Religious Commitment in Scriptural Reasoning: A Critical Engagement with Gavin D'Costa's "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions"

Abstract: The essay considers the objection that Scriptural Reasoning does not actually bring particular religious points of view into discussion, but rather suppresses traditions by the way it is organized. The article contends that, while Scriptural Reasoning as a whole is not entirely determined by a defining statement from any single religious tradition, any given participant can and is encouraged to bring the fullness of their commitment to discussion, and even overarching accounts of Scriptural Reasoning may well deploy the resources of a tradition. The essay closes by testing Scriptural Reasoning against criteria for being religious, concluding that it allows religious commitment to function in every respect that matters, given that it allows multiple traditions to have a say in how the practice is configured.

I.

As some see it, interreligious dialogue requires that members of different religious traditions "put everything at risk" [1] when engaging one another in conversation, which is to say that they must not hold on to their own religious commitments too tightly. They should be willing to give them up. Otherwise, what is the point of speaking to people with other points of view, if it is not to learn from them something of which one is not already firmly convinced? And how is this, in turn, possible if one is unwilling to re-examine one's most cherished beliefs? If a Christian is unwilling even to consider giving up the belief that the resurrection and ascension of Jesus were signs of his divinity, then is such a person genuinely engaged in a substantive discussion of that position with those who adhere to different points

[1] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991), 95.

of view? At the same time, if participants in dialogue really are willing to suspend their belief in any element of a religious framework, and no element of the framework is insulated from critical questioning, does such an interlocutor count any longer as religiously committed? Would such a person taking part in a dialogue be participating in a discussion that is genuinely inter*religious*? Would not interreligious dialogue require all parties to display adherence to their religious traditions? Do not Christians need to hold to some version of a doctrine of the Trinity even to count as Christians and to participate as such in conversation with religious others? Likewise, do not Muslims need to think about God according to a stricter concept of unity if they are to be giving voice to legitimately Muslim views in their exchanges with interlocutors from other traditions? Thinking along these lines, Gavin D'Costa exclaims: "If all religions were to drop their most fundamental unique insights into the nature of reality so as not to cause offence to those who had different views, interreligious dialogue would cease!"[2] There is a complicated dialectic to navigate here for any particular instance of would-be interreligious conversation, or for any relatively defined approach to sponsoring such dialogues.

This essay considers the sense in which those who speak with religious others about religious topics bring their religious commitments with them to the conversation, rather than putting religious convictions to the side, lest they hinder the flow of the discussion. The article takes up Scriptural Reasoning as a test case, asking how great of a role determinate theological commitment or religious specificity has within this version of interreligious discussion. The essay assesses Gavin D'Costa's recent critique of Scriptural Reasoning, which makes the case that this form of dialogue forces practitioners to suspend their religious (and specifically Christian) commitments. D'Costa puts his finger on important issues, but

[2] Gavin D'Costa, "The Trinity in Interreligious Dialogues," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 576.

there are internal resources within Scriptural Reasoning with which to address them. This mode of interreligious dialogue is not defined by a single religious vision, but, given this, it permits religious loyalties and commitments to operate in every way that could well be expected.

II.

Scriptural Reasoning (hereafter SR) is a name for gatherings of small groups of Jews, Muslims, and Christians who engage in simultaneous study of texts from their respective scriptures.[3] The practice convenes conversations around texts that stand at the center of these three Abrahamic religious traditions, and thus brings particular religious points of view into engagement with one another, without the dynamics of dialogue eroding or dissolving such differences.[4] In discussing scriptures with their interlocutors, participants in SR bring to the conversation their "internal libraries"[5]—all that they have learned from their tradition's

[3] SR has expanded in recent years beyond just these three traditions. Within this essay, though, I am not focusing on this new development, but am dealing instead only with SR only in its original Abrahamic form. For introductions to SR, in addition to the essay from David Ford which receives discussion below ("An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims," *Modern Theology* 22 [2006]: 345-66), see Tom Greggs, *Theology against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2011), 196-216; Steven Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning," *Modern Theology* 22 (2006): 367-83; Peter Ochs, "The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning," *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2 (2002), accessed July 30, 2018, http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/volume-2-no-1-may-2002-the-rules-of-scriptural-reasoning/the-society-of-scriptural-reasoning-the-rules-of-scriptural-reasoning7/. This collection of essays is also fundamentally important: David Ford and C. C. Pecknold, eds., *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). A quite accessible introduction to SR is Mike Higton and Rachel Muers, *The Text in Play: Experiments in Reading Scripture* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012). Finally, there is an important forthcoming book from Peter Ochs.

[4] There is a strong consensus about this among the leaders of SR, including both first- and second-generation leaders as well as those from more than one religious tradition. This sentiment is evident in several of the pieces of literature cited in the previous note and in other locations too: Nicholas Adams, "Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics," in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People*, ed. David Cheetham et al., Currents of Encounter (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 60; Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 345-46; Greggs, *Theology against Religion*, 209-215; Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning," 368; Peter Ochs, "The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning." There is sufficient agreement on this point to consider it generally established, though there is probably greater agreement on it in the United Kingdom than in the United States. Ford notes that there are some who take exception to it, but he does not subject their views to explicit critique: "Scriptural Reasoning and the Legacy of Vatican II: Their Mutual Engagement and Significance," in *Interreligious Reading after Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism*, ed. David Ford and Frances Clemson, Directions in Modern Theology (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 118.

[5] The phrase comes from an address by Aref Nayed that is cited in Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 348.

activities of study, prayer, and worship, in the light of which they read the texts. In this way, *both* what is read *and* how the texts are read are tradition-specific. The high premium SR thus places on preserving religious particularity, rather than reducing it to something else, is of course not the only way to deal with religious differences. For instance, John Hick's enduringly influential pluralist approach depends on an a priori principle that makes his outlook fundamentally different from the ethos of SR. For Hick, all of the world religions gesture toward a common object, which he refers to as the "Real."[6] This means that the thinking and practices that constitute each of the religions are not so much important in and of themselves, in their full determinacy; what is significant about them is how they function as signs pointing toward a common noumenal entity, some sense of whose nature might be precipitated out from the details of any and all of the living world religions. In reading scriptural texts with the aid of their internal libraries, Scriptural Reasoners do not ask how their traditions all ultimately say the same thing. Instead, they explore the differences that the dialogue uncovers, together with any potential areas of overlap, in an atmosphere of friendship.

In light of this summary, and in the briefest possible terms, it is possible to gloss D'Costa's critique as claiming that SR fails to achieve its own goals: it risks collapsing back into pluralism.[7] His review focuses on a single essay from one of SR's founders, David Ford, though D'Costa acknowledges that a fuller treatment would need to take into account a broader base of literature. The critical assessment has something of a narrow focus, yet there are a number of reasons the piece is of great value, fully deserving the close engagement that

---

[6] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[7] Gavin D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions: Some Reflexions," in *Mission in Dialogue: Essays in Honour of Michael L. Fitzgerald*, ed. Catarina Belo and Jean-Jacques Pérennès (Louvain: Peeters, 2012), 33-43.

follows here. Most importantly, it goes to the heart of SR and concentrates on the question of whether and how the particular religious identities of the participants are, in fact, preserved by the structure of SR dialogues. D'Costa does not dwell on merely peripheral matters or trivial details, but brings clearly into view an issue that is utterly crucial for SR, and indeed for so many of today's forms of interreligious dialogue.[8] An additional feature of the essay that makes it significant is that it is one of the very few existing engagements with SR that registers substantial criticism of it. By some way, the preponderance of the literature on SR appraises it positively and comes from those who have been associated with it over a long period of time. It is at least worth taking seriously and thinking through negative assessments of this practice, which has now become well established in a multitude of settings, both academic and otherwise, around the world. A final reason D'Costa's discussion of SR merits attention is because it comes from one of the world's leading voices on interreligious dialogue and the interrelationship of the world's religious traditions. He has written widely on these topics and is responsible for broadly acknowledged advances in thinking about how traditions relate to one another.[9] Anyone interested in assessing SR thus has good reason to ponder carefully what D'Costa says about it.

The critique consists of four distinct points. First, D'Costa claims that Christological and ecclesiological doctrine, which serves as a necessary underpinning for any genuinely Christian reading of the Bible, is undercut and marginalized by SR. Those who have

---

[8] For work from theologians sympathetic to D'Costa's drive to move beyond a homogenizing approach to interreligious dialogue, see Jürgen Moltmann, "Is 'Pluralistic Theology' Useful for the Dialogue of World Religions," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 154; Christoph Schwöbel, "Particularity, Universality, and the Religions," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 34-37.

[9] His expertise is on clear display in his major monographs on the world religions: *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, Signposts in Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000); *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

formulated important programmatic descriptions of SR, including Ford, often characterize it as a broadly postliberal way of handling texts,[10] and this postliberal reading puts great emphasis on Christology and ecclesiology. Postliberalism is of course not a unified school—for this reason, it is de rigueur to put "Yale School" in scare quotes[11]—yet one of the strongest points of synergy among those associated with postliberalism is a commitment to seeing the biblical text as one that "absorbs the world." This means that, despite the Bible's internal diversity, the text is sufficiently unified that it provides a point of view from which to understand all of reality.[12] As the church reads the Bible, the narrative of Christ, on which the canonical text centers, draws into itself and accounts for all other narratives about or explanations of what is real.

D'Costa doubts that this interpretive dynamic is operative in SR. He keys his criticism to Ford's image of the "tent" as the location of SR, a temporary space in which SR occurs. Practitioners bring with them to the tent their academic skills (having learned them on a "campus") as well as something of the formation they have experienced in their religious tradition (a "house" of worship), though the rules of dialogical etiquette that apply in the tent itself are not finally determined simply by any of the three religious houses. With a combination of bluntness and caution, D'Costa comments, "Ford's tent insinuates (and nothing stronger can be said here) the logic of liberalism [note: not *post*liberalism]: the Bible has no binding authority, nor has the church's reading of it got primary status, nor can Christian scripture/Christ actually narrate the other texts of scriptures: Jewish and Muslim."[13]

---

[10] Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 348; Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning," 380.

[11] See, for instance, George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42.

[12] D'Costa describes it in roughly these terms: "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 38-39.

[13] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 39.

One of SR's rules of etiquette is that it resists installing any authoritative overviews of the traditions involved or their scriptures,[14] and this is part of the reason that it seems to D'Costa that the practice prohibits the text from absorbing the world. If the material content of the text, or the tradition that takes its cue from the text, is not defined, how can it render an encompassing account of what is real? There is also in Ford's account the injunction not to dwell on "secure disagreements," areas where the traditions have clashed in the past without being able to come to a satisfying resolution.[15] One of these areas is Christology, and so it would appear that that might forbid a Christological reading of the texts from the other traditions.[16] D'Costa asks how a Christian practitioner can read in a way that depends on a doctrine which is not supposed to be her focus. The standards of etiquette that govern discussion in the tent thus seem to be fundamentally different from the way the ecclesial community reads, taking every thought captive to Christ as he presents himself through the scriptural story.

Second, D'Costa's critique takes a specifically Roman Catholic turn when he charges that SR does not leave room for "metaphysics" in relation to scriptural interpretation.[17] He draws upon Matthew Levering, who characterizes metaphysics as "intellectual judgment about ultimate questions regarding the nature of God and creatures."[18] Metaphysics in this sense is important in connection with the Bible in a number of ways. At a basic level, the text of the Bible raises questions that themselves fit with the definition of metaphysics just

---

[14] This is noted by D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 38. For a corresponding primary source, see Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 347.

[15] Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 363.

[16] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 39.

[17] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 39-40.

[18] Levering is cited by D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 40. The original text is Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 41.

quoted. When the text of John's Gospel is construed as offering itself as a resource to enable contemplation, it provides the reader with claims about God the Father and Jesus' relationship to him that press the reader to consider such ultimate issues, for instance in texts such as "before Abraham was, I am" (8:58), "I and the Father are one" (10:30), and "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9).[19] The importance of metaphysics for interpretation is not just that scriptural and metaphysical modes of articulating truth are not diametrically opposed to one another—contra the standard Hellenization thesis—but that, much more broadly, a biblically inspired way of thinking about God and human beings shapes consideration of the goal and subject-matter of interpretation as well as reflection on the nature of the interpreter and the practice of reading itself. More specifically, it positions reading in a theocentric ascent that deepens the interpreter's participation in God's knowledge, which the believer already shares in via faith and which reaches its perfection in the beatific vision.[20] Understood in this sense, metaphysics becomes a way of thinking about the whole structure of Christian reading. D'Costa writes, "SR seems to eschew any canopy over the project, but the metaphysics of Christian scriptural reading generates precisely such a canopy."[21] At this point, D'Costa discusses, but does not directly cite, Nicholas Adams and Peter Ochs, both of whose reflections on SR are funded by a pragmatic philosophy that disallows the scope for metaphysics that is favoured by D'Costa, who follows Levering and ultimately Thomas Aquinas. Reference might have been made here to Ford's point that there is a sense in which SR avoids definitive overviews of scriptural traditions, for that is precisely what metaphysics is, as D'Costa is commending it. That is not how D'Costa develops this point, thought it might well have been.

---

[19] Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, 40.

[20] Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, 37.

[21] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 40.

The third objection is that "there is a vaguely pluralistic agenda present."[22] Part of what is happening here, as D'Costa says this, is that he is expressing concern that Ford uses language that likens SR to shared worship, writing initially that "SR is analogised [by Ford] to shared worship"[23] and then, considerably more strongly, "the image of interfaith worship is curious, given the deep and presently unsurmounted problems between the three religions."[24] It might be possible to write this criticism off as an example of ungenerous interpretation, for Ford's explication of what happens in the tent makes it clear that he does not consider it to *be* shared worship, but only something *close to* that. As he says, referring to SR: "Its quasi-liturgical character is appropriate, since it is likely that 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."[25] Ford acknowledges here, openly and explicitly, that this is not a clear example of shared worship, and he also stipulates that there are differences in how God is understood among adherents of the different traditions. SR is *likened* to interfaith worship—nothing more. Yet, it is entirely possible to read D'Costa as having a serious point nevertheless, even if it is not made via a sympathetic exegesis of Ford, and this point would be one that reinforces the two points made in the prior two objections, namely, that there is not a determinately Christian (i.e., triune) view of God embedded in the design of SR. When Ford mentions God in speaking about how SR operates,[26] these references are open-textured. There is nothing quite as definite as either a Christological narrative absorbing alternative accounts of reality or a Thomistic

---

[22] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 40.

[23] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 40.

[24] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 40.

[25] Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 351.

[26] For example, Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 349, 351.

metaphysics setting the context for biblical reading. The section below will return to this point in responding to D'Costa's critique. For now, the aim is only to lay out a reading of D'Costa that seems to fit well with his overall intention.

Fourth, the final problem D'Costa finds in SR is that it offers itself as a reasonably comprehensive approach to interreligious dialogue, but it neglects the possibilities for mission and evangelism that ought to arise as a participant comes to understand the other two traditions, as one gets to know others personally who are members of those specific communities, and as a participant learns from the many genuinely positive elements of these traditions.[27] The way that SR is structured seems to D'Costa to squeeze out this important priority, or at least Ford says nothing about it in the essay on which D'Costa chooses to focus, nor does what he says suggest it very directly. D'Costa offers up a model for the sort of witness that he considers appropriate in the context of interreligious discussions.[28] A Christian offering witness to a member of another tradition needs to grasp the other tradition

[27] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 33, 41-43. I pass over, without treating it independently, D'Costa's mention of one other partial criticism of SR, which is that it only partly fulfills an important requirement of interreligious engagements, namely, that they allow one to learn from other traditions (D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 37). This line of critique is intimately related to the first major objection about Christology and ecclesiology, for D'Costa claims that the Christological and ecclesiological deficit in SR prevents participants from being able to return to their houses of worship with insights gleaned from SR. At least the Christian version of scriptural reading is—or so the critique goes—actually absent from SR, so it is impossible for others to learn from it (apart from this problem, some reciprocal learning is possible). Because what D'Costa says about this is closely linked to the first point above, I do not offer a separate treatment of this topic.

[28] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 41-43. The same material is covered more expansively and perhaps more clearly in Gavin D'Costa, "The Bible in a World of Religious Pluralism: Reading the Bible with and for the Jewish People?," in *The Bible: Culture, Community, Society*, ed. Angus Paddison and Neil Messer (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 148-55. Historically there has been quite a bit more stress on witness in the Christian and Muslim traditions than within Judaism. For a comparison between Christianity and Islam on this topic, see Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed., American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009).

The same general question, on the place of witness within dialogue, is dealt with in various ways by the following: John B. Cobb, "Dialogue," in *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, ed. Leonard J. Swidler et al. (London: SCM Press, 1990), 1-2, 8-9; Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1991), xi-xii; Paul F. Knitter, "Interreligious Dialogue: What? Why? How?" in *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, ed. Leonard Swidler et al. (London: SCM Press, 1990), 22-25; Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 114-17.

on its own terms, understanding it as if from the inside; to identify problems within that tradition, issues that it cannot address successfully using its own resources; and only then to offer daring recommendations on the basis of the Christian tradition for how those problems might be dealt with more effectively. This process does not require what does not actually exist, namely, an expansive domain of neutral territory in which both interlocutors can discuss the issues and adjudicate between different options. What is required is a realization that thinking about the issue with reference to the Christian God—and this most definitely should not be confused with the version of Christianity that is identical, in all respects, to that of the particular Christian(s) involved in the conversation—provides a vantage point which is genuinely better for addressing the issue in question.

By way of illustration, D'Costa provides an example, borrowed from Panikkar, of how this could work in connection with a particular strand of the Hindu tradition[29]: there, Brahman is the total ultimate cause of the world, though there are difficulties, evident when the texts are read sensitively in their own contexts, in bridging between Brahman and the world itself; the figure of Isvara forms something of a link between the two domains, yet there are residual difficulties associated with his role as a bridge figure; these challenges may be addressed when Isvara is identified as Jesus Christ, when the things that are good in Isvara are seen as fulfilled in the person of God incarnate, and when Christology is seen as a more capacious framework on the basis of which to reflect on this version of the one and many problem. Of course, this brief summary of the sort of thing D'Costa has in mind is compressed and omits what would be, in any real dialogue, deeply significant details that deserve more unpacking than is possible in this context. But this illustration is intended simply to gesture toward a way in which dialogue might include a moment of witness, and

[29] D'Costa, "Catholics Reading the Scripture of Other Religions," 40. See also D'Costa, "The Bible in a World of Religious Pluralism," 150-55.

indeed one that does not presuppose a framework of discourse that is shared between two religious traditions and is neutral with respect to disputes between them. That nothing like this seems to feature in SR D'Costa sees as a sin of omission on its part.

This is the fourfold remonstrance from D'Costa against SR. The following section provides a response to his criticisms.

III.

One way to reply to D'Costa would be to deal rather directly with the specifically Roman Catholic concerns that he raises, especially in two of his criticisms: the second, based on a Thomistic metaphysic, and the fourth, in which the good things in world religions other than Christianity count as preparations for an understanding of Jesus Christ, à la Vatican II's broadening out of the theme of *praeparatio evangelicae* (reserved previously for Israel), such that it extends to a whole range of religious traditions. To the best of my knowledge there is no response to D'Costa that does exactly this, but there is some recent literature that comes close by discussing the compatibility of SR and post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism.[30] For his part, David Dault expounds a version of Roman Catholic scriptural interpretation, and theological reasoning that grows out of biblical reading, in such a way as to stress how it harmonizes with what happens in SR. In his essay, David Ford takes on the question of compatibility more fully, arguing that key themes of Vatican II—*conversazione*, *ressourcement*, and *aggiornamento*—are present, mutatis mutandis, in SR's drive to host a conversation between major religious traditions that returns to the Bible (and other scriptures) and deals with pressing challenges that face not only all of the traditions but the world as a

[30] David Dault, "Catholic Reasoning and Reading across Traditions," in *Interreligious Reading after Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism*, ed. David Ford and Frances Clemson, Directions in Modern Theology (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 46-61; David F. Ford, "Scriptural Reasoning and the Legacy of Vatican II: Their Mutual Engagement and Significance," in *Interreligious Reading after Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism*, ed. David Ford and Frances Clemson, Directions in Modern Theology (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 93-119.

whole. Though neither of these authors engages D'Costa, these two essays can be read as implicit and sometimes even explicit responses to some of the distinctively Roman Catholic issues on which he concentrates. In this section, I will not pursue those topics any further. Instead, my reply will take an angle that allows for the exploration of a more general point—one that includes the worries D'Costa registers together with analogous questions that have pertinence in other Christian traditions and beyond Christianity.[31]

To follow this strategy, it is necessary, before proceeding, to point out something that all four of D'Costa's objections have in common. Each critical point is a specific way of saying that large-scale frameworks of religious commitment cannot function fully within SR, or that their operation is seriously impeded and inhibited by the very layout of this form of interreligious engagement. In other words, the general point that holds together the four problems is a sense that religious commitments—the beliefs and loyalties that mark religious practitioners as such, and ought to continue to do so even as they enter into dialogue with one another—are not written into the practice of SR, with the result that these commitments are eroded and rendered feckless. The Christology/ecclesiology issue is but one variation on this: the thrust of this concern is that a customary ecclesial reading of the Bible, in which the story of Jesus can draw within itself and interpret all accounts of reality that do not already acknowledge his centrality, is displaced by SR's rules of dialogue. Likewise, the heart of the

[31] My response will be based upon my own experience of SR as well as the literature on it, taking up D'Costa's suggestion that further discussion of SR would consider writing about it by others than just Ford. Michael Barnes usefully distinguishes between a theology *of* dialogue (one that arises from within the practice and thinks about it) and one *for* dialogue (a rationale for engagement that would prepare people to undertake it): *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), x. The reflections on dialogue that follow certainly do not have the scope or ambition to qualify as a full theology of dialouge, but they do grow out of experience of it. That this work is informed by practice accords with what Peter Ochs says about the priority of experience in SR: "Members of SSR [the Society of Scriptural Reasoning] came gradually to agree that the practices of SR could not be taught by way of these writings [concerning theories of SR], but *only* through apprenticeship or training in the practices themselves," (stress added). I take his point not to be that no understanding of SR is possible apart from practice, but that secure understanding is only possible through some experience of this form of dialogue. See his "The Possibilities and Limits of Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Scott Appleby, Atalia Omer, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 498.

treatment of metaphysics is that a biblical-metaphysical idiom cannot organize an entire approach to biblical interpretation, taking the reading of biblical texts as a means for the contemplation of ultimate questions that see the text as their point of departure. Similarly for the query about pluralism: if the references to God found in discussions of SR are, in fact, vague and lacking in theological specificity, then the way in which mention of the triune God organizes a Christian perspective, including on how the Bible should be read and on how other religious traditions should be interpreted, is effectively undermined. Finally, because of the way that D'Costa imagines that dialogue should include the opportunity to bear witness to others—not by the two interlocutors entering a neutral territory but by one committed viewpoint demonstrating how it can address aporiae that another cannot—this process also presupposes the cogency and necessity of a whole framework of religious commitments.

The key to responding to this overriding concern is to underline a distinction that is crucial to SR, but that does not factor in D'Costa's account of it. This is the distinction between what is happening at the *participant* level of the discussion as opposed to the *canopy* level. Individual participants—be they Jews, Muslims, or Christians—take part in the discussion with their religious convictions intact: they themselves are not encouraged to bracket out what makes them Jews, Muslims, or Christians, or indeed the even more specific sorts of commitments that make them (say) orthodox Jews, Sunni Muslims, or Roman Catholic Christians. They can and should speak on the basis of who they are, connecting deeply with their own religious identity. This is one level of SR. The canopy level of the discussion refers not to what each individual in the discussion may think or feel, but to the overall protocols for SR-type of dialogue which guide each of those who participate. There are two aspects to the canopy. It is fair to say that the first is the subject of an informal consensus among participants in SR. This aspect is a very simple, minimal description of SR's process: it includes stipulations that SR involves small groups of participants, taking

part in live, face-to-face discussion, about texts from the three traditions that have been selected in advance and all of which deal with a common topic, and so on. The other aspect of the canopy is a fuller, more robust and in-depth account of what is happening in SR. It is Ford's explanation of the canopy that D'Costa deals with when he discusses the rules for conversation in the tent.[32] While there is more or less a consensus around the most trivial description of SR as a dialogical practice, there is no single authoritative deeper account. Ford's is only one example. There are also descriptions of the canopy that come with a Jewish inflection.[33] It is a policy of the Society of Scriptural Reasoning that there should never be a single formalized account of the shape and rationale for SR.[34] Doing so would almost certainly slant the practice so as to privilege one of the involved traditions to the detriment of the others.

There is a real sense, then, in which the things that D'Costa takes to be absent from SR can indeed be present. At the participant level, there is nothing to prevent someone taking part in a session of SR from being invested in the view that the biblical narrative about Jesus can bring within its scope any other narrative or worldview. Nor is there any reason that a participant could not be persuaded of a Thomistic metaphysic, seeing it as fitting with the Bible and as the proper context for reading the text. Nor are there any grounds for barring a participant in SR from having an intricately developed doctrine of the triune God that the individual thinks of as being as compelling as any human language about God can possibly be. It is entirely possible to engage in the discussion on the assumption of any or all of these

---

[32] Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 349-50.

[33] Ochs, "The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning"; Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning," 370-81.

[34] Peter Ochs, "Re-Socializing Scholars of Religious, Theological, and Theo-Philosophical Inquiry," in *Interreligious Reading after Vatican II : Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism*, ed. David Ford and Frances Clemson, Directions in Modern Theology (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 202-03.

positions. As Ford writes, in the context of discussing Roman Catholic views specifically, "Scriptural Reasoning does not rule out anyone claiming universality, absoluteness, uniqueness or other forms of superiority for their own tradition."[35]

Does this permission to make overarching claims on the part of a single tradition imply that these sorts of views could also be operative at the level of the canopy? In actual practice, descriptions of what is happening at the canopy level are often rather modest in order to leave room for others to have their say, from their own point of view, about what is taking place without provoking immediate confrontations.[36] At the same time, the existing accounts of the canopy are religiously specific. It would not be possible to formulate a canopy-level description of SR that is exclusively informed by the sort of Roman Catholicism D'Costa finds attractive, for the simple reason that a canopy description is a depiction of what *everyone* involved in SR is doing. Jews, Muslims, and other Christians would not do precisely what a certain sort of Roman Catholic would do in interpreting texts because they do not accept the theological background that generates the relevant interpretive strategies. At the same time, it might well be possible to frame a canopy account that reflects this tradition in certain ways, yet such an account would have the same essential status that all other canopy accounts do: it would be one among several points of view on what is happening in SR.

Of the four critical points surveyed above, this leaves unaddressed only the practice of witness or evangelism. Does it too have some place in SR? Or is it really neglected? It is worth noting initially that there do exist in the literature on SR explicit statements to the effect that, while evangelism is surely a sensitive issue, and the desire on the part of some to testify to God as understood in their tradition may make some participants wary, it is

---

[35] Ford, "Scriptural Reasoning and the Legacy of Vatican II," 115.

[36] Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 242.

nevertheless something that can be encompassed in SR—assuming that it is not done in a disruptive way. To quote from Ford once more, "Scriptural Reasoning has in fact included, and should in theory be able to include, those (nearly always Christians and Muslims) who are committed to missionary activity on behalf of their community. …If the protocols of Scriptural Reasoning are observed, there can be a space where even this is explored and argued about with reference to the scriptures of each tradition."[37] It is thus clear, at minimum, that one of SR's founders does not see it as excluding evangelism in principle.

How, more specifically, would this fit within the practice of SR? A subtle mode of testimony might well be considered to be implicit within the conversational dynamic of SR as that dynamic receives insightful description by Nicholas Adams, who characterizes what is happening in SR as making "deep reasonings" public.[38] Deep reasonings are the written records of arguments from the past about the meaning and implications of scriptural passages, which have shaped communities, and have become the prior understandings in light of which they continue to read their sacred texts in the present. Making these public means exposing them and explaining them to the rest of those gathered for discussion. In this way, what lies at the center of SR discussions, and what members of a tradition unpack for others is not so much the hermeneutical rules by which they read their scriptures, as it is the historically important chains of exegetical reasoning and conclusions that have formed them and their traditions. As Adams says, "Scriptural Reasoning is a practice of 'publicising' deep reasonings, so that others may learn to understand them and discover why particular trains of reasoning, and not just particular assumptions, are attractive or problematic."[39] Given that a

---

[37] Ford, "Scriptural Reasoning and the Legacy of Vatican II," 115; Greggs, *Theology against Religion*, 215.

[38] Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, 241-42; Nicholas Adams, "Making Deep Reasonings Public," *Modern Theology* 22 (2006): 398-400.

[39] Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, 242. Of course, in SR it is not only the tradition for which any given text is sacred scripture that provides a reading of it. The gathered religious others also read those texts, perhaps in the process taking up some of the assumptions of the tradition whose sacred scripture it is and allowing their reading to be guided by them, at least for the sake of the discussion. It is certainly possible for

member of a particular tradition must consider her own tradition to be more attractive than problematic on balance—it being hard to see, otherwise, why one would remain affiliated with such a tradition—there is only a very fine line between explaining what makes the history of scriptural interpretation (partially constitutive of a tradition as it is) attractive, and offering testimony to God from the perspective of one's tradition. If a tradition is expounded and given an evaluation that is positive overall, in the tone of the words used in speaking, then this very activity shades into offering testimony—or does so for those traditions, such as Christianity, that have the category.[40] Strong and overt calls for conversion are a different matter, however; making such calls is not tied up with the whole dynamic of SR-style dialogue, and those appeals are extremely likely to disrupt the process of dialogue, throwing it off-track.

In sum, then, in the form in which D'Costa couches his objections, they do not hit their target. There is more room for religious convictions, and commitments of a particular Christian form, than he gives SR credit for allowing. Convictions about Christology, metaphysics, the doctrine of God, and the necessity of testimony can be operative in certain significant ways. So, at least when read according the letter, the critique is not entirely compelling.

---

such interpretive frameworks to, in this way, have different standings for the different participants in the dialogue.

[40] Practitioners often say that SR aims for understanding rather than agreement. See, for instance, Adams, "Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics," 65. Does the assertion that witness belongs in SR covertly push discussions in the direction of achieving consensus on issues under discussion? No; that is not an entailment. The general orientation of SR discussions is not toward agreement, but that is not to say that agreement on certain topics cannot happen on specific occasions, whether or not that is to do with such a large-scale issue as which religious tradition is the most compelling one. As Adams comments, "One of the assumptions among participants in Scriptural Reasoning that the three traditions are likely to persist, in relation to one another, for the long term. There is no prospect of mass conversions from one tradition to another; no prospect of agreement on some of the core issues at the heart of the traditions' accounts of one another…. There is also no cause for worry in the face of this lack of prospects. To put it rather crudely: if Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are features of the world until the eschaton, it is probably wise to develop modes of understanding disagreement that are well fitted for the long haul" (Adams, "Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics," 65).

IV.

Yet what if the critique is taken more according to the spirit than to the letter? It is possible to reshape the main question to ask whether there are secularizing tendencies in SR (this is neither precisely what D'Costa wonders about, nor is it utterly foreign to the ethos of his piece). Reformulated, the question would run as follows. On the one hand, individual participants in SR are welcome to be as religiously committed to their tradition as they like. On the other hand, though, at the canopy level, it is impossible for there to be the same sort of singular, well-developed religious perspective, but only something that is, by comparison, trimmed back. What is offered as an account of the canopy is usually relatively modest, if not minimal, in its deployment of specifically religious language. What is offered here also needs to face the constant challenge posed to any one account by the enduring presence of others. Just as people in a modern secular age are buffeted by cross pressure as one system engages with another on an ongoing basis, without any one tradition finally supplanting the rest,[41] deeper descriptions of what is happening in the canopy will always face at least implicit challenges from rival accounts, which aim to perform the same work they do. In SR, religions are discussed, to be sure, and there is also no question that religious belief or conviction can serve as elements of rationales for the practice. But at the level of what holds the practice together—the deeper aspect of the canopy—is there a certain secularizing drift by virtue of such accounts being modest in the content they deploy, and because they are each constantly unsettling the others? Perhaps it is for this reason that SR so often does not take place in sacred locations, but rather in spaces such as academic conference meetings. Just as D'Costa asks about Ford's image of the tent, and whether it suggests that SR proceeds according to the logic of liberalism, perhaps SR meetings typically take place outside of

[41] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 594-617.

sacred locations because of SR's inherent secularizing movement. If there is a secularizing tendency in this sense, does it undermine the religious allegiance of those who take part in the practice? Do they become distant from their religious allegiances by taking part in SR?

The simplest response to this question is that something like this may be inevitable for the governance of a practice that involves multiple traditions, even in the frameworks that describe its process. Perhaps so, yet considerations of practicality do not mean that this question about basic principles goes away. The question remains whether the settlement follows a secularizing pattern in a certain sense.[42] This section will explore that issue.

A useful way to clarify this query, and particularly its key term *secularizing*, is to inquire into the way in which SR discussions are *religious*, at both the participant and canopy levels.[43] To the extent that SR fits criteria for being religious, it is not secularizing, for the latter term here points to an absence of religious commitment, or to it not doing certain work it might perform in a more fully or deeply religious perspective. There is no question, in the present context, whether Christianity counts as a religion, or for that matter, whether Judaism or Islam do either. Things would become more complicated if a different concept of religion

---

[42] It should be obvious now, from what has already been said about SR, that participants are not categorically prohibited from using theological language (this is what Jeffrey Stout refers to as *secularized* discourse), nor is it the case that participants decline to use theological language for the sake of fulfilling strategic goals, that is, they elect not to speak in a theological mode because they realize that that doing so will not result in persuading many in their audience, as their audience is not united in holding any single theological perspective (this stance Stout calls *secular*, not fully secularized). Note that neither his use of secularized nor secular is the same as my use of secularizing. For his distinction, see Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 97-99. In SR, it is true that there is no single shared theological perspective, but discussants are encouraged, nevertheless, to express their views so as to explore their religious differences, without assuming that reaching a consensus is required for the discussion to be interesting and fruitful.

[43] I adapt and apply the analysis of being religious to be found in Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7-13. That he offers his account of religion for the purpose of developing a view of interpretive activity that takes place in communities that qualify as religious means that his concept fits well in the context of this study. In employing the concept of religion here, and indeed throughout this essay, I do so with awareness of the dangers of using religion as a genus term where particular religious communities must count as species of that defined genus. For a vigorous articulation of these worries, see John Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 176-181. I seek to use the terms religion, and religious, in a way that is not rigid, that is, without squeezing particular world religious traditions into a preconceived mold into which they *must* fit.

than the one that is about to be spelled out were invoked—say Kant's,[44] which serves to limit or critique, rather than merely to describe, particular traditions (thus, actual religious traditions would need to fit within the confines of religion defined in this generic way)—but this section intends to operate in a descriptive register in the way it uses the term religion. What is at issue presently is not whether the three Abrahamic traditions qualify as religions; the question being pressed is whether SR allows religious language to be used in a fully religious way, in all its vigor and potency, or whether its employment is cramped or hampered by the structure of SR dialogue. The focus here is on Christianity, because that is the tradition on which D'Costa and Ford mainly focus, but analogous questions could be posed in relation to the other traditions too.

Three criteria are relevant. First, does SR permit the use of religious language in a *comprehensive* manner?[45] The criterion of comprehensiveness is about the scope of subjects to which religious language is applied: the comprehensiveness standard is met if strictly

[44] Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39-215.

[45] In the paragraph above, I provide a total of three criteria for when religious language is being used in a specifically religious way, beginning with this first standard of comprehensiveness. But I should also state here more explicitly than I have so far what I mean by religious language in the first place, for I make mention in what follows of phrases with a similar meaning, such as religious vocabulary, speaking in a religious register, and so on. What I have in mind, in referring to the use of religious language and the like, is simply that the idiom native to members of a religious tradition—one that can be seen in their scriptural texts and the myriad ways in which those texts are received in the communities that treat them as sacred—is preserved, rather than being transposed into another way of speaking, as necessarily happens when a hermeneutic of suspicion is applied to that language. Hans Frei summarizes incisively what it means to utilize a hermeneutic of suspicion: it is "a theory of interpretation that says that every self-interpretation of a religion is really an ideology—that is to say, the self-interpreters don't really know what it's about. It's only the intelligent outside observer who knows what the real thing is because he has an explanatory structure for it" (*Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992], 12). If insiders to a religious tradition never understand what is taking place when they speak, and if one ultimately wants to know what is actually happening, then the language about God that religious people employ will need to be understood with reference to the user's social relationships, material circumstances, or other factors that would not be primary in the religious person's own explication of their claims (with the exact meaning depending on the particular operative explanatory framework). There is no need, however, to be overly zealous in differentiating between religious and philosophical language, for many religious communities have proven themselves to be comfortable using language with a philosophical origin. Such language, such as certain creedal formulations in the Christian tradition, can certainly count as religious language, as religious people can make their own claims with it, and indeed without the process resolving reference to God into this-worldly explanatory terminology.

everything in SR is or can be the subject of religious language, and at least in theory nothing is omitted. Applying Christian language comprehensively, at both participant and canopy levels, need not involve specifying in advance every possible detail regarding how to think about an aspect of SR. But nothing can be entirely off-limits, sealed off from the possibility of having religious language applied to it. This initial criterion concerns the scope of the application of religious language, rather than anything about how firmly the corresponding beliefs are held. This brings us to the second standard, *unsurpassability*. To use religious language and think of it as unsurpassable in so doing, would be to think of it as indicating a commitment that one could not imagine abandoning. Unsurpassability is about a perspective, at least in its main outlines, that is incapable of being replaced or subsumed by a better account of the same content. Of course, it is entirely possible for a given person to relinquish the commitments signalled by the religious language that he uses. But so long as this language is used in a genuinely religious way, no such thing is imaginable. The point is that such usage of language indicates what seems to the language-user to be a non-negotiable commitment: its formulation and expression can change, it can be supplemented, but no alterations in its main substance are possible. Third, do those who take part in SR take the religious language that they use to relate to matters that are *central* to them as practitioners in dialogue? Is the theological language they employ directly relevant to what they see as the central questions of SR? Does it provide them with answers to these questions, or, at minimum, a way of seeking after such answers? Or is such language concerned just with matters that are less than utterly primary within SR, leaving the more important tasks for some other forms of thought? Does religious language provide participants, both at their own level and as they think about the canopy, with an orientation that does not require them to shift out of a religious mode and into something fundamentally different for the sake of engaging in dialogue, thus rendering these discussants fragmented and dispersed? Each of

these criteria is necessary, and they are together sufficient for an application of language to qualify as religious.

SR fulfils them all in the following way. It does not prohibit religious discourse at either the participant or at the canopy level. Quite the opposite: those who take part in SR are encouraged to deploy religious language as they themselves enter into discussion with religious others about scriptural texts, and whenever they offer their views on the deeper aspects of the canopy that accounts for how the entire discussion runs. That is, for any given Scriptural Reasoner, their own application of religious terminology is comprehensive in its scope. If there is any limitation at all, it would simply be that the application of language by a single participant does not exclude others from employing different language. Any one instance of language can be used comprehensively *by an individual*, though it need not be used in this way *by all participants*. Comprehensiveness as a criterion is fulfilled, but it is indexed to a specific Scriptural Reasoner, who has a particular perspective that is a function of her religious tradition as well as of her academic expertise and other contingent factors. That SR permits and even encourages religious language to be used comprehensively does not, however, mean that religious traditions must serve as the sole basis of rationales for the practice. Nothing in any of the three Abrahamic traditions indicates that precisely small group scripture-based discussion among the three religions is necessary.[46] But it does not follow from religious language being applied to all elements of an account of SR, or with unlimited scope within the practice itself, that absolutely nothing else at all can be found in

[46] Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, 240. Yet Peter Ochs notes that participants in SR typically, after a period of time, come to see that taking part is not finally incompatible with their traditions at their best, even if nothing within their traditions prepared them exactly for the experience of it: "The Possibilities and Limits of Inter-Religious Dialogue," 489. See also Mike Higton's explanation of how taking part in SR fits into the life of Christian discipleship, though that is only one of a number of rationales for taking part in SR, with others coming from the other Abrahamic traditions: "Scriptural Reasoning and the Discipline of Christian Doctrine," *Modern Theology* 29 (2013): 130-34.

such an account or in the practice. That other factors play a role is compatible with comprehensiveness: comprehensiveness does not entail exclusiveness.

An example of how comprehensiveness might be embodied in an SR dialogue will help to illustrate this criterion. Let us say that a group of discussants is working through a set of scriptural texts on prophecy, and they come to an Islamic text on the subject, say Qur'an 2.[47] In the group's discussion, a number of things are noted about how prophecy is conceived in Islam, including in this text, among which is that the true hearer of prophecy accepts the *Qur'an* specifically—and not just any word claiming to be from God—as a divine message and responds to it by embodying the text. The Jews, Muslims, and Christians who constitute the group come to see, over the course of their discussion, that prophecy is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon in Islam, but that obedient response is part of what makes for a proper response to a genuinely prophetic word within this tradition. How ought a Christian respond to this text? On the one hand, having understood more clearly and deeply the notion of prophecy in Islam, Christians should be better able to return to their own scripture and to discern how prophecy functions in ways that are both similar and different to its role in Islam. For instance, they might reflect in ways that they could not have imagined before on the hope that Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians 14 whereby all might prophesy, or on the statement in 1 Samuel 10:9-12 that Saul is to be counted among the number of the prophets. They are likely to see things in the Christian Bible that they have never noticed before. But, on the other hand, the criterion of comprehensiveness enters in when a Christian realizes that she can only hear the Qur'anic prophecy as such to the extent that it jibes with her commitment to her own scripture, for that allegiance is comprehensive in its scope, and there can be no exceptions to it. That Christian commitment excludes no element of the SR discussion means that

[47] In developing this example, I am indebted to the treatment of prophecy in Islam to be found in chapter 14 of Higton and Muers, *The Text in Play*, 151-56.

Christian learning takes place within a framework of established beliefs—and indeed the principle of comprehensiveness would likewise mean that a religiously committed Muslim would read texts from the Christian Bible and respond to them within parameters set by her own tradition.

Next, consider unsurpassability. For each Scriptural Reasoner, they may and in fact do offer comments in group discussions based upon nonnegotiable commitments, and if they offer accounts of the practice of SR, these can also draw upon loyalties that they cannot imagine surrendering. Experience of the practice of SR is likely to put those commitments into a new light and to help the religiously invested participant to perceive those beliefs in a different perspective. Regular participation in dialogue is also likely to lead the participant to try out new formulations of these commitments, or to experiment with ways of developing these commitments (and study that confines itself to the participant's own tradition is likely to do the same, assuming that an illuminating and fruitful form of study is followed). But of course those same commitments are only unsurpassable for that Scriptural Reasoner, not for everyone involved in the process. A particular Scriptural Reasoner, in virtue of being a member of an Abrahamic tradition, must take with sufficient seriousness his own religious beliefs; however, by the same token, the members of other traditions must reject many (but by no means all) of those same positions. If practitioners of SR offer accounts of the practice only "for the sake of discussion," presenting certain things tentatively and in the hope that they might be spurred to revise as they receive criticism and questions from an audience, this is compatible with fulfilling the criterion of unsurpassability so long as the practitioner offering the account ventures elements of it firmly, while sensing that other elements probably require further refinement. That would almost certainly be the case when an account of SR is a complex mixture of religious commitment and ways of elaborating these themes that are provided by an auxiliary discipline such as philosophy.

Once again it is worth illustrating the point about unsurpassability with an example—in fact, returning to the same example just mentioned and exploring another facet of it will serve to show what is at stake here. The example above about prophecy was discussed in connection with the criterion of comprehensiveness, but it was actually not only this criterion that was operating when the Christian participant realized that there were limits, set by her own tradition, to how she might respond to the Qur'anic text as a prophetic word. The criterion of unsurpassability is also necessary to fully establish this judgment. The reason that the two need to work in conjunction with one another is that comprehensiveness itself deals only with the scope of religious commitment—nothing is left out—but unless a further stipulation is added regarding the firmness with which a belief should be held, then it does not follow that the Qur'an can be heard as a prophecy to precisely the extent it is confirmed by texts from the Christian Bible. Without unsurpassability, it would be possible in principle for the Christian's commitment to her own scripture to be superseded by the belief system that another set of texts projects, even if that weaker level of commitment were universal in the range of items to which it applies. And, again, just as it is true that the religiously committed Christian views her beliefs as unsurpassable, in the sense carefully spelled out in the previous paragraph, so also the religiously committed Muslim would also see her Muslim views as unsurpassable. And the same would of course be true for the Jewish participants in the dialogue, unsurpassability being a function of religiosity as such.

The structure of SR is also such that it is entirely compatible with religious language being used with reference to its most central questions (and indeed to the most central questions of the lives of those who partake in discussions). What is most central to SR? The most obviously central element, apart from the practice itself, would be the canopy level descriptions of it, for it is only these accounts that are applicable to all of those who participate. Furthermore, it would be the deeper aspect of the canopy accounts, not merely

the list of basic discussion protocols, that stands at the heart of SR. What is happening in SR? Why do people do it? What are the results that come from it? Religious language is regularly used to offer answers to those questions—though again, the crucial caveat applies: any one Scriptural Reasoner can employ religious vocabulary as fully and elaborately as she wishes, while others who take part will consider those central questions from within their own distinctive religious point of view (and there is nothing stopping them from reframing the questions themselves in the process). When considering the criterion of centrality, Griffiths writes, "Bilingualism is possible, but bireligionism is not."[48] This is certainly true for each individual practitioner of SR, for there is only room for one religion to supply answers to the questions that are central to one's life: there are enough conflicts between the traditions that there is no easy way to combine two of them and thereby find answers to the central questions of one's life from the attempted combination. And the same goes for one's understanding of what is central to the life of SR: a given practitioner can only appeal to a single tradition in offering an account of what is central to SR. Others from other traditions will speak in in their own religious tongue in considering those issues. (For the previous two criteria, I have offered illustrations in the form of reflective comments on how actual SR discussions might flow. I decline here to offer an example of this final criteria because its most important application in this context is to accounts of the canopy, which are too complex to exemplify in brief compass. Of course, there are many extended examples to which one might refer, though none of them is susceptible to a summary that is both concise and fully accurate.[49])

---

[48] Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 12.

[49] For instance, see Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom," 345-66; Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning," 367-83; Ochs, "The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning."

The pattern that connects all the criteria will by now be clear: the practice of SR meets all the criteria, and so counts as a genuinely religious, but the precise way in which it does so is correlated with the specific religiosity of participants from each of the three traditions. Religious texts are discussed in a way that is religious in a bona fide sense, but no single religious point of view displaces perspectives emerging from the other traditions. Religious language is not absent from any aspect of the practice, it is eligible to be used with as much earnestness and conviction as it could be, and it is active in dealing with questions that are utterly crucial to this form of interreligious dialogue. In SR, while religious plurality is permanent, the religions are, each of them, powerfully present and in a specifically religious manner.[50] It is, therefore, inappropriate to see SR as evincing secularizing tendencies in the way it interrelates canopy descriptions and individual participation in dialogue. The way that SR is structured allows religious discourse to do all that it could possibly be expected to do (assuming that the practice is not simply defined by a single religious paradigm, which SR is not). For this reason, it is better to see the locations in which SR occurs as *shared*, or jointly occupied by the plurality of religious traditions that participate in SR dialogue, rather than secular in any strong sense. What is happening in them is what drives and warrants the characterization of the space as shared, for the nature of the activity is more determinative than the type of space in question, when the location is considered apart from any questions about what happens there (that is, the nature of SR makes the space shared; it is not that being located in a conference center makes SR secular or betrays that it is ultimately an irreligious form of dialogue).[51]

---

[50] This coheres with what David Ford says about SR fitting with what he calls a pluralism of multiple depths, whereby religious viewpoints are not excluded from entering fully into the public arena, but no one voice drowns out all the others: David F. Ford, "The Future of Theology at a Public University," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38 (2017): 4.

[51] My claims above dovetail with Kepnes's claim that SR refuses sharp distinctions between sacred and secular space. See Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning," 371. Thoughtful further reflection on the image of the tent as the location in which SR occurs can be found in Higton and Muers, *The Text in Play*, 128. They write about how the tent can be seen religiously by Christians (and by Muslims and Jews as well in

This correlational or indexing feature of SR may raise a question for some: is what is being claimed that certain religious beliefs are true for one participant while they are false for another, that the actual truth status varies from participant to participant, being a function of that person's particular religious subjectivity? In other words, does SR presuppose a religious relativism? No, that is very much not the claim. It is possible to clarify the difference between relativism and my account of SR by borrowing a distinction that grows out of Adams's work on making deep reasonings public, which has already been mentioned.[52]

It is true that in SR, when adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths make deep reasonings public, the content of these reasonings—the narratives, background beliefs, and even metaphysical commitments that structure one's knowing—do not have an identical status for each participant. Yet it is not relativism that properly describes this difference. It is not that, for instance, the belief that Jesus is both man and God is true for the Christian discussant and at the same time false for that Christian's Jewish and Muslim interlocutors. Ultimately the belief is either true or false. According to Adams, the difference in status that this sort of claim has is that it is axiomatic for the Christian, in that its truth is taken for granted by anyone who is part of that tradition, while it can serve as a hypothesis for the other participants, which is to say that they may explore that point of view during the dialogue with such deep sympathy, and by virtue of the relational bonds that they have with their interlocutors, that they come to engage with scriptural texts almost as if they themselves hold

---

their own distinctive ways): "The tent might be seen by Christian participants as a step on the journey of kenosis to which they are called. More concretely, the disciples of Jesus are called to discover him in the face of a child, rather than in the face of their own security—and that tent might be a location in which 'children' (other 'children of Abraham' in this case) may be encountered, and the face of Jesus discerned in their faces. Again, this need involve no rejection of the centrality of Jesus' name or of revelation in Christ, but the text [Luke 9, read in connection with Genesis 28 and Qur'an 3] suggests that it is only through finding Christ in those other faces, seen through these other eyes, that the whole Christ is found at all."

[52] Adams, "Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics," 73-76.

this view. Even if this claim never becomes an axiom for them, and even if they retain grounds for choosing not to allow it to serve in that capacity, they may inhabit it in a certain way during the dialogue (and this exercise is of course bound to change how they view other traditions even after any given session of dialogue concludes). The basis for this is not religious relativism but what Adams and others refer to as the triadicity of language as it is understood in SR.[53] This means that the way in which signs relate to their subject matter is a function of a particular interpretive framework that connects those two items. Very different interpretive frameworks are operative in SR: the deep reasonings of one's tradition are part of what accounts for this difference (another element is the particular academic expertise one brings to the discussion), and a participant in SR may sympathetically indwell another's interpretive framework even without actually surrendering his commitment to his own.

This distinction between axiom and hypothesis has substantial value in clarifying what is happening in SR, but for the purpose of this essay it also comes with an attendant disadvantage, which deserves to be noted. As I argued in the previous paragraph, the axiom/hypothesis language proves useful in accounting for the different status that deep reasonings can have as they shape interpretive frameworks that are brought to bear upon scriptural texts. That this distinction describes how dialogues run effectively dispels the specter of relativism, which might otherwise seem to be undergirding the design of this dialogical practice. Yet the drawback of this formulation, at least for the purpose of this essay, is that it is, in the first instance, an idiom that is more philosophical or even scientific than it is obviously religious, and it is not obvious that there are readily available equivalents

[53] On triadicity, see especially Nicholas Adams, "Long-Term Disagreement: Philosophical Models in Scriptural Reasoning and Receptive Ecumenism," in *Interreligious Reading after Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism*, ed. David Ford and Frances Clemson, Directions in Modern Theology (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 162-66. Treatments of semiotics in SR are often inflected by pragmatic semantics, of which triadicity is a key component. Pragmatic philosophy is a large topic, which this essay does not intend to engage with comprehensively. For more on this topic, see Peter Ochs, "Philosophical Warrants for Scriptural Reasoning," *Modern Theology* 22 (2006): 465-81; Ochs, "The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning,"; and Och's forthcoming book on SR.

within a religious register. Most Christians see their religious commitments not as axioms precisely, but rather as faith commitments. At least in certain major strands of the Christian tradition, there is a contrast between faith as the form of mediated and indirect engagement with God that is possible at present and "sight," which is the more direct form of engagement that becomes possible only in the eschaton. There are also associations between faith and divine action: it is seen as a gift from God, rather than something that human beings can generate from within themselves by drawing upon their own resources. These are not associations that the term axiom has in an obvious way. Nor is there, so far as I am aware, a ready parallel between what contrasts with axiom, namely hypothesis, and anything within a clearly religious lexicon. The resources of philosophy and other disciplines are usually welcomed into SR, where they show themselves to be useful, and rightly so. The question here is not whether philosophy might ever help in giving an account of the practice. It most certainly can and has. But if the philosophical resources being proposed then seem to make it difficult for more religiously direct language to operate, then there is reason to reflect further on the suggested formulation. Therefore, this could be an area for further exploration, though the language is the best form of words currently available to clarify this aspect of SR. The distinction may be imperfect, but it is the best instrument we currently possess for describing the different status that a particular form of commitment may have for various participants.

From a Christian point of view which is concerned to see interreligious dialogue be deeply and authentically religious, what is necessary overall is that accounts of the canopy level of discussion should, like at least some contributions to SR dialogue itself, count as acts of testimony or witness.[54] Where depictions of the canopy are religiously very modest, as they sometimes are, the driving motivation seems to be to retain room for religious plurality:

[54] In saying this, I draw some inspiration from the distinction between witness and coercion that runs through Lesslie Newbigin, "The Trinity as Public Truth," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1-8.

a less religiously spare account of SR would be more likely to come into open conflict with other accounts than would something more demure. Yet canopy descriptions need to be reasonably robust religiously, or else there is a risk that the description will not fully meet the criteria of comprehensiveness (doctrine being held back in certain respects so that modesty can be ensured) or centrality (the crucial questions about SR being handled by some other discourse as a substitute, or simply going unanswered in any definite manner). These canopy accounts ought to be robust enough that they are obviously substantive, in the way that the religious traditions themselves are when they are at their best. Furthermore, robustly Christian canopy accounts should engage, both critically and respectfully, with robustly Jewish and Muslim accounts. It is to be expected that versions of each will all remain, but they must interact with one another if they really are all serious claims to be views of one and the same practice. So long as these descriptions are rich in religious content, SR is not in any meaningful way restraining the participating religious voices, but is fostering a reciprocal engagement between the traditions that is, as it should be, deeply religious.

V.

In summary, D'Costa's criticisms are not persuasive when taken according to the letter or according to the spirit, but they prompt consideration of issues that are utterly crucial for SR as a form of interreligious dialogue. This form of engagement allows for religious commitment to function fully and without inhibition, thus making it suitable for those who have firm roots in their own traditions and want to speak with others. "Scriptural Reasoning has proven to be resilient in the context of such meetings," for "each person speaks confidently from the depths of his or her tradition with no need to establish a common ground on which to build such speech."[55]

[55] Adams, "Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics," 76.