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Scriptural Reasoning among Jews and Muslims in London

Dynamics of an Inter-Religious Practice

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ABSTRACT Scriptural Reasoning (SR)—the philosophical inter-religious study of foundational religious texts—came into being as an academic practice in the 1990s. In this article, based on empirical research, we analyse how in London over the past decades this practice has gradually been applied by new groups—including as a means for Jewish-Muslim engagement, the focus of our research. We discuss the ways in which the role of the foundational religious texts in SR practices has changed and how Jewish and Muslim initiators and participants at the local level now navigate between academic theological guidelines, daily interactions, and grassroots’ objectives for inter-religious engagement. We argue that SR practices, after having been adapted to community and individual needs and responding to religious and social caveats from different sides, provide a meaningful approach to constructive and dynamic interaction and engagement between Jews and Muslims at a grassroots level.

KEYWORDS Scriptural Reasoning, Jews, Muslims, London, interfaith, dialogue, tradition

Introduction

According to the most recent census data (2011), approximately 56 percent of British Jews live in London, which is almost 150.000 Jews, representing an average of 1.8 percent of the city’s total population. More than one million Muslims currently live in London, which is almost 38 percent of all British Muslims and 12.4 percent of the city’s total population (Office for National Statistics 2011; see also Gilliat-Ray 2010; Graham 2012). Besides housing Jewish [1]

and Muslim communities, London's religious landscape is characterized by its position as a 'headquarter' for national interfaith and mono-faith representative organisations.¹

At the grassroots level we nowadays find a highly diverse and widely dispersed landscape of Jewish-Muslim relations, with Jewish and Muslim groups and individuals, in different boroughs, undertaking various types of initiatives that are aimed at developing constructive relations and working towards reaching pragmatic as well as strategic goals. In a report published in 2005, Dilwar Hussain and Keith Kahn-Harris divide these initiatives into five 'categories of contact', namely religious/theological, pragmatic, political, cultural/social, and multi-faith contact (see Hussain and Kahn-Harris 2005). Such Jewish-Muslim cooperation has been around in the United Kingdom since the late-1980s, when the Rushdie affair motivated Jewish and Muslim organisations to start working together more structurally. It is difficult to know the precise extent of Jewish-Muslim engagement that has taken place in London over the years, but when we include formal as well as informal initiatives—of both short-term and long-term nature—we estimate that there have been hundreds cases of engagement. When looking at multilateral interfaith initiatives in which Jews and Muslims have participated, this number will be higher.

Among scholars as well as policy makers, there have been extensive debates on the most effective approaches to interfaith initiatives in general. The empirical research of the first author into Jewish-Muslim relations in London demonstrates that among the many sorts of activities that are undertaken by Jews and Muslims, we find dialogue as well as social action projects, including several forms of so called Scriptural Reasoning (SR)—the philosophical inter-religious study of foundational religious texts. In the abovementioned 'categories of contact' between Jews and Muslims, this practice is situated in the first category, of religious/theological contact, and it is mentioned in the report under a section called "religious texts as focus for religious dialogue" (Hussain and Kahn-Harris 2005, 10). The report mentions one example of SR taking place in a bilateral setting and involving an exclusively Jewish-Muslim audience: the "Jewish-Muslim Text Based Workshops", which since 2003 have been organised by the An-Nisa Society in cooperation with the liberal Jewish Leo Baeck College. In our fieldwork, we have come across these workshops as well as other well-known SR initiatives, such as Marylebone Scriptural Reasoning, an initiative organised and coordinated by West London Synagogue, and the work of St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. The latter both work from a trilateral perspective, involving Jews, Christians and Muslims. We have furthermore found that London-based mosques, synagogues and individual Jews and Muslims have independently organised Scriptural Reasoning sessions. In short, in London, we are dealing with an established inter-religious practice.

In this article, we analyse how a practice that originated as a philosophical-theological dialogue at the academic level—aiming to open up dynamic interactions between existing traditions by applying a specific philosophical approach (to be discussed below)—has gradually been applied by new groups at the local level in London, where initiators and participants coming from the traditions of Judaism and Islam now encounter the challenge of navigating between academic theological guidelines, daily interactions and grassroots' objectives for inter-religious and inter-ethnic engagement in London. Connected to the changes in leader-

1 Such as the Board of Deputies for British Jews (est. 1760), the Muslim Council of Britain (est. 1997), the Inter Faith Network for the UK (est. 1987) and the Faith and Belief Forum (est. 1997; previously known as the Three Faiths Forum). When specifically looking at the national representation of Jewish-Muslim relations, we find the Joseph Interfaith Foundation (est. 2006), with its national council of rabbis and imams, and the women's organisation Nisa-Nashim (est. 2015).

ship and participation that the shift to the local context has brought, there is also a changed role for the foundational religious texts and religious focus of this practice. We argue that SR practices, after having been adapted to community and individual needs and responding to religious and social caveats from different sides, provide a meaningful approach to constructive and dynamic interaction and engagement between Jews and Muslims at a grassroots level. More specifically, our analysis aims to contribute to the concept of ‘tradition’ that forms part of the analytical framework of *Entangled Religions*.²

We commence with a brief reflection on our research methods, followed by a contextual framework on contemporary Jewish-Muslim relations in London. In order to provide a foundation for understanding the current empirical practices of Scriptural Reasoning that the first author observed in London, we will then continue by focussing, firstly, on how SR emerged as an inter-religious practice in the 1990s, and, secondly, on how this practice developed since the early 2000s and gave rise to normative discussions connected to inter-religious dialogue. Then, we present our empirical research in order to demonstrate the shift from academia to the grassroots by focusing on four cases of Scriptural Reasoning in London. [5]

Methodology

The research presented in this article is conducted in the context of the research project *Delicate Relations: Jews and Muslims in Amsterdam and London*. This is a comparative, interdisciplinary research project funded by the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) that focuses on the relations between Jewish and Muslim groups in London and Amsterdam within their respective local, national and international social and political contexts. It aims to deepen our understanding of these relations and the actors and factors influencing them, while adding to a corpus of existing literature on Jewish-Muslim relations in various countries (see, for example, Ahmed and Kessler 2016; Egorova and Ahmed 2017; Katz 2015; Mandel 2014; Meddeb and Stora 2013; Meri 2016). [6]

In this article we combine a textual, diachronic (historical) and empirical approach. A textual analysis was used to study Jewish and Muslim normative views, including two fatwas (religious advice). The empirical research that is presented in this article furthermore results from the fieldwork that the first author conducted in London between 2014 and 2016. The complete collection of data consists of 53 semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews—with 58 interlocutors—and 54 participant observations. Related to the exploratory nature of the first author’s study, the interview sample includes a large range of interlocutors, including representatives of (inter)faith organisations, civil servants, (independent) religious leaders, board members of local mosques and synagogues, professional and grassroots community organisers, school staff and individual participants in interfaith initiatives. Interlocutors were selected by means of a combination of purposive, theoretical sampling and snowball sampling (Bryman 2008). Where possible, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The participant observations were of inter-religious initiatives, taking place both in bilateral—only involving Jews and Muslims—as well as trilateral and multilateral settings. [7]

The use of Scriptural Reasoning as a practice to stimulate the dynamics of Jewish-Muslim relations at the local level in a constructive way, as discussed in this article, came up during the empirical research as one of the types of engagement in which Jews and Muslims in London were involved—besides initiatives such as the pragmatic and political cooperation [8]

2 For definitions of these concepts, see: <https://er.ceres.rub.de/index.php/ER/concepts>

on common concerns, the joint involvement in social action projects and the participation in cultural or artistic activities. Fifteen interlocutors mentioned in the interviews that they were either involved in an SR initiative or were aware of the existence of this practice and its relevance for Jewish-Muslim dialogue. Additionally, in eight of the participant observations, the first author attended gatherings solely focusing on SR or applying certain elements of the practice. Hence, though on a small scale, our empirical findings show that the practice of Scriptural Reasoning plays a role as a practice involving Jews and Muslims at the local level in London.

Jewish-Muslim Relations in London

Intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict together with a statistical increase in cases of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Britain³ have contributed to growing tensions among and between Jews and Muslims in London. When comparing Jewish-Muslim relations to those with other religious communities, many of our interlocutors have pointed towards transnational and geopolitical issues as the main point of differentiation and fear—especially regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see also Kahn-Harris and Gidley 2010; Kessler 2011). These issues were often seen in a framework of similarities versus differences, where cultural and religious elements are often highlighted as commonalities but are overshadowed by opposing (geo)political views. One of our Muslim interlocutors, for example, mentioned that “...theologically we are very close, you know, the Muslims and the Jews are theologically very close to one another..., [but] everything changed after the creation of Israel” (interview, 16 October 2014, London). [9]

The fact that transnational issues find their way to the local level does not necessarily turn them into divisive issues; our research showed that at times of heightened tensions, local responses also included encouragement for building new inter-religious and inter-communal relationships and tightening existing bonds. Within these relations, the initiators and participants search for strategies in order to deal with the potentially divisive issues that they encounter.⁴ This constructive engagement between Jews and Muslims in London is characterised by a willingness and openness to learn from and about others and to work together when needed, but it should be noted that while several Jewish and Muslim communities in London have found ways of dealing with difficulties and diverging opinions, not all communities and individuals are willing or able to do so. [10]

Rationales Behind Jewish-Muslim Engagement

The reasons that our interlocutors gave for their involvement in Jewish-Muslim engagement were varied and displayed their main goals, on the one hand, and the role of contextual factors that encouraged or stimulated them to get involved in these relations, on the other hand. Generally speaking, the data from all interviews combined brought up three types of goals: pragmatic, strategic and personal. Each of these three encompasses a number of sub- [11]

3 Data demonstrating this statistical increase can, for example, be found in the annual reports issued by the Community Security Trust—measuring anti-Semitic incidents—and Tell MAMA—measuring Islamophobic incidents. These reports can be found on their websites, respectively: <https://cst.org.uk/> and <https://tellmamauk.org/> (accessed May 22, 2019).

4 For the application of such strategies for cooperation in times of tension, see Roggeveen, Vellenga, and Wiegiers (2017) on Jewish-Muslim relations in Amsterdam.

goals, depending on the actors and the ways in which they are affected by specific contextual factors and pre-existing relations. Among the pragmatic goals are, for example, the wish to counter prejudice by working towards creating better mutual understanding and facilitating peacekeeping or ‘troubleshooting’ in times of tension. The strategic reasons for engaging in Jewish-Muslim relations are mainly based on the idea that both communities, as religious and ethnic minorities in a secular society, could benefit from cooperation on issues that are of common concern. Such issues are, for example, ritual slaughter, male circumcision, burial rites and, in some areas, also issues on housing and employment. One of our interlocutors who works as an interfaith professional stated: “There are some very strategic interests that they have to work [at] together as minority communities, because the mainstream will not accept their views” (interview, 17 September 2014, London). The third category, of personal goals, mainly relates to intrinsic motivations for learning about others. This includes theological as well as cultural learning.

As mentioned before, these goals, and the subsequent implementation of various means used to achieve these goals, did not arise in a vacuum but is rather influenced by the surrounding political and transnational context and triggered by certain events. In our study of contemporary and historical cases of Jewish-Muslim engagement, we came across certain contextual factors that instigate Jewish-Muslim engagement, such as intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, terrorist attacks—for example, in the United States on 11 September 2001, and the London bombings on 7 July 2005—as well as the renewed attention in parliamentary discussions for issues concerning Jews and Muslims. This is in line with what Anna Halafoff (2010, 2011, 2013) found in her work on the multifaith movement; she emphasises how organisations, networks and other actors “consistently *respond* to their context, particularly to local and global crisis events” (Halafoff 2011, 144—emphasis in original). As mentioned before, conflicts, or potential conflicts, can be turned into opportunities for peacebuilding (cf. Garfinkel 2004), an approach also taken by the British government, where funding is made available for inter-religious engagement that is aimed towards countering extremism and improving social cohesion (see Beckford 2010; Halafoff 2013, 267).

The role of the government as an actor can be seen as one of the contextual factors influencing Jewish-Muslim relations. Generally speaking, we find two streams of governmental work which concern religious communities: work on community cohesion in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG),⁵ and work on security and counter-extremism in the Home Office. In the first case, it was especially the New Labour government (1997–2010) which provided various types of funding for religious organisations and inter-religious initiatives and worked towards entering into a ‘partnership’ with them (cf. Beckford 2010, 126; Furbey et al. 2006; Prideaux 2009). This is, for example, illustrated by the policy report “Face to Face and Side by Side” (Department for Communities and Local Government 2008), which provides a framework dedicated to promoting partnership in Britain’s multi-faith society by encouraging people to participate in interfaith activities.⁶ On the other end of the spectrum, there are also policies and budgets aimed towards faith communities, and especially Islamic communities, but all in the context of *CONTEST*—the “United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering International Terrorism” that has been in effect since 2003. The most well-known policy (‘Prevent’) has been operational since 2007, and is controversial because

5 Previously known as the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

6 James Beckford (2010, 126–27) argues that the discourse of ‘faith’ was in itself an instrument of the Labour policies to promote unity among the religions. It also increased the support for the Inter Faith Network for the UK.

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it has been accused of enhancing stigmatisation and instigating Islamophobia by conflating Muslims with terrorists (cf. Kundnani 2009, 2014; O’Toole et al. 2013; Werbner 2013). This is also one of the reasons why, in some cases in our empirical research, we have encountered a suspicious attitude towards state funding and a fear of state interference in Jewish-Muslim initiatives.⁷ On the other hand, the availability of state funding in some cases also served as an incentive for setting up new projects—as was recently the case with the Near Neighbours funding,⁸ which was commissioned by the MHCLG and delivered through the Church Urban Fund.⁹

The role of the British government should also be seen in light of the position of religion in modern public life in Britain, which has rapidly changed over the last decades. Among British scholars, we find a variety of views on this issue. Steven Vertovec (Vertovec 2007)—who coined the term ‘super-diversity’ for British culture—as well as Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, in their book *Spiritual Revolution* (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), describe and discuss a shift from community-based religious life to individual subjectivity in the 2000s. However, in a publication in 2012, Woodhead argues that the declining influence of the Anglican Church and a growing independence of the state reflects the post-war society’s “move from Christian to secular to multi-faith” (Woodhead 2012, 5–11), hence emphasising Britain’s religiously diverse society. James Beckford (Beckford 2010) specifically focuses on the role of the British government and brings forth a different perspective. He argues that the level of religious activity in the public sphere has increased, but since this results from interference by the New Labour government he is hesitant to speak of a ‘resurgence’ of religion. In this context it is also interesting to note that scholar Peter Ochs—one of the founders of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning—is quoted to have said that the practice of SR can be seen as a means of “letting religion return to the public sphere”, and as a way to create a bridge between the religious and the secular (quoted in Bailey 2006; see also Cheetham 2010, 345–46).

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Dialogue or Social Action? Various Approaches to Jewish-Muslim Engagement

When there is an impetus for engaging in Jewish-Muslim relations, there are decisions to be made concerning the contents or focus of the initiative, as well as the targeted groups and the preferred setting. Regarding the latter, our empirical research shows that most initiatives in which Jews and Muslims are involved take place in bilateral or multilateral settings, with the exception of Scriptural Reasoning sessions, which also take place in trilateral ‘Abrahamic’ settings. Depending on the goals and anticipation of certain results, meetings or initiatives will be open or closed—in the latter case only allowing a deliberately selected group of participants. The fieldwork conducted by the first author showed that specific target groups include religious leaders, women, youth and ‘neighbours’. Participants in Jewish-Muslim initiatives encompass most denominations within Judaism and Islam—from Reform to ultra-orthodox Jews, including secular Jews, and Sunni as well as Shi’i Muslims—but, as we will see in the

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7 This attitude is also found among critics of the ‘interfaith industry’ in general, who blame the government for funding interfaith organisations that allegedly engage with particular Muslim organisations that these critics qualify as extremist, anti-Semitic and fundamentalist (see, for example, Westrop 2013).

8 For more information on the implementation and evaluation of this programme, see <https://www.near-neighbours.org.uk/> (accessed May 22, 2019).

9 It should be noted that the construction of delivering such a programme through the channels of the Church of England risks influencing power dynamics between the participating faith communities. Among Muslims, for example, the programme and its organisational construction received critical as well as positive responses because of this (see O’Toole et al. 2013, 49–51).

case of Scriptural Reasoning, the actual involvement of adherents to certain denominations depends on the locality in which the activity takes place as well as the type of activity undertaken and the presence of underlying normative discussions. One of our interlocutors from an ultra-orthodox Jewish community, for example, mentioned how religion in an interfaith context serves as “a factor which binds us” when talking about common concerns and issues related to living in a certain local context, but not as a central topic for discussion as it is in SR. He said that “it is not about theological dialogue or debate, it is about communal issues, so therefore we are not there to debate issues of religion, of theology, of scripture” (interview, 18 September 2014, London; cf. McCallum 2013, 5).

The second consideration, besides the setting, concerns the choice for a certain type of activity. In 2007, the then chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Britain and the Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks, published his study *The Home We Build Together*. In it, we find an essay entitled “Face-to-Face, Side-by-Side,” in which Sacks distinguishes interfaith dialogue (face-to-face) and social action (side-by-side) as different sorts of activities that lead to different results (Sacks 2007, 173–82).¹⁰ Based on “Robbers Cave”, a study of the dynamics of group conflict conducted by Muzafer Sherif in 1954 (cf. Sherif et al. 1961), Sacks mentions the benefits and range of influence of social action as opposed to dialogue. He regards the latter as being limited to the religious elite and writes that “...more than sixty years of dialogue have not yielded peace between religions” (Sacks 2007, 175). It is the other approach, of joint social action, that should be used to connect religious groups and to pursue the increase of social capital. Sacks cites here from the work of, amongst others, sociologist Robert Putnam, who famously distinguished between bridging and bonding (Putnam 2000).¹¹ It leaves no doubt that Sacks prioritises social action—in contrast to the “utopian” concept of dialogue—as most powerful in overcoming social and religious problems of society at a local level of ordinary individuals and community life (Sacks 2007, 173–76). The issues that Sacks discusses have also been addressed in scholarly discussions, which together raise three types of concerns: first, the compatibility between the type of activity (e.g. dialogue vs social action) and the intended goal; second, the implications that the choice for a certain type of activity has for the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups of participants (e.g. elite vs grassroots); and third, the issue of naming and categorising interfaith engagement as either ‘dialogue’ or ‘social action’ (cf. Cornille 2013; Garfinkel 2004; Prideaux 2009; Race 2015). An interesting distinction in this regard is made by Melanie Prideaux, who distinguishes a formal ‘conference model’ from an informal ‘conversation model’ and points out how formal dialogue is “outcome orientated” while informal dialogue is “oriented towards the process” (Prideaux 2009, 462). It is the first understanding of interfaith dialogue, as a formal enterprise often carried out on an elite-based level, which Jonathan Sacks criticises, but to Prideaux, this does not mean that all types of dialogue should be disregarded. She actually interprets any inter-religious contact as ‘dialogue’ and makes a distinction between ‘theological’, ‘mystical’, ‘practical’, ‘ethical’ and ‘living’ dia-

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10 Please note that this is the same distinction that was made in the 2008 government policy called *Face to Face and Side by Side*, as mentioned above.

11 In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam distinguishes bridging and bonding as two forms of social capital. Bonding social capital is the more “exclusive” version that relies on intra-communal ties that are good for “undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilising solidarity” (2000, 22)—or, as Sacks summarises it, “is it what bind members together” (2007, 179). Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is more “inclusive” and serves as a way to connect various networks and to allow assets and information to be linked and diffused through those connections (Putnam 2000, 22–23). In the words of Sacks, bridging capital is “acts of friendship across communal boundaries” (2007, 179).

logue (Prideaux 2009, 462)—the latter categories encompassing practices that others might categorise as ‘social action’.

The discussion on the approaches used in inter-religious engagement is especially interesting in the context of Scriptural Reasoning, where we find a formal academic practice being transferred to the often informal settings at the grassroots level, while retaining its dialogical character. One of our general empirical findings in this regard is that one of the characteristics of Jewish-Muslim engagement in London is exactly the presence of a variety of these approaches including ‘dialogue’ as well as ‘social action’. Generally speaking, our interlocutors considered inter-religious engagement to be ‘meaningful’ when the type of activity and the type of social and spatial setting corresponds with the anticipated goal—hence not necessarily excluding (theological) dialogue as an effective approach. [17]

Scriptural Reasoning: The Emergence of an Inter-religious Practice

The concept of Scriptural Reasoning originated from the practice of ‘Textual Reasoning’, which was conceived in the 1990s as a theological and philosophical practice in Jewish academic circles (cf. Ochs and Levene 2002). It turned into a dialogue activity for Jews and Christians, and later into a trilateral activity involving Jews, Christians and Muslims, and was established in 1996, when scholars Peter Ochs, David Ford and Daniel Hardy together founded the ‘Society of Scriptural Reasoning’ (Ford 2006; Moyaert 2013; Ochs 2015).¹² In an article on the possibilities of employing Scriptural Reasoning as a form of peacebuilding, founder Peter Ochs mentions how the actual incentive for turning SR into an inter-religious practice came from concerns about the academic curricula and the ways in which religion and philosophy were taught through “narrow lenses” (2015, 499). SR became an “experiment” of introducing a new method in class to address the “complexity of our subjects of study” (2015, 499). His co-founder David Ford, an influential Anglican theologian active at the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Cambridge, has also played an important role in developing Scriptural Reasoning and has remained an influential scholar in the Cambridge Interfaith Programme ever since. In a book edited by David Ford and C.C. Pecknold in 2006, entitled *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, Ford describes the aim of SR as “a wisdom-seeking engagement with Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures”, in spite of the fact that “many of the bitterest disputes within and between all three faiths centre on appeals to scripture” (Ford 2006, 1). In order to overcome, or at least discuss, these disputes, Scriptural Reasoning is an attractive means. [18]

However, SR, according to Pecknold, is also a “risky practice”, referring both to the fact that the practice refrains from using the accepted dominant neutral public reasoning as well as the challenge that building long-term commitment between Jews, Muslims and Christians brings (Pecknold 2006, VII; see also McCallum 2013). In the application of Scriptural Reasoning as a peacebuilding activity outside academia, Peter Ochs also reflects on the difficulties that such an approach brings. He calls it the “potentially most dangerous form of inter-religious dialogue” while at the same time it is the practice that is “most likely to contribute to long-

12 In an article from 2015, founder Peter Ochs looks back at the moment in which the dialogue became a trilateral practice and mentions how “Scriptural Reasoning took something like its current form after a Sunni scholar joined the fellowship and the four colleagues generated what we called Abrahamic Scriptural Reasoning” (2015, 498). [19]

term conflict transformation” (Ochs 2015, 488). In light of the aforementioned discussions on ‘face-to-face’ versus ‘side-by-side’ engagement, it is interesting to note how Ochs characterises SR as a “heart-to-heart” dialogue where “‘scriptural study’ represents a religious ‘heart’ within each group and inter-scriptural reasoning the best practice for heart-to-heart dialogue” (Ochs 2015, 505). The ‘heart’, for Ochs, symbolises “places of maximal warmth, depth, and fire within each religious community and tradition” (Ochs 2015, 488). However, he adds that with these “places of warmth” come potential places of “fire”—hence referring to the possible presence of inter-group conflict and tensions and confirming how Scriptural Reasoning can indeed be the ‘risky practice’ that Pecknold calls it (Ochs 2015, 505; cf. Pecknold 2006, VII).

Crucial elements in the academic practice of Scriptural Reasoning, according to David Ford (2006), are: to use carefully selected passages; to make use of the participants’ “internal libraries” while discussing the texts; to take a considerate amount of time for a session; to have the session take place in an “in-between” space, outside of places of worship or universities;¹³ and to pursue theoretical, philosophical and theological questions in the “reasoning” aspect of the practice, in addition to focusing on the “plain sense” of the texts. In terms of the dynamics of traditions, we argue that the practice of SR aims to experiment with spaces between established interpretations in traditions, thus opening up dynamic avenues for innovation and constructive interaction between participants. Multiple times throughout his chapter, David Ford mentions that the aim of the practice is not to reach consensus but to develop friendships based on hospitality. Ben Quash agrees with David Ford on this point by stating that reaching ‘agreed statements’ should not be the intended output of the sessions. In his view, it is the development of “high quality arguments”—used for “improving the quality of disagreement”—that should be pursued (Ford 2006, 68). Peter Ochs, on the other hand, emphasises the aim of Scriptural Reasoning to be a visual, public practice that crosses the boundaries between the secular and the religious and lets “religion return to the public sphere” (Bailey 2006). He is also quoted with having said that:

[Scriptural Reasoning says that] to have any hope at achieving peace, we can no longer push religion off to the side or into some private belief system. That simply is not an option for the world today, and certainly not for Islam. Let’s go back to religion and have serious conversations about the heart of our belief systems (quoted in Bailey 2006, par. 39).

In recent years, several important publications that aim to theorise this phenomenon ‘from within’—here as a practice for bilateral Jewish-Muslim engagement—have seen the light; see Schneier and Ali’s *Sons of Abraham. A Candid Conversation about the Issues that Divide and Unite Jews and Muslims* (Schneier and Ali 2013), and Anver Emon’s edited volume *Islamic and Jewish Legal Reasoning: Encountering Our Legal Other* (Emon 2016). The latter, inspired by the Cambridge Scriptural Reasoning Group and based on the principles of SR, proposes a “new practice of reading” in studying Jewish and Islamic legal traditions—as was applied during multiple workshops at the University of Toronto, the results of which are discussed

13 In this context, David Ford uses the metaphor of the “house”, the “campus” and the “tent”. The “house” are churches, synagogues and mosques, i.e. “the main homes of the three scriptures and their traditions of interpretation”. The “campus” are universities as a space in which “interfaith” and “secular” meet, providing a “mutual ground” for Jewish, Muslim and Christian academics—although Ford mentions that this space brings its own challenges that do not make it the best suitable space for Scriptural Reasoning sessions. The final space, the “tent” is to be preferred and is characterised by its “in-betweenness”; situated between a social space and an intellectual space. This can include hotels, conference centres, seminaries and private homes (Ford 2006, 7–13).

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in the first part of the book. By using a “conversational, dialogic protocol”, the Jewish and Muslim scholars of law who participated in these workshops aimed to read the two legal traditions together, but without reducing them to a common ground and without it being an exercise in comparative law. The “lens of difference” was mainly used to provide a new outlook on one’s own tradition, made possible by looking at the overarching theme of the “role of reason and authority in interpreting and determining law in religious traditions” (Emon 2016, XI–XXVI). This is what Ben Quash describes as the element of “surprise” that Scriptural Reasoning can bring; “the interrogation of one’s own scripture by other voices can have the effect of making the all-too-familiar texts of one’s tradition ‘strange’ once again..., which can unlock the ‘surprisingness’ of texts we thought we knew in productive and generative ways” (Quash 2006, 60–61). Again, though this time in terms of the important legal traditions that Judaism and Islam have in common, new avenues are experimented with.

Yet, despite the success of Scriptural Reasoning in academia, its place and success as a communal, grassroots practice varies—as we will see in more detail below. Catriona Laing (Laing 2012) dates the beginning of Scriptural Reasoning’s public ‘existence’ in the United Kingdom back to 2004, when the London-based St Ethelburga’s,¹⁴ together with scholars from King’s College London and Cambridge University, “aimed to develop the practice into civic action”. Laing is critical with regard to later developments of Scriptural Reasoning into a grassroots inter-religious activity, for, she observes, detached from the involvement of religious guidance, discussions about authority very soon caused rifts between participants (Laing 2012, 126; see also Hedges 2010, 88–91). According to Jeffrey Bailey, around 2006 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and other church leaders promoted Scriptural Reasoning as a key to developing Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations in England. SR was seen at the time as a genuinely new approach; “Scriptural Reasoning gives us a model for political disagreement that can be considered productive, even without reaching consensus”, according to William Taylor, a minister of the Anglican Church. He also said that:

Politics often looks to overcome debate by looking for some ‘position’ or statement people can assent to. But those kinds of agreements are usually pretty thin and generate little sense of loyalty. Here we observe a group of people with deep differences finding unexpected areas of agreement, and surprising friendships developing amid those remaining differences (quoted in Bailey 2006, par. 45).

Scriptural Reasoning groups were established at a number of universities, and what started as a Jewish practice has now evolved into an inter-religious practice, supported and promoted by major universities in England and elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon world. The British Home Office funded the development of Scriptural Reasoning across London at the time, and planned to train imams, rabbis, ministers and other community leaders in Scriptural Reasoning (Bailey 2006). That this practice was being promoted and subsidised by the government does not

14 St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace is a public centre dedicated to dialogue and conflict resolution. At the time, it received a subvention from the Home Office and the Church of England to do so (Bailey 2006). This institute is nowadays connected to the Children of Abraham Institute, of which Peter Ochs’ Virginia University programme and David Ford’s Cambridge Interfaith Programme are a part as well (see <http://abraham.lib.virginia.edu/groups.html>; accessed May 22, 2019). On St Ethelburga’s, see also the Report *Face to Face and Side by Side* (Department for Communities and Local Government 2008, 49–Case study: The Tent), where it is explained that after the destruction of the church by the IRA in 1993, the wasteland was used to build a Bedouin style tent, designed by architect Keith Critchlow and drawing on the “traditions of Al-Andalus, where Jews, Christians and Muslims shared the space in relative peace for 300 years.”

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need to surprise us; England has a state church, and the state has a particular responsibility for Christianity and inter-religious relations (Bretherton 2010; Soper, den Dulk, and Monsma 2017; Taylor 2004). As mentioned before, it has budgets to promote interfaith relations that are channelled to the local level and to grassroots groups and networks through various departments and institutions, and as James Beckford has shown, the government, and especially the New Labour government between 1997 and 2010, promoted and supported a multi-faith partnership with public religions (Beckford 2010).

Religious Traditions and Interfaith Dialogue in the Public Sphere: the Rise of Normative Discussions

As we have seen, Scriptural Reasoning nowadays is not only an academic practice, but also one that takes place at the grassroots level of inter-religious and interethnic relations. With regard to its origin and widespread nature in England, it would be safe to say that the stimulation in terms of religious support of the Church of England around 2006 and a number of theological departments of well-known British and American universities in the public sphere resulted in numerous activities in the United Kingdom that have been coined as scriptural, religious and text-based reasoning and that are now found at different levels of society and in different types of interfaith engagement. Before turning to our empirical findings on present-day practices of Scriptural Reasoning in London, it is interesting to consider how the shift of Scriptural Reasoning towards an inter-religious grassroots practice also instigated normative discussions as well as discussions on and criticism of its public character, accessibility and the often one-sidedness of its funding. [26]

The emergence of normative discussions among religious leaders on inter-religious text study are not new. In the 1960s, the American orthodox rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his essay “Confrontation”, argued against inter-religious text study with Christians. He encouraged working together on secular issues but rejected theological engagement—a point of view that we still find among some of our orthodox Jewish interlocutors in London—saying that, [27]

the word of faith reflects the intimate, the private, the paradoxically inexpressible cravings of the individual for and his linking up with his Maker. Hence, it is important that the religious or theological logos should not be employed as the medium of communication between two faith communities whose modes of expression are as unique as their apocalyptic experiences. The confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level (Soloveitchik 1964, 23–24).¹⁵ [28]

One of Soloveitchik’s conditions for non-theological inter-religious engagement was to provide a state of equality among the participants, saying that there is need for a “clear assurance that both parties will enjoy equal rights and full religious freedom” (Soloveitchik 1964, 21). Similar discussions have taken place among Muslims in the West. Within the framework of the Sunni religious jurisprudence for minorities, the ‘European Council for Fatwa and Research’ (ECFR), under the guidance of sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, issued a statement on ‘Interfaith Dialogue’ in 1999. This statement said that dialogue between religions was allowed but should take place on the basis of the principles of the Prophetic mission and God’s Unity (Ar. *tawhīd*) with the other revealed religions, i.e. Christianity and Judaism (European Council for Fatwa [29]

15 This position was later adopted by the Rabbinical Council of America (see Soloveitchik 1964, 28–29).

and Research 2002b, 101–3, cf. 2002a, 105–7). It is permitted on the condition that the dialogue takes place in a “healthy atmosphere”—“free from coercion, patronising others and offending them” (European Council for Fatwa and Research 2002a, 106). The text emphasises that there are differences between the religions which should not be eradicated, and that it should take as a point of departure principles such as the oneness of God and the belief in the Prophets, while commonalities such as “social constructs [of] family...and issues of human rights” could become a theme in dialogue (European Council for Fatwa and Research 2002b, 102, 2002a, 106). It is clear that a study on the basis of foundational religious texts alone, as in SR, is not what the ECRF envisages; dialogue should be firmly embedded in the Sunni Islamic dogmas.

Following the emergence of Scriptural Reasoning as a grassroots inter-religious practice in the early 2000s and the subsequent shifts in its scope and substantive focus, another fatwa was issued—this time specifically dealing with SR. This fatwa was issued on 17 July 2007/14 Rajab 1428 by a Fatwa Council, referred to as “Sharia Court”, of London Central Mosque.¹⁶ Unlike Rabbi Soloveitchik’s negative views on inter-religious theological engagement, the fatwa endorses this practice, but only when certain conditions are met. It is interesting in this regard to find an emphasis on the condition for ‘equality’ in a similar way as the ECFR and Rabbi Soloveitchik have formulated it. [30]

A Fatwa on Scriptural Reasoning

The text of the fatwa tells us that a question about Scriptural Reasoning was brought to the attention of the Fatwa Council by a group referred to in the fatwa as the ‘Scriptural Reasoning Society’¹⁷—to be discussed below. The question itself is not mentioned, but the advice addresses two issues related to Muslim participation in this practise: first, the conditions for Muslims to participate in dialogue with Christians and Jews (the Arabic text reads: *ahl al-kitāb*) about the texts; and second, the issue of using copies of texts/verses of the Qur’an—either print or online—and the considerations that should be taken into account when dealing with these published texts before and after use. [31]

The Fatwa Council, consisting of three members, i.e. Muhammad Fath Allah, Salah al-Ansari and Muhammad al-Salamuni, is of the opinion that on the basis of the Quran and the Sunna, Muslims are allowed to participate in such activities on the condition that the traditions of the commentaries are followed and no autonomous, “sectarian” interpretation of the Quran (Ar. *tafsīr*) is offered; in case of doubt, religious scholars (Ar. *‘ulamā*) should be asked for their opinion. Regarding the inter-religious nature of the activity, as mentioned before, the text emphasises the need for equality and parity among participants and organisers.¹⁸ The Quran and the Sunna should be respected with regard to content and behaviour; funding money should not have its origins in *ribā* (unlawful interest), purity rules with regard to the Quran [32]

16 For the full text in Arabic, see http://www.scripturalreasoning.co.uk/fatwa_arabic.pdf (accessed May 22, 2019). For the English rendition that is provided by London Central Mosque, see http://www.scripturalreasoning.co.uk/fatwa_english.pdf (accessed May 22, 2019). For more background information on the London Central Mosque as a centre of official Islam, see, for example, Tibawi (1981) and Wiegiers (2011).

17 Not to be confused with the Society of Scriptural Reasoning as founded by Ford, Ochs and Hardy.

18 Interestingly, this is especially emphasised in the English rendering of the text, where a whole paragraph is dedicated to issues of ‘equality’ and ways of dealing with situations where this equality is not granted. It also warns Muslims about the presence of certain underlying political motivations. In contrast, the Arabic text only mentions it in one sentence, stating (in translation) that “it is desirable that when Muslims dialogue with others they do so on the principle of equality.”

should be observed by the participants, no unduly critical use of the Quran is allowed and one should also reckon with the fact that the Quran was revealed in clear Arabic—no translations are to be printed without the presence of the original text in Arabic (cf. Winter 2006).

The fatwa endorses the aforementioned ‘Scriptural Reasoning Society’ as a group that works along these normative guidelines and recommends it. The text furthermore figures prominently on a website promoting what it calls the ‘Oxford School of Scriptural Reasoning’, which should be distinguished from the ‘Cambridge School.’¹⁹ The website mentions Muhammad Yusuf al-Hussaini as the copyright owner.²⁰ This is the same Al-Hussaini who, in 2009, as Fellow and lecturer in Islamic Studies at Leo Baeack Rabbinical College, London, published an article in the journal *Middle East Quarterly*, in which he gives an interpretation of the fatwa and names it as the first document to provide a legitimation for ‘lay Muslims’ to participate in Scriptural Reasoning with Jews and Christians, albeit under certain conditions: [33]

In Britain [...] this approach [i.e. Scriptural Reasoning] has been taken out of the ivory towers and onto the streets of Muslim communities, resulting in the historic achievement of the first fatwa (religious edict²¹) in modern times issued in 2007 by senior Islamic authorities, giving sanction for lay Muslims to meet with Jews and Christians for interfaith dialogue and frank debate around their sacred texts (Al-Hussaini 2009, conclusion section, par. 2). [34]

This fatwa, Al-Hussaini expects, will prove to be a powerful tool for Muslims to discuss religious matters in a novel way, while Jews may profit from it as well, so that it may even help solve long existing Middle Eastern problems. The following excerpt of his article may serve as a Muslim account of the vicissitudes of SR, and as a case study of his own (written) practice: [35]

From a Jewish perspective, there are more important humane considerations for the sanctity of human life, of justice and fights for the Palestinian people that respect human dignity, self-determination, and parity of esteem—things safeguarded by the best of Judaism’s legacy of rabbinic wisdom. At the same time, Muslims need to recognize the extent to which a vacuum has been created by the absence of any explicit Qur’anic counterclaim to the Holy Land. This missing concept has been filled instead with Judeophobia—the popular demonization of the Jewish people, embraced as a substitute for the lack of a heavenly eviction order (Al-Hussaini 2009, conclusion section, par. 3). [36]

By way of an example of Scriptural Reasoning, i.e. offering an absence of contour claims to the promise in Genesis 13:15, the article goes on to argue why Jews have a right to claim Israel as a Jewish home—a position that is exceptional in present-day Muslim discourse. [37]

Against this background, it would have been interesting had the text of the fatwa mentioned the immediate case(s) that triggered the fatwa. Another source tells us that the issue at the core of the fatwa was “a scandal caused by haram money used by the group led by William Campbell-Taylor in relation to the Holy Quran in a way that desecrates it (Ar. *tadnis* [38]

19 We should note that the first author did not come across this group during her fieldwork in London between 2014 and 2016 and cannot say anything about their level of activity and influence.

20 See <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk/index1.html> (accessed June 5, 2019).

21 Sic. A fatwa (Ar. *fatwā*) is usually a piece of non-binding religious advice.

al-qur'ān).²² It is very likely that the website here refers to the same Anglican minster quoted above, who was active at the London Christian charity and dialogue centre St Ethelburga's.²³

In conclusion, the appeal made in Western societies to Muslims to engage in inter-religious dialogue raised concerns that found their expression in normative writings such as those we have discussed here. These are concerns about power relations, about the norms which should guide a dynamics between traditions, and the role of these traditions. Is it possible to engage in dialogue on the basis of philosophical, i.e. 'rational' principles alone? These are questions that were already raised in Muslim and Jewish circles in the Middle Ages, but which need new answers in the context of a minority position in a Western, secular society. The emergence of requests for religious advice in the case of Muslim participation in trilateral or bilateral text studies with Jews and Christians can be seen against the background of the relatively new configurations of inter-religious and interethnic contact (see also Kessler 2010, 3–4).

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From an Elite-Based Academic Practice to the Grassroots: New Audiences and a Changing Role for the Foundational Religious Texts

The wider implementation of Scriptural Reasoning in the 2000s—as a highly academic practice in which lay persons and faith leaders cooperate in the public sphere—did not become the success that David Ford and Jeffrey Bailey expected. As mentioned before, around 2007 we witness a change in focus with regard to inter-religious dialogue, at the same time when Jonathan Sacks published his “Face-to-Face, Side-by-Side” essay (Sacks 2007, 173–82). This change is clearly shown in the case of the Three Faiths Forum,²⁴ which was involved in the early days of grassroots Scriptural Reasoning. A board member at this organisation mentioned during an interview with the first author that although the current school's programme includes a workshop about religious texts, this is no longer done from a Scriptural Reasoning approach:

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...we do it very much from a pragmatic sociological point of view instead of a theological point of view. So, we wouldn't do interfaith prayer at any point. We generally don't do stuff with places of worship and we don't do stuff where the kids would show each other their religious practices (interview, 19 May 2014, London).

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When looking at the 'field' of Scriptural Reasoning in London nowadays, we still find St Ethelburga's, which was an important actor at the very beginning of the implementation of the practice in the public sphere (cf. Laing 2012, 126). What is interesting is that we now also see Jewish and Muslims institutes, as well as individual Jews and Muslims, initiating and organising Scriptural Reasoning sessions—detached from academic or Anglican institutions. Most of these initiatives take place in a trilateral setting, similar to the academic practice, but we have also come across one case of a bilateral practice of Scriptural Reasoning between Jews and Muslims in London. This is interesting in light of the dynamics of Scriptural Reasoning,

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22 See <http://www.scripturalreasoning.co.uk> (accessed May 22, 2019).

23 We do not know at this stage which activity of William Campbell-Taylor, who in 2011 defended a PhD thesis at Princeton Theological Seminary about Scriptural Reasoning (see Campbell-Taylor 2011), instigated this concern.

24 Since 2018: Faith and Belief Forum.

which started out as a Jewish-Christian practice, developed into a Jewish-Christian-Muslim practice and is now again applied in a bilateral setting but with Jews and Muslims (cf. Emon 2016; Ahmed and Kessler 2016; Schneier and Ali 2013).

During her fieldwork in London, the first author was able to observe three Scriptural Reasoning groups—two trilateral groups, one bilateral—as well as two separate events which included a Scriptural Reasoning session. Even while many at times talk about religious or legal texts, they do so at a grassroots level and not exclusively under the guidance of faith leaders with religious training and knowledge of the original sources. The shift to the grassroots is also accompanied by a changing role for the foundational religious texts and a reconsideration of the original academic guidelines. Furthermore, the audiences vary widely, with different compositions of religious leaders and/or lay members of different faith communities, and sometimes with a specific focus on people living in a certain locality or people of a specific age group. [43]

In the following sections, we will analyse four cases of Scriptural Reasoning that we encountered at the local level in London and which are all initiated and organised by Jews and Muslims. The grassroots Scriptural Reasoning sessions observed by the first author took place at various locations throughout London, usually in buildings in which worship takes place.²⁵ Each has its own signature way of ‘doing’ Scriptural Reasoning, ranging from cases that strongly resemble the academic practice (the first and second case) to cases that take a less academic approach to the religious texts (the third and fourth case). We will first provide a brief introduction to the four cases, followed by a discussion of their audiences and the role of religious leaders in these grassroots practices, as well as a discussion of the changing role for the foundational religious texts. [44]

Four Cases of Scriptural Reasoning in London: An Introduction

The *first* case is that of the “Jewish-Muslim Text Based Workshops” that are jointly organised by the Muslim women’s organisation An-Nisa and the progressive Jewish Leo Baeck College. This initiative is among the text study groups that are firmly established and have existed for a longer period of time; biannual meetings have been organised since 2003 and have been facilitated by the same sheikha and female rabbi ever since (cf. Hussain and Kahn-Harris 2005, 10). In an internal document, the aim of this initiative is described as “build[ing] bridges between Muslim and Jewish communities through exploring our religious texts in order to seek understanding and solutions for the challenges that we both face.”²⁶ The meetings take place in a bilateral setting and the organisers apply the strict selection criterion that “the workshops are limited to participants from the Jewish and Muslim communities.”²⁷ Upcoming meetings are published online and both old and new members are allowed to participate. Themes that have been discussed over the past years include theological and religious issues [45]

25 This diverges from the original idea to always hold Scriptural Reasoning sessions in a “neutral space” (cf. Bailey 2006; Ford 2006).

26 The document *Aims and Objectives* was kindly sent to us upon request. A collection of documents, including the *Aims and Objectives*, is made available for consultation by all participants during their Scriptural Reasoning sessions.

27 Despite this selection criterion, the first author—an ‘outsider’ to both Islam and Judaism—was granted permission to attend a meeting of this group in 2015 under the condition that she would solely observe and not join in any of the conversations and discussions. We would like to thank An-Nisa and Leo Baeck College for their trust and willingness to make this exception.

as well as contemporary societal issues, such as ‘prophecy’, ‘fasting’, ‘shariah and halachah’, ‘prayer’, ‘liberation’, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘repairing the earth.’²⁸

The *second case* is an initiative called “Marylebone Scriptural Reasoning”, which is part of the interfaith department of West London Synagogue; the UK’s ‘flagship’ reform synagogue.²⁹ They aim to organise three main events each year, besides providing introductory workshops in Scriptural Reasoning in mono-religious contexts. Events are announced via a dedicated mailing list and are always held at a place of worship, rotating between various locations. Our interlocutor at Marylebone Scriptural Reasoning describes the workshops as “interfaith with a scholarly emphasis” and their target audience as people with a “genuine interest” who are “likely to come back”, among whom are scholars and religious leaders (interview, 24 July 2015, London). Meetings take place in a trilateral setting, and themes over the past years have included: ‘religious law’, ‘arguing with God’, ‘asylum and refugees’, ‘tattooing’ and ‘loss and mourning’. These themes are selected by the organiser, and each session consists of ten-minute introductions of the texts followed by discussions in groups whose compositions are designated by a seating plan.

The *third case* is a Scriptural Reasoning group that was newly set up in 2015 at a local mosque in North London—located in an area where Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities live in close proximity to each other. The initiative was taken by a Jewish woman belonging to a local reform synagogue and a Muslim man, a member of the local mosque. They had become acquainted at a previous event and have continued to develop new interfaith initiatives together since then. The initiative takes place in a trilateral setting and is aimed towards bringing together local Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders; each of them is also encouraged to bring along one lay member of their community. The first meeting of the group consisted of an introduction to the religious texts that the religious leaders found most representative for their religion. Themes of the following meetings were: ‘feasts and fasting’, ‘refugees’, ‘Islamophobia and anti-Semitism’ and ‘community building’.

The *fourth case* actually consists of two cases (A and B) where aspects of Scriptural Reasoning were used as part of larger interfaith events taking place in the context of the celebration of religious festivals. In both cases, these were interfaith *iftars* hosted by local synagogues during Ramadan in 2015 and 2016. Besides plenary speeches and a joint breaking of the fast, both evenings included a Scriptural Reasoning session open for participation to everyone. *Case A* was an interfaith *iftar* at North Western Reform synagogue, organised as part of the national Big Iftar³⁰ initiative. The synagogue’s rabbi decided to include an element of text study during the evening, and during his word of welcome he referred to his own experiences of fasting during Yom Kippur and mentioned that he usually chooses to focus on reading and studying to get through the final hours of fasting. Drawing an analogy with fasting during Ramadan, he reasoned that the text study sessions provided at this interfaith *iftar* could perhaps also help Muslims. The theme for this evening’s text study was ‘hospitality,’³¹ and the speakers

28 The first author was present at the meeting on ‘repairing the earth’; the texts that were discussed were Deuteronomy 20:19-20, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:20, Genesis 1: 25-31, Genesis 2:7-15, Sura 2:30-33, Sura 11: 61-68, Sura 26:141-159, Sura 33:72-73, and Sura 30:41-42.

29 See www.wls.org.uk (accessed May 22, 2019)

30 The Big Iftar was launched in 2012, and according to their website they are a “community-led initiative” that “has provided a platform for *iftars* to take place in homes, community centres, synagogues, parks, town squares, schools and more”. Each year during Ramadan, their website provides a list of *iftars* that have a multi-faith character and are open to a broader audience. See: www.thebigiftar.org (accessed May 22, 2019).

31 Among the texts discussed in this session were Sura 51:24-37 and Genesis 18:1-8, which was interesting because with this selection, unbeknownst to them, the imam and one of the rabbis had chosen similar texts

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were two Reform rabbis and one Shi'i imam. *Case B* was an SR session taking place during a larger interfaith celebration at the reform West London Synagogue—the same organisation behind our second case study of Marylebone Scriptural Reasoning. In this case, the date they chose to host the *iftar* purposively coincided with the Jewish festival of Shavuot.³² Other than in North London, where the session was designed to pass the time until the breaking of the fast, the Scriptural Reasoning in this session was intended to take place after prayer and the breaking of the fast—as a transition between the *iftar* and the start of the night of Torah study during *Shavuot*. As a theme for the Scriptural Reasoning session, they chose 'revelation', the same theme that would also be discussed throughout the night at the synagogue, and it was addressed by a Jewish, Muslim and Christian speaker.

New Audiences and the Role of Religious Leaders

The four cases introduced above all attract different types of participants, both in terms of the level of their religious knowledge as well as in terms of their general involvement in inter-religious practices. When we compare this to the original academic milieu in which the practice emerged, the workshops in the first and second case seem to come closest to this. In the *first* case, the sheikha and rabbi select the texts for each meeting and introduce the texts to the group, followed by discussions in pairs and a general group discussion, under their guidance. Each text from the Quran or the Torah is first read out loud in its original language, followed by a rendering in English. In an independent paper written on her personal experience with Scriptural Reasoning, the sheikha leading these sessions mentions that it should be seen as a "process-oriented rather than result-oriented" initiative and it is the "personal learning process" of the participants that is the central focus, not any kind of published output or public statements (Krausen 2015).³³ The focus on this personal learning process also becomes evident in the amount of information that the organisation provides the participants with; among the documents that were laid out on the table during the session that the first author observed were documents providing background information on Jewish and Islamic traditions and their texts as well as on the development of Islamic thought. They also provided a genealogy of people playing a significant role in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, starting with Abraham/Ibrahim. The closeness to the academic practice of Scriptural Reasoning that this first case shows is especially interesting when taking into account that the workshops started as early as 2003 and developed as a bilateral practice, in contrast to the academic practice of trilateral Scriptural Reasoning. Halima Krausen mentions how the organisers were inspired to set up this group after their experiences at the Jewish-Christian-Muslim conference in Germany and the Interfaith Theology conference in Jerusalem—again interesting, since this does not show a (direct) link to the UK-based academic practices. Another point in which the workshops clearly diverges from the academic practice is in including Jewish and Muslim prayer in every workshop and encouraging participants to join in or be present as observers to these prayers.

In contrast to the first case, the Scriptural Reasoning sessions in the *second* case are all

from their respective traditions, on the story of Abraham/Ibrahim, who invites unknown guests into his home and prepares food for them.

32 Tikkun Leil Shavuot is a night of Torah study, celebrating both the start of the harvest season and the reception of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Traditionally, the night includes a reading of the Book of Ruth (see <https://reformjudaism.org/shavuot-customs-and-rituals>; accessed May 22, 2019).

33 Please note that this corresponds to the distinction that Melanie Prideaux makes between the purpose of 'formal' versus 'informal' dialogue (see Prideaux 2009, 462).

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organised by one coordinator, who is not a religious leader, based at West London Synagogue. For each session, a changing group of religious leaders is invited to select texts that fit the theme and introduce them to the participants. According to our interlocutor, the group mainly consists of faith leaders and academics, and participants need a certain level of basic knowledge and are preferably able to read one or more of the original languages in which the religious texts are written. A difficulty or controversy that comes with the trilateral character of the meetings of Marylebone Scriptural Reasoning, according to our interlocutor, is that the Christian speakers are not always able or willing to read the Bible text they selected out loud in Greek—since that deviates from the idea that “the Bible is the Bible in any language” (interview, 24 July 2015, London). Another issue that our interlocutor encountered is that she encourages Jews and Muslims to not only read the texts in their original languages but also recite them. And while many Muslim leaders or participants who attend the sessions have no issues reciting the Quran texts (*tajwid*), not all rabbis or Jewish participants feel comfortable doing so outside of a service and without having a Torah scroll in front of them. Our interlocutor mentioned that the reason behind including recitation in the sessions is that participants “get a feeling of how this text can be used in a ceremonial way without having to go to a service.”³⁴ In line with what we observed in the first case, this idea also seems to be related to the personal learning process that participants undergo, i.e. increasing religious knowledge that goes beyond learning only about the texts. What is a “massive issue” in terms of finding speakers for the sessions in the second case, according to our interlocutor, is the difficulties they have in finding Muslim speakers. As reasons for this, she firstly refers to the diversity among Muslim communities and the decision that they, as organisers, had to make to exclude certain groups. Secondly, she observes the difficulties between Sunni and Shi’i Muslims and the issue of having representatives of both in the same Scriptural Reasoning session. Thirdly, she mentions that she has encountered Muslims that object to SR based on Islamic law—which may very likely be related to the normative discussions that we have discussed above. In an overview of six sessions of Marylebone Scriptural Reasoning between 2015 and 2018,³⁵ we see that in one case there was no Muslim speaker present and in three cases the sessions included the same speaker; a representative of the Inclusive Mosque Initiative, which is a highly controversial organisation in Muslim circles.³⁶ This is possibly what our interlocutor referred to when she said that “[certain parts of the Muslim community] are quite shocked by some of the other Muslims that we engage with” (interview, 24 July 2015, London).

As mentioned before, the main goal of the Scriptural Reasoning meetings in the third case was to bring together local religious leaders, and not so much to provide academic learning for lay persons such as we see in other cases. The rabbis that participated in this group came from liberal and reform synagogues and, similarly to the other cases, the orthodox Jewish community was not represented—which could be explained by the absence of a significant orthodox community in this part of North London, but could as well be related to the pres-

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34 Providing a “quasi-liturgical character” by emphasising the “sacredness” of the religious texts is something that David Ford also mentioned. He says that “the study of scripture which acknowledges the presence of God (variously identified) comes as close to worshipping together as faithful members of these three traditions can come with integrity” (Ford 2006, 7). However, in contrast to what we see in the second case, Ford does not mention the recitation of the texts as an element needed in order to establish this.

35 See <https://allevents.in/org/marylebone-scriptural-reasoning/3407246#> (accessed May 22, 2019).

36 In an article on this initiative published by *BBC News* in 2013, the Inclusive Mosque Initiative is said to challenge the patriarchy in mosques by allowing a role for women side-by-side with men, and by welcoming gay people. It received mixed responses from Muslims and representatives of Islamic organisations. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-22889727> (accessed May 22, 2019).

ence of the aforementioned rabbinical discussions on this practice. The imam, on the other hand, was a Sunni Muslim who had a more conservative outlook on religion; his input in the meetings suggested that these sessions were his first introduction into the religious texts of other faiths. Since every religious leader was only allowed to bring one lay member of their community to the meeting, the sessions remained on a small scale. Due to the recent establishment of the group, the participants were still figuring out a format for structuring the sessions, but similarly to the first and second cases, the sessions included a reading of the texts in the original languages. One of the discussions that came up in the third session of the group was about the role of prayer; the sessions originally did not include any form of prayer, but one of the group's Christian lay members mentioned that when studying texts on an occasion like this he felt the need to pray. The group decided to integrate this in future meetings and the next meeting therefore opened with a Christian prayer and closed with a Jewish prayer—while taking place in a mosque. The themes for upcoming meetings were also decided upon together by the group's members. Besides having two people organising the sessions, the meetings themselves were not convened strictly and granted the participants freedom to make decisions on the course they would like the group to take. After four sessions, this led to a more pragmatic approach, with the group tending more towards joint social action than joint text study. Since 2016, no further sessions have been held and the SR group, in this composition, ceased to exist.

Our *fourth* case, of occasional Scriptural Reasoning sessions taking place during interfaith *iftars*, is interesting since text study was only one of the elements of the gatherings and the participants did not make the conscious decision to attend an SR session; they were there for the joint breaking of the fast. In both cases, the aspect of reading the texts in their original languages was omitted. In the case of the interfaith *iftar* at North Western Reform synagogue, the restricted time available for text study also meant that there was no place for interactive engagement, only for listening to the religious leaders introducing the texts. As mentioned before, at the interfaith *iftar* at West London synagogue, the session mainly served as a transition between the *iftar* and the start of the night of *Shavuot*. In comparison to other Scriptural Reasoning sessions that the first author attended, this session lacked some of the 'interfaith dynamic' of people willing to become acquainted and be involved in an activity together. Many of the Muslims had already gone home—probably also because the Jewish host of the evening had mentioned multiple times that Muslims were allowed to leave before the Scriptural Reasoning session, since they would probably be very tired due to the late nights during Ramadan—which left an almost exclusively Jewish group of people waiting for the Shavuot workshops to commence. [52]

A Changing Role for the Foundational Religious Texts

In the previous section, we focused on the changes that the shift away from academia has brought regarding the participants and the role of religious leaders in the sessions. Another change that we have observed while studying these cases is the position that the foundational religious texts hold during the sessions. With the variety in aims that SR now has at the grassroots level—ranging from personal learning to strengthening the relations between community leaders and finding a meaningful way to get through the time at an interfaith event—the texts have in some cases become a means to an end and are no longer the exclusive focus of the sessions. At the same time, the religious and devotional character of the SR sessions becomes more stressed in the grassroots cases; all but one of the sessions we observed were [53]

held at places of worship and, additionally, some of them included prayers. In our view, there is a larger focus on religion as the common denominator, but as a result of that there is a decreased focus on religious texts as objects for study and the element of actual ‘reasoning’ that the academic branch of Scriptural Reasoning prescribes—also related to the limited amount of time dedicated to the sessions.³⁷ Already in regard to the original academic practice, David Cheetham questioned whether it could be possible that the ‘tent’—the place of meeting—was actually more important than the ‘text’, since one of the goals is to create friendships and build constructive relations. Foundational religious texts then provide a “sense of familiarity” to the ‘tent’ where people encounter each other (Cheetham 2010, 352). The presence of different views on the position of the texts is also addressed in an evaluation report of Scriptural Reasoning-based summer schools organised by the Cambridge Interfaith Programme together with David Ford (see McCallum 2013). This report mentions how the texts are either seen as the “central part of the discussion”, or as a “focus for conversation” and an “opportunity for relationship formation” (McCallum 2013, 5). This divide also resembles the distinction made by Melanie Prideaux between a formal ‘conference model’ and an informal ‘conversation model’ for dialogue—the first referring to academic theological dialogue, while the latter refers to models of ‘practical’ and ‘living’ dialogue (Prideaux 2009, 462).

Returning to the cases that we have encountered at the grassroots, the *first* and *second* case remain closest to the academic practice of Scriptural Reasoning, and hence the role for the foundational religious texts is comparable to that in academia, with the added emphasis on the devotional character of the practice—including prayers in the first case and recitation of the text in the second case. One could say that in the second case, the organiser’s wish to present Jewish and Islamic traditions in a similar way, by having them recited instead of read out loud, also shows the changing role of the text in the case of Judaism; the unease that Jewish speakers at these events expressed to the organiser, as mentioned above, shows that recitation outside the context of a service is a practice that they are not used to and do not recognise from Jewish text study sessions. In this case, the inter-religious character of the sessions therefore also provides an ‘interfaith context’ for approaching traditions that is different from the intra-faith contexts and approaches that participants might be used to. The more process-oriented than outcome-oriented goals that underlie the first case also show a movement away from the original academic practices.

During an interview with the first author, one of the rabbis who participated in the initiative in North London (the *third* case) said that she mainly sees the Scriptural Reasoning sessions as a strategic means to reach the pragmatic goal of building relationships between local religious leaders. The actual contents of the texts discussed at the meetings is not her most important focus. She said that:

...the reason I sit in a room with faith leaders from other groups is so that when there are those moments where we want to do something jointly, we’ve established the relationship. And if we need to establish that relationship in a really *safe way* by looking at our texts together and doing what we do professionally together, then that’s fine....As the rabbi I need to know the imam and the priest so that when

37 Allowing enough time for reasoning about the texts is one of the keys to Scriptural Reasoning that David Ford mentioned. It is the quality of the sessions that counts, not the quantity, and therefore he recommends for an established group to only hold a couple of meetings a year (Ford 2006, 1–22; cf. Cheetham 2010, 344; Ochs 2015, 498; McCallum 2013).

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things happen, our communities can very naturally work together (interview, 15 December 2015, London)

What is interesting is that to the imam who participated in this same initiative, the element of text study holds a different meaning. To him, the sessions serve as an opportunity for personal learning and extending his knowledge on other faiths and traditions. In an interview conducted by the first author in November 2015, he mentioned that “in the Scriptural Reasoning that we have now and then, it is for us to understand how the other scriptures talk about certain aspects that we all share”. These two accounts demonstrate how a participant’s personal goals and the level of background knowledge that they have regarding other traditions influence the way in which they see the role of religious texts as either a focus of and source for study or as a means to another end. Over the course of the sessions in this case, the themes became more pragmatic and the sessions diverged from their original application of Scriptural Reasoning towards opening up other conversations among the participants about wanting to become more involved in social action and providing local responses on issues such as the refugee crisis and dealing with hate crime. The fact that this initiative, as a Scriptural Reasoning group, was eventually discontinued should therefore not come as a surprise and to us further demonstrates that in this case, SR did serve as the strategic means that the rabbi mentioned and became a prelude to social action. [57]

Studying texts as a ‘safe way’ of approaching interfaith dialogue, such as mentioned in the quotation above, also seems to be the rationale behind including elements of Scriptural Reasoning at separate, one-off events, such as during the two interfaith *iftars* of the *fourth* case, where the sessions were more informative than interactive. The ‘safe way’ then refers to the search for common denominators and a certain type of consensus. Our interlocutor at Marylebone Scriptural Reasoning also reflected on this aspect and mentioned that she generally tries to stay away from controversial issues such as the topic of Israel-Palestine—which, as we have seen before, can either be a divisive or unifying issue in grassroots Jewish-Muslim relations. She also mentioned that some other topics might be too controversial to discuss with conservative as well as liberal participants, such as issues on women, homosexuality and modest dress. The avoidance of controversial topics and the focus on common ground, however, leads these initiatives away from the situation where Scriptural Reasoning is seen as a ‘risky practice’ and where the goal—as we have seen before—is *not* to reach a consensus, but to develop an argumentation to be used in cases of disagreement and hence “improving the quality of disagreements” (Quash 2006, 68; cf. Pecknold 2006, VII; Ochs 2015). A lack of challenging discussions is also what one of our other interlocutors mentioned when referring to her first experience with grassroots Scriptural Reasoning—not related to one of the cases mentioned in this article, although it motivated her to make a change and set up the group that we have seen in the third case. She mentioned that the general structure of the session that she attended was that “one person presents [and] we have an opportunity to ask that person questions, then we move on”. She describes that session as “terribly light” and mentions that there was no room for conversation or critical discussion. [58]

When looking at the four empirical cases that we have discussed in this section, the bilateral Scriptural Reasoning group in our first case seems to be the only one that consciously aims to find a balance between addressing unifying as well as potentially divisive issues. This is also addressed in their online mission statement, which states the following: [59]

Fully aware of the complexities of the international political situation we wanted [60]

to create an arena where we could question, discuss, challenge and ultimately open our minds to new possibilities of understanding and experiences. Our intention was not to change the world overnight but to enable Jews and Muslims to view each other ‘outside of the box’. This dialogue group is a safe place where participants can move at their own pace to both struggle with or engage with the issues at hand.³⁸

Conclusion

As we have demonstrated above, the dynamics of Scriptural Reasoning are visible in three developments that have taken place over the past decades: firstly, the development of Scriptural Reasoning from a Jewish academic practice to a trilateral inter-religious practice in the 1990s; secondly, a shift from the private to the public sphere, which instigated the rise of normative discussions in the 2000s; and thirdly, since that same time, the application of Scriptural Reasoning as a grassroots approach to inter-religious engagement. [61]

In this article, we have demonstrated how this latter shift from academia to the grassroots not only introduced new audiences to the practice of inter-religious text study, but also changed the role of the foundational religious texts and the theological aspirations of the participants. Initiators and participants at the grassroots level now encounter the challenge of navigating between academic guidelines and grassroots objectives, but having such freedom, on the other hand, also allows them to make case-by-case decisions and adjust the practice and setting. Two interesting examples of changes made at the grassroots are firstly, in the case of An-Nisa/Leo Baeck College, the decision to apply Scriptural Reasoning in a bilateral Jewish-Muslim setting—instead of in a trilateral Jewish-Muslim-Christian setting—and secondly, an increasing focus on the devotional character of Scriptural Reasoning practices—as demonstrated in the inclusion of prayer and text recitation in some initiatives, the application of Scriptural Reasoning during the celebration of religious festivals and the use of places of worship as the location for Scriptural Reasoning sessions. [62]

What is also an interesting development is the emergence of Jewish and Muslim actors as the initiators behind grassroots Scriptural Reasoning initiatives. This development counters the Anglican dominance that we have seen in the early years of applying Scriptural Reasoning in the public sphere. At the same time, it demonstrates how the practice has been adopted and distributed at the grassroots level as a useful approach without needing further promotion. This means that outside stimulation by previously influential actors has decreased, although we have also seen that the availability of government funding overall remains a stimulating factor for the development of new inter-religious initiatives. [63]

One of the other factors influencing the current practice of Scriptural Reasoning, as we have seen, is the role of religious authority and the position of religious traditions in inter-religious settings. While inter-religious text study for Jews was forbidden by such learned scholars as Rabbi Soloveitchik in the 1960s, the 2007 fatwa allows it for Muslims, albeit under strict guidelines. The fatwa can be interpreted as an attempt to channel individual religious and moral behaviour away from lived or popular religion and keep it in the orbit of orthodox thought—a purpose many fatwas serve—, in this case represented by the London Central Mosque’s interpretation of Islam. Despite the differences between Soloveitchik’s work [64]

38 Facebook page ‘Jewish-Muslim Text Study’—Mission https://www.facebook.com/pg/Jewish-Muslim-Text-Study-134617189971903/about/?tab=page_info (accessed May 22, 2019).

and London Central Mosque's fatwa, a similarity can be found regarding the conditions for inter-religious engagement that are presented in the two texts; both emphasise the need for equality and advise against participation in a setting that is characterised by an unequal power balance.

We cannot say with certainty which influence these normative discussions have on Jews and Muslims at the grassroots level, but we did notice that we only encountered Reform and liberal Jews in the cases of Scriptural Reasoning that we studied. We did encounter orthodox and Haredi Jews in our study of other inter-religious initiatives between Jews and Muslims, which suggests that their absence in this case is specifically connected to the presence of inter-religious text study. Regarding Muslim participation, we have not found evidence so far that this particular fatwa has had a great deal of influence, and did not come across direct references to the fatwa during our empirical research. We have found both progressive and conservative Muslims participating, depending on the initiative, and in this regard we already addressed how our interlocutor at Marylebone Scriptural Reasoning received criticism for inviting certain progressive Muslim speakers. Regarding the case of the bilateral Jewish-Muslim text study initiative, the involvement of a (female) sheikha also implies that participants will likely have a more progressive view. The group of local religious leaders in North London, on the other hand, included a more conservative imam. Furthermore, we did not observe a clear pattern in the involvement of Sunni versus Shi'i Muslims, other than that in some cases it is related to the local presence of particular Sunni or Shi'i mosques; in the latter case in North London, the only local mosque was Sunni, hence involving a Sunni imam, while the interfaith *iftar* at North Western Reform synagogue was organised in cooperation with a local Shi'i community, hence involving a Shi'i imam as one of the speakers.

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Concluding, Scriptural Reasoning has become a meaningful approach for inter-religious engagement currently used by Jews and Muslims in London. The focus on religious traditions as dynamic common denominators has—perhaps paradoxically—become a novel way of constructing grassroots relations. Furthermore, with its continuing application outside of the academic realm, SR counters the notion of 'interfaith dialogue' as only being useful among the elite. Our research shows that—after having been adapted to community and individual needs and responding to religious and social caveats from different sides—joint inter-religious text study can serve pragmatic as well as strategic and personal goals, i.e. the three type of goals that we have distinguished for Jewish-Muslim engagement in London in general. In line with the other types of Jewish-Muslim engagement that we have studied, the potential effect that the practice of Scriptural Reasoning can have will depend on the accordance between the goal, on the one hand, and the chosen approach and setting, on the other—in addition to the groups' ability to deal with potentially disruptive issues, and the availability of (financial) resources that allow the development of sustainable relations.

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