

Engaged Particularity: Interfaith Scriptural Reasoning and the Politics of Small Achievements

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Introduction

I want to consider this evening a practice of interfaith engagement that, it may be argued, represents an important contribution to the way in which interfaith understanding is pursued. That practice is called Scriptural Reasoning, and I will have more to say about it momentarily. But I also want to attempt a second thing in this paper, which will necessarily be more exploratory, as it is an area that I am in the early stages of considering, and that is to try to think through to what degree this particular interfaith practice might be reconceived or extended in political terms, or even as an explicitly political kind of practice. I would not want to put this forth as a strong claim, more of an experimental one, so this should perhaps be considered as an initial attempt to engage in a certain kind of conversation which will no doubt benefit from critiques and suggestions.

The conversation I am attempting to pursue is the resonances that appear to exist between an embryonic theorizing regarding the practices of Scriptural Reasoning, and the more mature but still relatively recent theorizing of a certain set of practices commonly referenced within political theory as radical democracy. My question is whether Scriptural Reasoning might be understood as an embryonic exemplification of radical democracy at work. A minimal answer might be that at the least it provides a kind of “pedagogical utility” for the cultivation of certain political virtues; a more substantive and perhaps more contentious answer would be to suggest that it functions as a kind of political practice in and of itself.

I should perhaps note that I use the term politics in a relatively uncomplicated way, taking it as concerned with the deciding on and enacting of certain rules and agreements for how human communities will arrange their life together, with the aim of making such arrangements that most promote and sustain human flourishing.

Two points by way of introduction. First, my reading of radical democracy will have a somewhat American slant, in part because that is the context I still know instinctively better. This is not to say, however, that discussions of it as a political theory do not occur within British and European contexts, for there are various British and European political theorists who do just that.¹ One might also wonder if radical democracy has certain resonances with other approaches to political theory unique to Britain, such as early 20th century British pluralism, as represented by such figures as J N Figgis. This and other movements share with

¹ E.g., Paul Hirst, Chantal Mouffe, Paul Ginsborg in *The Politics of Everyday Life*, in relation to contemporary Florence, Italy.

radical democracy what we might term non-statist socialist concerns, that is, concerns for social justice and equality normally associated with the political Left, yet who remain wary of such efforts being coordinated or carried out principally by the state, or in a top-down, centralised way.

A second introductory point is that in the short confines of this paper I will draw in particular on two political theorists associated with radical democracy: Sheldon Wolin, now professor emeritus at Princeton University and perhaps most responsible for initiating a more sustained theorizing on democratic movements, and Rom Coles, professor of political theory at Duke University whose recent book *Beyond Gated Politics* has been the focus of much attention in the political science community. (Others on which we could have drawn would have included such political theorists as William Connolly or Jeffrey Stout.)

Critiquing the Current Order

The critiques of the current political ethos in the West, particular as exemplified by the U.S., made by political theorists such as Rom Coles, Sheldon Wolin, Cornel West, Jeff Stout, and other advocates of radical democracy, will not be unfamiliar. They critique a world increasingly marked, in the words of Coles, by “transnational corporate and financial power, myriad fundamentalisms, neo-fascist mega-states, gargantuan media conglomerates...bloody state and non-state terrorism, and environmental catastrophe”, all characteristics which appear to be furthered by a U.S. administration markedly antidemocratic in temperament and policy—a cadre “of super-elites who exhibit a culture of deafness to the rest of the world and all who dissent, while allowing blatant profiteering from government contracts by corporate giants like Halliburton; the increasing fusion of public and private operations of surveillance, policing, and punishment; the...megamedia public sphere; and the crystallization of foreign and domestic “antiterrorist” policy through a constellation of pre-emptive strike doctrines, unrelenting deceit, and periodic “alerts”.²

In response, radical democrats want to counter a notion of politics that is largely a passive in its preoccupation with distant, abstract machinations of megastates and corporate power, and recover instead a politics of the local, where multitudes of common people with shared concerns enact myriad forms of grassroots action to address specific issues. This is not, they underscore, to nostalgically look to some golden democratic past, nor to engage in utopic sentimentalities; it is simply to recover a notion of democracy from its current equivocation with free market economies or constitutional, representative institutions, equivocations that reflect political theorist John Dunn’s judgment in his book *Democracy: A History*, that “any modern state [that] claims to be a democracy...necessarily mis-describes itself.”³ Radical democrats are thus attempting to do what political theologian Kristin Deede Johnson says political theories are *supposed* to do: engage in an “exercise of imagination, offering new or different pictures of collective life in the hopes of remoulding, refashioning, or altogether altering contemporary arrangements.”⁴

² Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), x.

³ John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), 18.

⁴ Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22.

To articulate such a vision, however, entails a critique of the dominant theoretical paradigms, and radical democrats set their sights most decisively on contemporary political liberalism, especially as represented by John Rawls. (They would also claim their approach counters the kind of communitarian alternative often associated with Alasdair MacIntyre, though I judge their reading of MacIntyre to not be quite right, and that they have more in common with him than not.) One might question the need to still engage with Rawls—surely we can move on, not least given the critiques made over the years, Rawls’ own myriad qualifications in response, and its apparent lack of influence in the realm of global economic practice. Yet Rawlsian liberalism remains a frequent starting point in political theory, and continues to engender a particular perception of the political which, in turn, continues to have real-world implications for political encounters.⁵

My point here is neither to rehearse Rawls nor any of the extended critiques made of political liberalism as such; rather, I simply want to touch on a few insights radical democracy takes in contradistinction to Rawls for the very simple reason that an interfaith practice that can dwell in the tension of particularity and move beyond the liberal temptations to smooth over difference has, I would contend, the best possibility of allowing for the kind of deeper political engagements needed today. Put another way, a critique of Rawls opens up not just political space, but space for an interfaith encounters that intrinsically entail theo-political visions.

Questioning Political Liberalism

Rawls contends that incommensurable, comprehensive doctrines in pluralistic societies must be kept safely at bay by allowing debates regarding the common good to be conducted only according to the supposedly neutral terms of “public reason”. Such a position is argued for, however, according to a particular reading of the tragic in politics that is ultimately more rhetorical than it is substantive. Tragedy, in Rawls’ reading of politics, is the latent conflict always waiting around the corner in society, the inevitable clash between irreconcilable teleologies if these are left untended, unmediated, and un-arbitrated. To read Rawls is to be constantly reminded that tragic conflict accompanied the birth of modernity, and he invokes the ‘wars of religion’ as almost a mantra.⁶ As Rawls puts it, “political liberalism starts by taking to heart the absolute depth of that irreconcilable latent conflict”. If we bring absolute truths regarding meaning, being and the good into public forums, he writes, “divisions and hostilities between doctrines are bound in time to assert themselves.”

But the inevitability of such hostility is never argued, but merely conjured again and again.⁷ A central plank underlying political liberalism’s vitality, in other words—to remember a lurking, never-too-distant conflict—is merely asserted as axiomatic, invoked rhetorically in such a way that, ironically, it disallows contestations to such assumptions. Rawls attempts to

⁵ In his critique of political liberalism, he notes that he is largely sympathetic with large aspects of the kinds of ends the liberal democratic tradition seeks, and wishes there was much more of it in today’s climate—that despite his critiques and aiming for something better, it would still be much better than what currently exists today.

⁶ Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy*, 8.

⁷ Coles notes that not all versions of political liberalism have to be so rigid; Isaiah Berlin’s wasn’t; nor is J. Donald Moon; or Greenawalt.

safeguard public life, therefore, by dismissing any other projects which make fundamental claims in public life by establishing *itself* as fundamental. Thus, as one writer puts it, “It slides into the activity of stridently insisting on itself and dismissing [alternative political visions] by repeating “reasonable” several times per sentence, until the word begins to look and sound like a whip. In the overtones of certain formulations of freedom, equality, and tolerance, once can hear a certain kind of fundamentalism unaware of...itself.”⁸

Political liberalism so conceived, then, not only marginalizes alternative visions of human flourishing whose comprehensive doctrines exceed in one way or another public reason; it drains potential sources of political motivation, vision, and creativity. Furthermore, it cultivates an immodesty that risks fomenting resentment. By claiming possession of a political knowledge in light of which a polity is to be governed, it reinforces the presumptive stance of many in the professional managerial class who seek, from on high, to implement political policies on others.

Thus there is little room in a political liberalism so conceived for, by way of example, radical environmentalists to make claims rooted in certain pagan or theistic traditions of faith about human obligations to nonhuman beings; or for movements for global debt forgiveness for poor countries explicitly argued from the biblical practice of Jubilee; or for movements significantly shaped by a variety of religious visions that seek to transform practices of punishment or the use of violent force.

Thus, in spite of its aspirations, political liberalism’s profound fear of conflict entails a politics that proves weak, provokes backlash, and is insufficiently receptive to alternative visions. It views the tragedy of the political as something to be managed by abstract, self-assured calls for mediating difference via public reason, rendering it ultimately ineffective for a more flourishing democratic life.

Radical Democracy’s Vision of the Tragic

The political theory of radical democracy suggests, by way of contrast, that a sensibility of the tragic must indeed inform and even vitalize our politics, but in a very different way. Radical democracy’s rendering of tragedy is to suggest that new, unforeseen and unanticipated forms of communal life can be generated when an awareness of the tragic leads one to simultaneously articulate and strive toward the highest values of one’s comprehensive vision, while remaining open to being transformed amidst receptive engagements with those who experience themselves as marginalized or subjugated by that community’s ideals. Political action would see itself as informed and energized by being situated at the crux of this tension.

Such an approach, however, would require the cultivation of certain political virtues, practices and ways of being which would enable one to dwell in the tension between teleological directness, on the one hand, and on the other hand, *ateleological* receptivity to the otherness which lies beyond the horizons of those teleologies.⁹ Thus, as Sheldon Wolin

⁸ Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy*, xii.

⁹ *Ibid.* In *The Truce of God*, Rowan Williams suggests that a more thoroughly Godlike peace might involve generative conflict and tension. Of course, the distinction between generative and unproductive or competitive

puts it, “democratic politics is not simply about discussions and cooperation among friends and neighbours, but deliberation about differences—not just differences of opinion and interest, but the different modes of being represented in race, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, and class. The encounter with difference” he says, “presents a potential anomaly to the politics of the megastate: it upsets the passivity that is the essential condition of bureaucratic rule and the imagined politics of the mass media.”

Such an approach means that radical democracy is not generally the politics of Washington, DC or Downing Street, but is what Coles calls the politics of small achievements.¹⁰ It is a politics that, until recently, has been under-theorized. It is Wolin perhaps more than anyone who initiated such reflection based on what he had observed in the civil rights and other democratic movements of the 1960s. The sixties, he writes in one article, “were the first great attempt...at a democratic revival of American political life since the Populist revolts of the last quarter of the nineteenth century...The sixties converted democracy from a rhetorical to a working proposition, not just about equal rights, but about new models of action and access to power in workplaces, schools, neighbourhoods, and local communities.” [Cf Only recently receiving attention again, given Barack Obama’s work in Chicago.]

When Wolin turned to writing a history of political theory, he found that while the classic texts were largely dismissive of democracy as a political form, one could also discern something in the margins of these dismissals, something unstable, inclined toward anarchy, and identified with revolution, suggesting in Wolin’s reading that democracy functions best as an “unsettling political movement,” and is better understood as “a *moment* rather than a teleologically completed form”. In this respect, Wolin’s view of democracy draws on language that is self-consciously “quasi-mythic”, undergirding the sense that the emergence of democratic moments might be understood as almost proleptically eschatological events. In line with this reading, democratic movements in history should be seen as reacting, not against order *per se*, but against organizational visions which seek to “master the world” with “rationalizing concepts of power”.

Central to such a reading, however, is that such democratic moments—while neither perfect nor enduring in continuity across time—do actually *happen*. They are brought to life historically by abolitionists, feminists, antiwar activists, 19th century populists, the civil rights movement, and grassroots community activists. [There is a fascinating narration of this in Timothy Garton Ash’s book, *The Magic Lantern*, reporting on the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.]¹¹

This approach to politics, however, requires the cultivation of certain political virtues, a central one of which Wolin calls “tending”. Wolin defines tending as applying oneself “to looking after another, as when we tend a garden or tend to the sick. It implies active care for

tension would be difficult to discern—yet honing our judgment in this regard could be more fruitful than only discerning between dissonance and harmony. (Coles and Hauerwas, 188)

¹⁰ If “democracy” were not so persistently deployed as a rhetorical weapon to advance so many anti-democratic institutions and practices, we could simply say “democrat.” “Radical democrat” is a rhetorical effort to distance ourselves from the erosion of the term “democrat” that results from this deployment.” *Ibid.*, 3, n. 4.

¹¹ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Random House, 1990).

things close at hand, not mere solicitude...proper tending requires attentiveness to differences between beings within the same general class...implies respect that is discriminating but not discriminatory. The idea of tending centres politics around practices, that is, around habits of competence or skill that are routinely required if things are to be taken care of.”

This concern for tending would therefore, in Coles’ categories, work at the intersection of the teleological and the a-teleological—between the preconceptions and the stories of a tradition, on the one hand, and the surprising substantial textures of the world we encounter, on the other.¹²

Such an approach also entails a certain understanding of time. The politics of today is one of speed and efficiency and sound bites, and yet ironically, one could argue that the biggest—and perhaps quickest—change occurs when there are those who have time and space for deep engagement. Listening, of course, not only takes time, but requires a trained vulnerability that does not come easily, and depends upon the belief that communities which don’t simply survive, but flourish, are ones in which trust of others is paramount.¹³

One can read a wonderful observation of this approach to time and the political in Charles Marsh’s book, in *The Beloved Community*, about the U.S. civil rights movement. There he notes that it “is easy to forget that so much of a civil rights life involved sitting around freedom houses, community centers, and front porches with no immediate plan of action. The discipline of waiting required uncommon patience even as it sustained humility and perspective, resisting the cultural paradigm of efficiency. The genius of the SNCC, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee [one of the primary ad hoc groups of the civil rights era], was its ability to demonstrate...the strategies available to social progress within an unhurried and sometimes languorous emotional environment. As such, a condition for achieving beloved community was a certain kind of stillness in a nation of frenetic activity and noisy distraction, learning to move at a different pace...an attempt to live into a new and distinct kind of time...waiting as a discipline.”¹⁴ Marsh views these practices and the dispositions they cultivated as “contemplative disciplines” akin to a “free-floating monastic community”. Such slow-time practices paradoxically moved the U.S. along more quickly in changes in race, class and gender relations than anything previous. To move too quickly or frenetically is, ironically, to become more stuck.

Perhaps it is histories such as this which should be borne in mind when Coles asks, “Is ending a democratic meeting that surfaces intractable differences, opaque complexities, tradeoffs, and irreducibly particular attachments—is ending such a meeting with indecision a thing necessarily to be biased against in the name of ‘quickened tempo’? Is ending it *several* times this way necessarily bad?”¹⁵

¹² Stanley Hauerwas & Rom Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 58.

¹³ This is not to say that we should not be concerned with more macro politics, or be concerned with who we elect to high office. We “have lent”, Coles and Hauerwas say, “and likely will again lend, our support to elect such statespersons to office.”

¹⁴ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York, NY: Basic, 2005), 93.

¹⁵ Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 85.

A primary question, therefore, must be how people learn such habits and dispositions that would allow them to acquire the virtues necessary to such a political practice. For as Coles admits toward the end of *Beyond Gated Politics*, what his political vision requires are practices which “cultivate a people with capacities for this engagement [by]...body practices that habituate people to patience, receptive generosity, dialogue...[and] care”.¹⁶ As he later notes, “It is, I suspect, primarily practices of dialogue that cultivate the orientations, disorientations, virtues, and knowledges that are necessary...for struggling with others toward visions of what might be better.”

The Politics of Inter-faith Scriptural Reasoning

It is with this in mind—this exhortation to practices of dialogue in order to cultivate certain political virtues—that I turn to consider one approach to the practices of interfaith dialogue.

The practice of Scriptural Reasoning is, at root, the group study of scriptural texts from the three Abrahamic religious traditions. By way of description, at any given meeting, with roughly equal numbers of each faith represented, passages from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Koran are read. A theme (say, economic practices) usually relates the texts together. A few introductory comments about a scripture passage are made by a member of that faith, and then the entire group attempts to understand what the passage is teaching, and how it ought be applied to today’s context. Often this requires slow, patient work, especially to unpack the underlying logic to the way a faith has historically interpreted a passage. The same is then done with texts from the other two scriptures, and at the end the three texts are brought into dialogue with each other.

Many questions often ensue, but not only from representatives of other faiths; it is not unusual that members of the *same* faith disagree over the interpretation of their own scripture. Listening to such conversations between members of the same faith is often profoundly enlightening, as confident assertions as to “the” meaning of a text by one person—which members of another faith would have no reason to challenge—are suddenly brought into question by counter-readings by a member of the same faith. In so doing, one can observe the way a tradition reasons by listening to representatives of that tradition work out their interpretive disagreements “in public”, as it were. Furthermore, in the midst of such discussions, new insights can often be brought by a member of a different faith to the scripture being studied. Once one has thrown in shared cultural or academic backgrounds which don’t neatly follow the religious affiliations in the group (a Christian educated in the West may find more affinities with a Muslim similarly educated than with another Christian from the global South), and it quickly becomes apparent that the lines of agreement or disagreement cannot be easily predicted in any SR session.

It is for this and other reasons that putting scripture at the heart of such interfaith engagement has certain advantages. Of course, the Hebrew Bible, the Old and New Testaments, and the Qur’an are foundational to each faith’s worship, community life and ethics; major developments simply cannot occur without deep reference to their scriptures. But this is not the only reason to maintain a scriptural focus. Certain guiding assumptions

¹⁶ Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 323.

about the nature of sacred texts lead SR practitioners to view the often vexing gaps or lacunae in various texts not as “problems” to be quickly resolved by reference to, say, modern critical methods. Rather, they are taken to be invitations—indeed, divine invitations—to human creativity and reason in making sense of the passage. (Thus, while historical-critical questions are not avoided in the discussions—many SR practitioners are trained in historical criticism—neither are they privileged over other interpretive concerns.) This allows for a certain serious playfulness in the way in which the texts are approached; there is an assumption that layers of meaning are waiting to be disclosed as the texts are engaged with, and that the disclosure of such meanings may bring about a kind of reasoning that might not otherwise have occurred; that is to say, one’s thinking goes in new and unanticipated directions as a result of such a textual engagement in an interfaith context.

Furthermore, it is possible to suggest that scriptures are more generative for a kind of dialogical reasoning than simply conceptual conversations alone; discussing each faith’s respective positions on the Trinity will likely lead discussion towards settled positions too quickly, and foreclose the creative explorations and unexpected insights that textual study can invite.

Such an approach reflects the way in which SR navigates the competing truth claims of each faith, the “incommensurable comprehensive doctrines” that cause shudders of fear in Rawlsian liberals. The assumption behind such study is not that some underlying consensus exists beneath or behind the faiths represented—some kind of broad, “fourth way” that transcends the particularities of each faith with a kind of lowest-common-denominator, all-roads-lead-to-the-same-place consensus. The prevailing assumption is that each faith must go deeper into its own tradition, and not ignore the real differences that exist—while, at the *same* time, believing that one must engage in increasing depth with those of other faiths. These commitments are not mutually exclusive. This tension-dwelling, this simultaneous concern for both particularity *and* encounter, means that SR largely avoids philosophical attempts to resolve in any overarching way the conflicting claims of each faith. The resolution of such important questions of truth is clearly not unimportant; but the anticipation of such resolution remains an eschatological hope. The fact that such hope exists, however, helps to enable a willingness to dwell in the tension of deep encounter amidst deep difference.

As with radical democracy, however, a certain understanding of time and space is essential. It is important to note that SR sessions typically do not occur in a synagogue, church, or mosque; SR attempts to re-conceive its meeting space as a shared “tent of meeting” (cf. Genesis 28). The use of “tent” imagery for SR is intentional, for it suggests a contingent, transitional, non-established space in which SR practice can take place. SR is, in other words, an experimental context to explore new forms of interpretation, dialogue and friendship. But this also means that, in any SR session, it is not clear who is the “host” and who is the “guest”. If a group were studying only *one* of the scriptures, or meeting in a particular house of faith, things might be more defined. But if all three faiths are present, in a shared space that exists *outside* the three houses of worship, and if all three scriptures are being studied mutually, it suggests that one ends up with something like a three-way mutual hospitality. Each faith is host to the others *and* guest to the others as each welcomes the other two to their ‘home’ scripture and traditions of interpretation.

To put it another way, what is therefore sought in such encounters is not *neutral* ground, that liberal mirage which promises a zone of arbitration “free” from the messy particulars of faith commitments in order to pursue thin political agreements which do little to inspire much loyalty; rather, the space is reconceived as *mutual* ground, a conversational space in which the parameters for one’s reason-giving are not fixed in some *a priori* manner. A mutual versus a neutral space, thus conceived, does not require some kind of disingenuous setting aside of one’s deepest convictions before one can negotiate understanding across difference. Rather, it creates space and time for listening, for questions, for interruptions and understanding, even if such understanding does not entail agreement.

Thus, what is often the case in Scriptural Reasoning sessions is that one leaves such engagements more deeply aware of the degree of *difference*. But this is not necessarily a bad thing, because what also emerges simultaneously in the midst of such difference is a surprising degree of friendship and solidarity. In this respect Scriptural Reasoning reflects insights that might be named both Midrashic and radically democratic, as both suggest that disagreement and argument can be intrinsically productive, and can build social bonds, even where immediate resolution is not reached.

SR and the Political

There is more that can be said in terms of description, but let me instead turn to consider SR as potentially an intrinsically political practice. The question has been raised as to whether SR is not only one model for interfaith dialogue, but perhaps a model for certain kinds of political discourse, as well. Scriptural Reasoning, for example, departs from modern political theory in that, while agreements are sought where possible, it does not try to theorize in advance what the grounds of such agreement might be. In a book of essays entitled *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* Nicholas Adams, a political theologian at the University of Edinburgh who has reflected on SR practice, notes that “SR is a practice that can be theorized about, but it does not start as ‘theory’ one then attempts to put into practice.” Instead of basing SR on some theory of universal understanding as in the modern period, he says, SR observes that such understanding just *happens*, and proceeds on that basis. It is content to acknowledge that, while there may be certain basic conditions for understanding or agreement, one does not need to be able to *specify* those conditions.

A primary concern of SR, therefore, is practical: to create space in which the “deep reasonings” of a community can be made more public than they are at present. “Deep reasonings,” notes Adams, “are not just the grammar or vocabulary of a tradition, but the way their use gets handed down from generation to generation.” And while deep reasonings of the three Abrahamic traditions are hardly a secret (most mosques, synagogues and churches willingly admit guests, and most religion scholars publish their work in journals), most would agree that the quality of public debate between members of different traditions is dangerously low. (One needs only witness the reactionary debate that has occurred in light of the Archbishop’s speech on Sharia several months ago.) Where, then, are the public contexts for *really* understanding why a tradition argues the way it does? Through mass media outlets like television one is treated to sound bites, not deep reasonings; instead of understanding, the medium actually encourages the over-dramatizing of rival claims. Scriptural reasoning, by way of contrast, aims to carve out the space and time necessary for deeper discussions to occur.

Understood in this way, is it possible to imagine SR as a kind of practice in which topics with directly political implications are dealt with? The Abrahamic faiths are not merely inward faiths of privatized piety, despite modern political theory's attempt to render them as such; they are faiths which are intrinsically political, with profoundly political visions. How might the practices of Scriptural Reasoning be employed in these respects?

I think this is open to question, and I would not want to claim too much. But let me consider one example as a way of concretising the discussion thus far.

Several months ago an historic document called *A Common Word* was signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars and clerics from around the world, offering a scripturally-based reflection on two core, primary things Christians and Muslims hold in common, which was love of God and love of neighbour. It was offered as a way of beginning to go further in Muslim-Christian understanding by affirming a kind of shared, mutual ground from which to work further on the issues that unite and divide us.

The document is significant for all kinds of historic reasons, but in relation to what we are speaking of today, it is significant because it is rooted in careful engagement with Christian and Muslim scriptures, those core texts which are so often *mis*-used to divide, but are also profound resources for discovering and enabling deeper areas of mutual understanding and trust, as we've been discussing in relation to SR.

Recently various Christian leaders and scholars gathered together to begin forming a response to *A Common Word*, and it was notable what emerged. While nearly all of them expressed deep appreciation for the document, and the historical nature of it, they also questioned some of its premises: is love of God the same for the Muslim and the Christian? Is not the Muslim love of God understood differently from the Christian's, especially given that Christians understand love of God only as a movement in response to the *initiating* love of God in Christ? Furthermore, they wondered, is raising the centrality of love of neighbour to the degree that *A Common Word* does representative of a common interpretation within Islam, or is such a reading idiosyncratic? Is there anything equivalent in the Qu'ran to the Biblical understanding of love for one's enemies, for example, for those who oppose you?

These are some of the questions that were raised in response, but raised in an inviting and generative way. The assumption was that a next step would be to move beyond such high profile documents and, instead, to create contexts where Christians and Muslims on every level, including the most local of levels, could sit down with their respective scriptures and reason together about what each other means by love of God and love of neighbour. It goes without saying that a deeper understanding of each other's reasoning, not least about what it might mean to love the neighbour who opposes you, whether in Leeds or Lahore, could have significant political repercussions.

Whether this would actually count as a political practise, of course, is open to question. But as one Anglican priest working with Muslims in London once told me, "Once you call by the local mosque a few times, express solidarity with the Imam, and take away some flyers on the Five Pillars of Islam—what next?" Scriptural Reasoning, he was finding, was a way of continuing and deepening a conversation that went beyond simply liberal affirmations, or

conversations that centred only on the common denominators of Western political speech, in order to go more deeply into each other's respective faith traditions, and the way those traditions understood themselves to be relating to modern society. If such engagement is not a political practise, then it is perhaps, at the very least, a practise which points toward what a public square beyond the boundaries of liberalism might look like.

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