient literary and/or historical context (Hebrew *peshat*), on the other.<sup>4</sup> The first I have termed “to religiously truth-seek” (*derash*), whereas the second I consider to be the first significant attempts “to read according to context” (*peshat*) as we have come to understand the reading process in modernity.<sup>5</sup> But more relevant for our present purposes, I have found that participants and observers in Scriptural Reasoning sessions may feel less religiously threatened when considering the commonalities in sharing textual insights that may not necessarily have a bearing on current religious thought or practice. Thus, to take only one example, the great 12th century rabbinic interpreter, R. Samuel ben Meir (“Rashbam”), introduced his commentary on the first extended legal text in the Pentateuch (beginning at Exodus 21) with his avowed awareness of the distinction between the study of Torah for the purpose of determining Jewish law, on the one hand, and what we would term “just reading” the biblical text for any ancient, contextual insights that reading may engender:

Let knowers of wisdom know and understand that I have not come to explain halakhot (Jewish law), even though these are the essence of Torah... Rather, I have come to explain the contextual meaning of Scripture. And I will explain the laws and halakhot according to realia... And (I will do this) even though the halakhot are the essence (of Judaism), as the Rabbis taught: “halakha uproots Scripture.”<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his biblical commentaries, Rashbam fearlessly interpreted without regard for the way contemporary Jewish authorities—himself included!—thought authoritative or “normative” for rabbinic laws and practices. I would argue that this “de-linking” of text and religious predispositions helps to open the way to dialogue and unprejudiced mutual consideration among practitioners of different religions in our contemporary world, for if one may consider non-

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<sup>4</sup> This rabbinic distinction, of course, has its analogue in both Christianity (i.e., the four-fold method of interpretation) and Islam (i.e., the distinction between *zahir* and *batin*).

<sup>5</sup> See Robert A. Harris, “Twelfth-Century Biblical Exegetes and the Invention of Literature,” in *The Multiple Meaning of Scripture: The Role of Exegesis in Early-Christian and Medieval Culture*, ed. Ienje van 't Spijker (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), 311-29; and Idem., “Concepts of Scripture in the School of Rashi,” in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 102-22. This process had its Christian analogies, as 12th century churchman began to emphasize *ad litteram* modes of biblical study even as they continued to honor theologically authoritative Christian allegory. See Rainer Berndt, “The School of St. Victor in Paris,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300). Part 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 467–95; and Franklin T. Harkins and Frans van Liere, *Interpretations of Scripture: Theory: Victorine Texts in Translation 3* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Rashbam cites *b. Sota* 16a. I have translated all medieval rabbinic commentaries according to the texts found in Menahem Cohen, ed., *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer': A Revised and Augmented Scientific Edition of 'Mikraot Gedolot' Based on the Aleppo Codex and Early Medieval Mss* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1992–2012).

religiously authoritative interpretations by sages of one's own religious tradition, then one surely might be receptive to those of others.

To be sure, the great Protestant theologian, Krister Stendahl, argued only a generation ago that it is vital for modern Bible readers to consider the difference between the questions "What does the Bible mean" and "What did the Bible mean?":

It thus appears that the tension between "what it meant" and "what it means" is of a competitive nature, and that when the biblical theologian becomes primarily concerned with the present meaning, he... loses his enthusiasm or his ultimate respect for the descriptive task... The question as to the meaning of the Bible in the present—as distinguished from the meaning in the past by descriptive biblical theology—receives its theological answer from the canonical status of Scripture... Any statement of a descriptive sort about what an OT passage meant has to be accompanied by an address: for whom and at what stage of Israelite or Jewish history?<sup>7</sup>

As with the medieval rabbinic insight, Stendahl's approach may enable participants in a Scriptural Reasoning session to feel less threatened by the possibility of challenge to their religious perspective, as the insights shared have no religious authority but are presented as interpretations to which contextual/literary close reading may lead.

The other main idea I always try to emphasize is, in a sense, a corollary of a recognition of sacred Scriptures' multivalent nature: a healthy respect for pluralism. If Scripture yields an infinite number of potential legitimate interpretations, then it goes without saying that it is more than likely that some will regard interpretations as authoritative, or worthwhile, or indicative of great moral and theological value that others might think are incorrect, negligible, or even morally abhorrent. Again, I am reminded of an old rabbinic adage: *eilu va eilu divrei Elohim hayyim*, "Both these (interpretations) and those are words of the Living God."<sup>8</sup> When the ancient rabbis made this observation, it was primarily with regard to the differing interpretations of *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel*, two legendary rabbinic "houses" of interpretation which, carrying on the distinctive interpretations of their eponymous rabbinic founders, habitually disagreed about matters of Jewish law. A classic instance in which they vehemently disagreed—and yet respected one another's legitimacy—is found in the Mishna (Yebamot 4:1), a section of a treatise on family law in which the two Houses took distinctly different positions with respect to consanguinity in a discussion about the legitimacy of certain proposed marital unions. It is

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<sup>7</sup> Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, John Knox, Herbert G. May, and Samuel Terrien (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:418–32.

<sup>8</sup> A foundational text in which this principle is presented is found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Eruvin* 13b): "R. Abba stated in the name of Shmuel: For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting, 'The halachah [Jewish law] is in agreement with our views' and the latter contending, 'The halachah is in agreement with our views'. Then a Heavenly Voice issued forth, announcing, 'both these and those are the words of the living God...'"

important to remember in this context that the result of the opposing interpretation with respect to such unions would be that any children that resulted from them would be considered *mamzerim*, “bastards,” in the eyes of the other school, and such people could thereafter never legally marry according to Jewish law. And yet, despite the clarity of the legal rule, and because of the greater importance of pluralism, the Mishna went on to observe this astonishing conclusion:

Even though these [one school] prohibit and these [the other school] permit, these disqualify and these allow, Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel [refrain from marrying women] from Beit Shammai. [With regard to] purity and impurity where these ruled [a matter] pure and these ruled [it] impure, they did not refrain from using [utensils] the other deemed pure.

Thus, participants in Scriptural Reasoning must always be encouraged to approach an interpretive stance with the utmost humility: in one’s own faith (or, even more so, in one’s own denomination of one’s own faith), the meaning of sacred Scriptures may seem abundantly clear. However, one ought to recognize that while to God alone “the meaning” may well be clear, God’s creatures (both within one’s own faith community as well as outside of it) generally disagree! Indeed, in interfaith dialogue in which I participated, years before I ever learned about Scriptural Reasoning, I always employed the metaphor of discordant harmony: it might seem jarring to our ears, but to God’s ears, so to speak, it is sheer and utter delight.<sup>9</sup>

### **Scriptural Reasoning: Texts**

At the Scriptural Reasoning website, one may find “text bundles” containing themed texts and their respective interpretations in the three faith communities (e.g., on “Encountering God” or “the Creation of Humankind”).<sup>10</sup> I have found that the process of Scriptural Reasoning works with even more challenging religious ideas. For example, what if a group wished to consider the highly charged atmosphere that usually surrounds the question of divine election? That is, after all, a subject that generally divides religious people, often to the point of acrimony and hatred. If Scriptural Reasoning could be brought to bear on this question in a way that enabled Jews, Christians, and Muslims to walk away from the session, secure in their own beliefs but newly respectful about those of their fellows, what a blessing that would bring to the world! What an embodiment of the very sentiments that Father Körner taught!

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<sup>9</sup> According to Israel Knohl, in fact, this principle was woven by design into the very fabric of Scripture already in antiquity; see Israel Knohl, *The Divine Symphony: The Bible’s Many Voices* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003). As reviewer Marvin A. Sweeney observed (*AJS Review* 29:1 [April 2005], 160-163), “Israel Knohl argues that the Hebrew Bible does not present a consistent or monolithic viewpoint concerning ancient Israel’s or Judaism’s understanding of God, itself, and the world in which it lived. Rather, Knohl contends that the Bible presents a pluralism of viewpoints that to a great degree anticipates the pluralistic outlook of Rabbinic Judaism.”

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/text-bundles>.

Let us consider one such text, Deuteronomy 4:19–20:

And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the LORD your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven; but you the LORD took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people, as is now the case.

On the one hand, this is a somewhat “easier” biblical passage to consider on the subject of divine election, because it contains the surprising acknowledgment that God does not necessarily frown on the religious traditions of other nations, only that God requires Israel to be exclusively devoted to him on account of God’s actions in releasing Israel from Egyptian slavery. Rashbam addresses this distinction explicitly: “According to the essence of the contextual interpretation, [God] has arranged for all the nations to worship these things, moreover He is not concerned with them, but you did God take and bring forth [from Egypt] to be His inherited people, so that you would worship Him, and he should be your God.” Thus, Rashbam does not occasion his interpretation by denigrating the religious practices of other nations; he only acknowledges what the text considers to be the “special relationship” between God and Israel. Surprisingly, a strikingly similar attitude is expressed in an interpretation offered by Origen, a third-century Church Father:

It is clear then that since those who live according to the law reverence the One who made the heaven, they do not reverence the heaven as if God. Furthermore, none of those who serve the Mosaic law worship the angels in heaven. And in the same way that they do not worship the sun, moon, and stars and the “world of heaven.” They avoid worshiping heaven as such or the angels in it.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, Origen does not make the same type of distinction that Rashbam made between Israelite worship of “the One True God” and worship of astral luminaries among other peoples in antiquity; in fact, Origen appears to be arguing against types of idolatry. However, even as a Christian, he does acknowledge that “[Jews] who live according to the law reverence the One...” Thus, in articulating this stance towards Jewish worship he does to a certain degree retain the sentiment of the biblical passage.

Indeed, one is generally predisposed to think that the Torah, the New Testament, and the Quran—the sacred Scriptures honored by, respectively, Jews, Christians, and Muslims—would be uniformly singular with regard to their understanding of the exclusivity of divine election, and that they would deny any relationship with God to others. Yet one might consider verses such as Malachi 1:11: “For from where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name; for My name is

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<sup>11</sup> Origen *Against Celsus* 5.6, cited in Joseph T. Lienhard, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament, Volume III* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 277, and note 6 there.

honored among the nations—said the LORD of Hosts.” Here, an early, post-Exilic prophet acknowledges that God is pleased with the worship of other nations—even in antiquity, well-before the advent of either Christianity or Islam. The 12th century Jewish sage Maimonides (Rambam) famously offered his views on the importance of both Christianity and Islam in God’s plan for the redemption of the world in his great legal compendium, *Mishneh Torah*:

As for the thoughts of the Creator of the World, there is no human power to comprehend them... All of the words of Jesus of Nazareth and of [Muhammad] the Ishmaelite who came after him were for the purpose of preparing the way for King Messiah and for repairing the whole world, [that all should] serve the Lord together, as it is written: *I shall make all the peoples pure of speech, so that they all call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one heart* (Zephaniah 3:9).<sup>12</sup>

As a rabbi and a professor of Jewish Studies, I am, of course, most familiar with the literature and practices of my own faith. But the sentiments I have articulated here can be likewise expressed by turning to scriptural passages and interpretations found in Christianity and Islam. In a typical Scriptural Reasoning session, representatives of those faith traditions would present the relevant texts. Here I will have to serve, however imperfectly, on behalf of all three. For example, let us consider a New Testament text relevant to the subject of divine election, Romans 11:16-18:

If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

While no one would deny the significance of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans in the development of Christianity, nor would any doubt the centrality of belief in Jesus as the *sine qua non* for inclusion in the salvation history of the Christian Church, nonetheless, a text such as this might provide (and has provided) an opportunity for reconsidering the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Even in the *Glossa Ordinaria*, an authoritative work not especially known for its sympathies to Judaism, one may find interpretations that suggest a more tolerant approach than might otherwise be imagined:

**And if the root:** i.e., the Patriarchs from whom they derive thee disposition of holy faith, so too the branches, those who grew out of the race that was founded in them. **But if some of the branches**—(Paul) argues that the Jews are still able to be accepted so that he may restrain the Gentiles... **It is not you that supports the**

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<sup>12</sup> See “The Law of Kings” 11:4, I have cited and translated from: Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* (New York: Congregation Bnei Yosef and Shabse Frankel, 1998), 289.

**root...:** that is said to you because the Jewish people have received nothing from you, but you have faith from them.<sup>13</sup>

As Mark D. Nanos notes in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, in this text, “[Paul] is confronting any temptation of arrogance among the Christ-following non-Jewish audience toward the Israelites who are not Christ-proclaimers.”<sup>14</sup>

The “apology” I offered earlier before introducing Christian texts must be repeated before I turn to the Quran: again, in an actual session of Scriptural Reasoning, a Muslim spokesperson, deeply engaged in the scholarship of Islam, would be the one to present a passage of Quran and some interpretive tradition pertaining to it. Thus, please accept that which I present here as but embodying the principle of engagement and not the best possible example of it! That being said, let us turn to Sura 2:62 (also 5:69): “Surely those who have faith, the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans, whoever accepts faith in God and the last day and performs good deeds, those shall have their reward with their lord; no fear shall come upon them nor will they grieve.” Of course, this text comes in a context of Muslim sacred scripture—it is the Quran, after all!—and so no one would deny that its author would consider Islam itself to be anything other than the most perfect expression of the divine will. Nonetheless, this Sura does express criteria through which even non-Muslims may be considered blessed. These are belief in the one true God; belief in the final judgment; and whoever “does right,” living a life dedicated to goodness.

In an essay entitled “Islam and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism,” Professor Mahmoud M. Ayoub has sought to understand this Sura in the light of the history of traditional Muslim interpretation:

[T]he verse just cited [Sura 2:62] appears in the first major Medinan Sura. It is then repeated verbatim, in the last but one major Sura to be revealed to the Prophet before his death. This is, to my knowledge, the only verse repeated in exactly the same words in the Qur’an. The fact that this verse occurs at the beginning and end of the Prophet’s political career means that neither the words nor the purport of these two identical verses were abrogated...

Muslims have, since the rise of the Islamic caliphate, strenuously attempted to negate this clear and twice-repeated Qur’anic assertion. They have always resorted to two important verses which in some ways complete one another. The first declares: “Surely the true faith before God is Islam” (Sura 3:19). The second asserts: “Anyone who seeks a faith other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him...” (Sura 3:85). Here we see clearly the clash between the Qur’anic view of religious pluralism and the conservative and narrow worldview of Muslim jurists. This is because the Qur’an undoubtedly means by the term

<sup>13</sup> See Michael S. Woodward, *The Glossa Ordinaria on Romans* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2011), 172–173.

<sup>14</sup> Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament : New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 277.

Islam in both verses not the legal Islamic identity of Muslims, but the way of total submission to God, which is open to all the people of faith from Adam to the end of time.

It is important before we discuss this problem in some detail to observe that most of the verses in the Qur'an dealing with the religious communities, particularly with the Christians, do not fall in the category of legislative verses (ayat al-Ahkam) and therefore cannot be subject to abrogation...<sup>15</sup>

Professor Ayoub's candid assessment is instructive to members of all three religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: as we seek to interact with one another, to both learn about other religious traditions and seek to "improve the quality of our disagreements" among us, we must above all be honest in our reflections about our own traditions. Each religion has its own traditions of "supremacy" or "chosenness" expressed in both our respective sacred Scriptures and their authoritative interpretive traditions. As religious people, we must wrestle with the implications and respective interpretive traditions of passages such as Deuteronomy 10:15, John 3:36, and Sura 3:85. Nonetheless, we must make a distinction between incorporating the entirety of these traditions (insofar as we continue to find religious meaning in them) and choosing a way forward that may express respect and acceptance of other religions while maintaining fidelity to our own.

### **Conclusion: Reflections**

By its very nature and aspirations, we must acknowledge that Scriptural Reasoning attracts a self-selected group of people who are interested in that respectful engagement. On what basis might we forward that respect? We might consider the relationship among peoples of faith through the work of the Second Vatican Council, the discussions surrounding the various drafts of *Decretum de Judaeis*, and the ultimate publication of *Nostra Aetate*:

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language.... other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men... We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as

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<sup>15</sup> Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "Islam and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *Global Dialogue* 2, vol. 1 (2000): <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=58>.

their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned.<sup>16</sup>

Rabbi David Hartman's essay, "Creating Space for the Integrity of the Other," is an appropriate text with which to close. While it may have been subtitled "An Educational Challenge for Jews and Christians," it is entirely appropriate for us to consider it as oriented towards Islam (and other religions), as well:

We walk together in Jewish-Christian struggle. I will welcome that moment when I look at a Christian whom I dearly love, and he will look at me, and we will recognize that, through our love, we have become strangers to each other; that our love is not: We are the same. But our love will lead to a sense of radical otherness. I cannot be absorbed within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. I dislike that terminology. It is only the beginning of neighbour love. I love to hear the passion of the Christian tradition, the passion of the Islamic tradition, the passion of other religious traditions, and I will walk forward with the passion of Hillel and Abaya and Maimonides and Soloveitchik. I will be other. And the question is, when I walk as the stranger, will you be able to still say: "Him I love"?<sup>17</sup>

Rabbi Hartman and Father Körner are suitable bookends for this essay. Both recognize the importance of welcoming the other and fully embracing the otherness in the other. Scriptural Reasoning seeks to do this very thing through honest, respectful, and loving text study. Welcoming the other requires that we embrace the disagreements that embody that otherness; Scriptural Reasoning seeks to improve the quality of our disagreements.

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<sup>16</sup> Text cited is from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html). It is true, of course, that *Nostra Aetate* articulates—quite naturally—exclusionary principles, as well (e.g., "Indeed [the Church] proclaims that, and ever must proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' [John 14:6], in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself." However, one can hardly expect even the liberal and reformist Second Vatican Council to forego this type of statement; without it, one might argue, there is no Christianity! Nonetheless, considered in the context of historical and supersessionist Christianity, one must acknowledge—gratefully—the degree to which the Roman Church has evolved with respect to the legitimacy of other religions.

<sup>17</sup> Text cited from [http://www.notredamedesion.org/en/dialogue\\_docs.php?a=3b&id=956](http://www.notredamedesion.org/en/dialogue_docs.php?a=3b&id=956)