The Community Ethic of the Scriptural Reasoning Society

"The Oxford Ethic"

Scriptural Reasoning is a broad and loose term for an evolving and diverse range of different practices of shared study by people of different faiths of their sacred texts. For example, in Abrahamic Scriptural Reasoning, Jewish, Christian and Muslim women and men, including lay people from all walks of life, clergy and academics, meet to read and interpret together the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

A distinctive feature of all the various forms of Scriptural Reasoning is their emphasis on the particularity, distinctiveness and integrity of each of the participating faith traditions. This is expressed in a strong respect for the cherished differences between Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other faiths, a high regard for each faith's heritage of scholarship and tradition (ie. "Scriptural-Traditional-Reasoning"), and the fostering of good quality disagreements between participants which are concurrently to be contained within relationships of collegiality and friendship.

The Scriptural Reasoning Society is one independent "School" of Scriptural Reasoning (colloquially known as "The Oxford School") within the broader family of different independent SR Schools in communication. We share important commonalities with other practitioners of Scriptural Reasoning, both in relation to the way we think about and do SR, and at the same time we also hold to some distinctive and fundamental differences in our approach to Scriptural Reasoning *vis à vis* other SR groups. We uphold these, our unique and distinctive characteristics, in a spirit of conversation, friendly disagreement and healthy academic collaboration between differing opinions with other practitioners of Scriptural Reasoning – true to the promise that SR is about "not consensus but friendship".

The Scriptural Reasoning Society is a network of free and independent local Scriptural Reasoning groups, which are bound together by a shared "Community Ethic" (also known as "The Oxford Ethic") to which they all formally subscribe, and by a commitment to support one another in the advancement of Scriptural Reasoning as a free and egalitarian practice, for the sake of God.

The Scriptural Reasoning Society aims to provide a free of charge service for the preparation of Scriptural Reasoning study texts, electronic and other materials for its independent and free member SR groups, tailored to the specific requirements requested by member groups. It also aims to raise funds financially to assist small local independent Scriptural Reasoning groups which do not otherwise have means of monetary support.

Any Scriptural Reasoning group which is free and independent and consists of at least one person from each of the participating faiths (eg. in Abrahamic Scriptural Reasoning, at least one Jew, one Christian, one Muslim), is entitled to join and receive all the membership privileges of the Scriptural Reasoning Society, provided that the group subscribes to the "Community Ethic" of the Society which is expressed in our three cardinal principles:

The Community Ethic

1. **Parity:** A Member Scriptural Reasoning Group of the Society must be independent, free and self-governing, with every best effort made to ensure that in every aspect of its sensitive work of interpreting sacred texts, and in its administration, leadership arrangements, financial management and other affairs, to the greatest extent possible there is scrupulous parity between members of each of the participating faiths

    a. *For example:* It may be appropriate for meetings of a Member Scriptural Reasoning Group to take place in rotation between different venues associated with different faiths, or for meetings to be hosted at a neutral venue such as a secular university or community centre. Where Scriptural Reasoning meetings take place mainly or exclusively at a venue associated with only one faith, it is important that the SR group maintains its autonomy from that venue institution and that all reasonable efforts are made to ensure that the group is self-governed on a basis of parity between the participating faiths – for example rotation of the convener or chair between different faiths.

    b. *For example:* It is particularly important that control of the material and financial assets of any Member Scriptural Reasoning Group, and decisions about resource allocation are managed jointly by members of a Member Scriptural Reasoning Group on a basis of strict parity between the participating faiths.

2. **Equality:** A fundamental distinguishing principle of the Scriptural Reasoning Society is our commitment to develop Scriptural Reasoning as an egalitarian and grassroots practice, and our aim to make the possibility of conversations between different people within Scriptural Reasoning groups as equal as possible – where quite often such conversations to the same degree of equality are not possible in wider society. Therefore, a Member Scriptural Reasoning Group may under no circumstances distinguish or discriminate between its members by virtue of their non-academic *versus* academic standing, lay *versus* clerical status, social-educational background or other personal characteristics. We hold the gifts that every woman or man brings from their personal background and life experience to the table of study and interpretation of sacred texts, to be entirely equal in value.

    a. *For example:* It is important that the governance of a Member Scriptural Reasoning Group reflects the fact that lay people are to be treated and placed in positions of responsibility and authority on a basis of equality relative to academics, clergy and religious scholars.

    b. *For example:* Given the primacy in some faiths such as Judaism and Islam of reading the holy scriptures in the original language, the Scriptural Reasoning Society is strongly committed as a matter of egalitarian principle to making word-for-word original language access to Hebrew and Arabic texts available to all people, lay and scholars alike, through close glossing and grammatical parsing of original language materials into English. We see this as an essential contribution to making conversations between people of different faiths and educational backgrounds in Scriptural Reasoning meetings more equal.

    c. *For example:* If a group dynamic in Scriptural Reasoning meetings is observed which over time is tending towards increasing social deference or authority of scriptural interpretation being given to particular persons by reason of their academic or clerical status, the chair should make all reasonable efforts strongly to discourage such a tendency, and make best efforts to address imbalances of power and to give more voice and authority to other members of the group, in particular women, young people and lay people. While equality is never achievable, it is a principle of the Society that in our egalitarian and democratic practice of Scriptural Reasoning, it is an aim to which we always aspire and make best efforts to realise.

    d. *For example:* We extend the principle of equality to the Scriptural Reasoning group level, so that all Member Scriptural Reasoning Groups are granted equal value and status, regardless

of whether they are a group associated with a university department, place of worship or an informal group of friends meeting at home. Aside from subscribing to these three principles forming the Community Ethic, we actively encourage Member Scriptural Reasoning Groups to develop the practice of Scriptural Reasoning in their own distinctive, varied and independent ways.

3. **Subordination and Subsidiarity:** A cardinal and distinctive principle of the Scriptural Reasoning Society is our commitment to Scriptural Reasoning being a practice that is at all times derivative and subordinate to the participating faith traditions (in Abrahamic Scriptural Reasoning these being Judaism, Christianity and Islam). As a temporary tent of meeting, the practice of Scriptural Reasoning must at all times recognise its submissive and secondary status to the centuries-old autonomous faith traditions from which its participants derive, and must never attempt to establish "fourth position" structures or regulations which in any way might begin to form alternative sources of authority. Authority in Scriptural Reasoning therefore lies at all times primarily with the religious laws, churches and religious communities of the participant faiths alone. The practice of interfaith sacred text study pre-dates the term "Scriptural Reasoning" by many centuries, as do the traditional rules and customs of different faiths which are associated with it. Therefore Member Scriptural Reasoning Groups must at all times refer, defer and make all best efforts to respect the religious laws and customs of the participating faiths as the *first and primary* source of guidance for Scriptural Reasoning practice, and *only thereafter* look to secondary academic literature on Scriptural Reasoning as a subordinate source of guidance for Scriptural Reasoning practice.

   a. *For example:* For many Jews and Muslims, religious authority in regard to the appropriate handling and reading of sacred texts is articulated through Jewish *halachic* law and Islamic *shari'ah* law, while for many Christians the authorities of their churches provide the locus of religious teaching and authority. These sacred loci of authority should never be supplanted or even supplemented by any "fourth position" construct, such as a Scriptural Reasoning Reference Group.

   b. *For example:* For Muslims, centuries-old Islamic *shari'ah* rulings are clearly articulated in respect of practices of shared reading and interpretation of the Holy Quran and hadith together with members of other faiths, and the clear injunction is upheld that decisions regarding appropriate handling and treatment of Islamic sacred texts, their publication and ethical financing, are a matter for the Muslim community alone, and are *never* to be delegated to any Scriptural Reasoning group or Scriptural Reasoning Reference Group containing non-Muslims.