



Religions in Dialogue: A Triadic Approach to Scriptural Reasoning

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"After the eighth Infallible Imam al-Riḍā (Persian pronunciation, Imam Reza) had answered the questions of the (religious) delegation, including eminent Christian and Jewish (religious) scholars, he said to them: 'O People! If any of you is familiar with Islam and wants to (direct) questions (to me), then let him come up with the question(s) without feeling ashamed.'"

The above quotation from Imam Reza proves insightful into how he understood engagement with other religions, as it relates to his own religion in that this engagement should not be done, but with honesty.

The present paper focuses on Scriptural Reasoning as a method of making religions closer to one another with a view of understanding the other and, in so doing, understanding more of oneself. The engagement of religions will be addressed at three levels (triadic approach): Inter-religion, Intra-religion and trans-religion.

I will trace the history and influences that developed into the concept of Scriptural Reasoning as a method of honestly engaging other religions and one's own religion. Scriptural Reasoning was always a method of engagement between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is not about finding commonality, neither is it to be seen as a foundational approach, where exclusivity forms the basis of the approach to Scriptural Reasoning, nor about finding agreements (though there may be). It is, however, about learning to disagree better. It is about engaging the difficult texts, asking the difficult questions, and allowing the text to speak even to the detriment of popular beliefs about a text.

Keywords: Interreligious dialogue, Imam Reza, scriptural reasoning, Judaism, Christianity, Islam



1. Introduction

Hans Küng, who is famed for being an advocate for inter-religious dialogue, held firm to the now well-known maxim that there can be no peace without religions entering into dialogue with one another. Based on this maxim, Küng (1991: 137-138) strove for “a more intensive philosophical and theological dialogue of theologians and specialists in religion which takes religious plurality seriously in theological terms, accepts the challenge of the other religions, and investigates their significance for each person’s own religion.”

Interreligious dialogue is a term that generally proposes dialogue between different religions. Much has been written on why, how, and what form this dialogue should take. Copeland (1999: 97) may not have been entirely right to state that dialogue between persons of different religions was a construct of the latter half of the twentieth century, because there were dialogues between

religions that had taken place even before this time. A well-known example is the 6th and 12th edicts of King Ashoka Mauryan of the ancient India (Sukdaven, 2017, 86-87). Ashoka drafted a number of edicts in which he referred to himself as “Beloved-of-the-lord, King Piyadasi”. These edicts, which were scattered in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan were inscribed on rocks and stone pillars. In this paper, the 6th and 12th edicts are quoted. The latter part of the 6th edict reads thus: “I have honoured all religions with various honours. But I consider it best to meet people personally.”

In this 6th edict, in as much as he sees the significance of respecting and honouring different religions, Ashoka wanted to meet people in person. Could it be that he wanted to look beyond the religion to the person, the human being, behind the religion? Even Imam Reza wanted to meet people of other religions in his religious debates. The truth of the matter is that it is not religions that conduct dialogues, rather people get engaged in dialogues.

The 12th edict was as follows:

Beloved-of-Gods. King Piyadasi honours both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honours them with gifts and honours of various kinds. But beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this – that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one’s own religion, or condemning the religions of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one’s own religion benefit and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one’s own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion and condemns others with the thought “Let me glorify my own religion”, only harms his own religion.

Therefore, contact among religions is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. King Piyadasi

desired that all should be well-versed in good doctrines of other religions. This suggestion is reminiscent of the afore-mentioned discourse of Imam Reza. Those who are content with their own religions should be told this: “Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions.”

What is noteworthy here could be construed as one of the first written reference to inter-religious dialogue. He covers many basic approaches to dialogue but also the need to see the essentials of all religions grow.

Neither is Copeland (1999: 97) entirely right to suggest that dialogue before the twentieth century “was usually a form of apologetics”. Indeed, this statement does have elements of truth in it, and probably more. Yet, it is barely true in all its aspects so long as there were instances where religious dialogue was pursued without the need to turn to apologetics so as to show off one’s religion to be superior to the other ones. A well-known example is the Emperor Abū al-Fatḥ Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar (Sukdaven, 2017, 87-88).

In 1575, Akbar built a walled city known as Fatehpur Sikri. Here he built a temple. At this temple, he invited scholars from other religions. He brought together yogis, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian scholars together. He never forbade the Jesuits from building a church in Agra, India. He even discouraged the slaughter of cattle because of the religious significance which Hinduism attaches to cattle.

In 1579, a declaration was issued that granted Akbar the authority to interpret religious law. This became known as the “Infallibility Decree”, and it thus gave Akbar the ability to create an interreligious state. This led to him establishing the Divine faith (*Dīn-i Ilāhī*) which combined elements of many religions including Islam, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. (biography.com editors, n.d)

Here again it can be noticed that the great strides were created among religions for co-existence, even to the extent of forming a new religious cult, which could be construed as a syncretic religion. The attempt was by no means to encourage people of different religious persuasions to form one religious entity. Now, of course in religious dialogues, the intention is not to form a new religious entity. It is in this regard that scriptural reasoning offers an appropriate approach to interreligious dialogue without the coercive nature of pressurising the other to compromise their religious thought and beliefs.

What has certainly been significant is the different methodological approaches in the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries to further enhancing interreligious dialogue. During this period one has witnessed the gathering of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in September of that year. Interreligious dialogue is assumed to have been formerly introduced as a phenomenon at this gathering (Marshall, 2015) which has since evolved and gave impetus to other methods of engaging other religions. A more recent methodological approach to interreligious dialogue was “scriptural reasoning”. This article intends to address this phenomenon of scriptural reasoning by explaining its origin and how this method can be effective in the interreligious dialogue especially among the monotheistic religions.

This approach endeavours to expand the concept of interreligious dialogue to include two other approaches to religious dialogue within the ambit of scriptural reasoning. These two other approaches are (1) intra-religious, and (2) trans-religious dialogues. These two approaches together with interreligious dialogue will be addressed as the triadic approach to dialogue among monotheistic religions. To expound on the triadic approach to religious dialogue, scriptural reasoning will be adopted as an instrument to achieve this. The choice of these three monotheistic religions is based purely on a fact that Judaism, Christianity, and

Islam share a common ancestor, the Divine prophet Abraham.

In the dialogues of Imam Reza with the followers of other religions one may also realize that all the three methods of dialogue were based on, though unintentionally or intentionally, what seems to be the modern approach of scriptural reasoning.

2. The constitution of the triadic approach to religious dialogue

The triadic approach to religious dialogue consists of three segments. These three segments can be deduced from Imam Reza's encounters in Chapter 5 of al-Qarashi's book, *The Life of Imam Ali Bin Musa al-Ridha* (2001). The encounters were with people from his own religion, with people from other religions and with engagements within in non-sacral spaces. The very first paragraph of this chapter encapsulates and sets the tone for the rest of Imam Reza's engagement with others. Al-Qarashi states thus: "The time of the Imam [peace be on him] was famous for the debates and arguments which spread among the great figures of religions, of Islamic schools, and of others. Violent discussions took place among them on numerous theological researches, especially as it concerns the fundamentals of religion. Theology books and others are full of different kinds of such an ideological conflict accompanied by evidence which the theologians have produced in support of their own beliefs".

The three segments of the triadic approach:

[1] Interreligious dialogue between two or more groups of religions. In this dialogue people of different faith traditions talk with each other in dialogue for the purpose of reaching out to one other for the common good of humanity and the flourishing of life. In these encounters there may be areas of agreements as well as areas of disagreements based on reference to apologetics,

practices and beliefs (which may also include customs and traditions). These differences should nevertheless cause division among practitioners of religions, rather the dialogue should be of such a nature that mutual respect should be inculcated to accommodate these differences and create a unity in diversity.

[2] Intrareligious dialogue that takes place within a particular group of the followers of a given religion. In this dialogue people of the same faith tradition engage each other in dialogue for the purpose of addressing their differences based on the interpretation (and/or exegesis) of their own scriptures. These differences could be historical, dogmatical praxes, and other such areas of differences which may cause division and enmity amongst themselves. An example of this intrareligious dialogue can be assumed from Chapter 5 and the second paragraph of al-Qarashi's book. In the same place, he presents the problem faced by the Shiites and the Sunnis. In this paragraph, he states that "One of the matters which led to violent arguments and discussions between the Shiites and the Sunnis was that of the Imamate. The Shiites maintained that the Imamate was similar to the Prophecy [*sic*; it must be prophethood], which was not subject to the choice and election of the community; rather it was decided by Allah the Exalted Who chose for it whomever He willed from among His righteous servants whose hearts He examined for faith. Also they made a condition that the Imam should be infallible of errors, the most learned of the community, and the most knowledgeable of it in the affairs of Islamic law and all sciences of life."

[3] Trans religious dialogue is one which goes beyond (across) inter- and intra religious dialogue. In this dialogue, religious communities will engage in areas which are not of a religious nature. This is of course a loaded concept because of the lack of a definitive explanation of the term religion. If a religion is defined in a narrower sense as being that of a belief in a supernatural being, then transreligion can assume religion entering into non-

sacral spaces which could include engagement with secularism, atheism and other such phenomena which presuppose a social and scientific sphere devoid of the influence of religion. This dialogue must not be neglected and religion has an obligation to engage these so-called non-sacral spaces.

With this understanding of the triadic approach to dialogue, one may want to venture into that aspect of dialogue in religion which can be used as a tool to enhance the credibility of the triadic approach known as Scriptural Reasoning.

3. Scriptural Reasoning as a method for religious dialogue

Scripture Reasoning is an engagement between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in that it draws upon scripture as the point of reference. Because these are monotheistic religions and are regarded as Abrahamic religions and possess what is termed scriptures which exist in the form of the Torah, the Bible, and the Quran, the texts drawn upon these sacred books become the center for engagement. Hardy (2006) notes that, “[f]or a member of one Abrahamic tradition to participate with members of others in the study of his/her and their Scriptures, respectfully and interactively, is the *fons et origo* – the “source and origin” – of Scriptural Reasoning.” (p. 530). The intention of this method of dialogue was never about finding commonality; neither is it to be seen as a foundational approach, where exclusivity forms the basis of the approach to Scriptural Reasoning. Nor is it about finding agreements, though there may be, rather it is about learning to disagree better. (Moyaert, 2013, p. 73) It is about engaging the difficult texts, asking the difficult questions, and allowing the canonical texts to speak, even to the detriment of populous beliefs about a text. It is indeed reasoning around scriptural texts of

these three religions. One can see glimpses of this in the words of Imam Reza when he alluded to the engagement with others, as remarkable in his famous, aforementioned quotation.

Sukdaven (2018, p. 2) supports the notion that the intention of Scriptural Reasoning is to learn to disagree better with other religions. Sometimes disagreements, if not channelled and steered properly, can have catastrophic results. Therefore, Scriptural Reasoning developed guidelines for engaging other religions, especially when it enters into the sacred space of scripture. The integrity of those engaging in such dialogues need to be of excellent character and truthful to themselves about the purpose of such an engagement. This approach of Scriptural Reasoning lends itself by the same token to an interreligious sphere which suitably meets the criteria for the one pillar of the triadic approach.

Of significance to Scriptural Reasoning was how this approach to religious dialogue emanated. The phenomenon that gave rise to Scriptural Reasoning was also known as Textual Reasoning. Textual Reasoning was a gathering of Jewish scholars that met to address classic Jewish texts and rabbinical traditions. The purpose for this gathering was to look exegetically at their scriptures in order to address the challenges that post-modernism posed. There were disagreements among them, but through gathering in this way they were able to look at issues and challenges together.

A statement of purpose extracted from the present website (i.e., www.scripturalreasoning.org) gives a glimpse of Textual Reasoning. It states thus: “Textual reasoning was also a university-based forum for scholars of Modern Jewish Philosophy and scholars of Rabbinic texts to meet and study together. The aim was to grow in understanding of the different disciplines, and to approach key questions about Judaism in the present and future.” The same statement of purpose explains further how Textual Reasoning developed into Scriptural Reasoning. It states that, “In the mid-1990’s, some Christian friends of members of the Textual

Reasoning group sat in on the conversation, and were so attracted by the lively process that they suggested using it as a model for inter-faith conversations. Later, Muslim friends were invited to join the conversation, and ‘Scriptural Reasoning’ was born. The first Christian participants were from the UK, and the practice quickly spread across the Atlantic. Before long, it also began flourishing among non-academic groups.” (See <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/the-history-of-scripturalreasoning.html>).

In Textual Reasoning one may also discover the second segment in the triadic approach to religious dialogue which is that of intra-religious dialogue; the idea of dialogue within a particular group of a religion. The idea for promoting this type of dialogue is due to the many sects that exist among the members of a particular religion. Although there is a core belief system, one also finds diversity. Within the three monotheistic religions which Scriptural Reasoning currently embraces, one finds the existence of various sects within each of these religions.

Karesh and Hurvitz (2006, pp. xx-xxi) lists seven different sects of Judaism, although there could be more. In Christianity, there are too numerous sects to list; in Islam, there are five major branches, from which other sects have developed. Intrareligious dialogue encourages different sects within a religion to dialogue with one another based on the common sacred text such as the Torah, Bible and Quran.

As a method of engagement in religious dialogue, Scriptural Reasoning needs not only to focus across religions, but also to concentrate within a religious tradition. There is, therefore, some merit in taking Scriptural Reasoning seriously in both inter- and intrareligious dialogues. There are rules of engagement when adopting Scriptural Reasoning as a method in religious dialogue so as to ensure that in as much as there are differences in belief and understanding, from both inter-and intrareligious perspectives, one learns to differ better without any sense or intent of malice,

yet ensures respect for other's beliefs and practices.

4. Imam Reza's religious encounters with others

In reflecting on Imam Reza's encounters with religious scholars of other traditions, one may conclude that Imam Reza not only employed the method of dialogue, rather he utilized the method of debate and argument. There is certainly a reason for this approach as adopted by Imam Reza.

One has to consider the context in which Imam Reza had to operate when encountering other religious traditions, including his own tradition. He showed his ability to get engaged in religious dialogues across the triadic segments, as thus described thus far in this article. It is recorded in al-Qarashi's (2001, pp. 83-146) book, *The Life of Imam 'Ali Bin Musa al-Ridha*, that Imam Reza engaged people of other religions, including people from his own faith. In this sense, he engaged people at the inter-, intra-, and transreligious segments. In the interreligious segment, he engaged the Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Zoroastrian religious delegations. In the intrareligious segment, he engaged his own Muslim fellow believers and finally at the transreligious segment he engaged the atheists.

Imam Reza's engagement never met the criteria set out by Scriptural Reasoning. This was because his engagements were more in the form of a debate and argument. With this thought in mind, cognizance must be taken of the fact that his engagement with others was for a completely different purpose. The purpose was driven by a subtle agenda of al-Ma'mūn. There is an evidence of this fact that when al-Qarashi (2001, 6) records the following cunning nature of al-Ma'mūn: [P]eople came to know that the Imam (Reza) had deep faith and that al-Ma'mūn had nothing except

cunningness. They understood that al-Ma'mūn merely desired to achieve his own political aims. When al-Ma'mūn had achieved his goals, he assassinated the Imam..." Furthermore, al-Qarashi (2001, 7) records the intention of al-Ma'mūn when he states that:

"It is worth mentioning that al-Ma'mūn had asked them to come to Khurasan in order to test the Imam. He held a private and secret meeting with them and promised to give them a lot of money if they could silence the Imam with their arguments and render him incapable of answering them, that he might use this incapability as a means for slandering and defaming the Shiites who believed that the Imams of the Household (of the Prophet) [peace be on them] were the most knowledgeable of the community, and that Allah endowed them knowledge and excellencies just as He had endowed His prophets and His testamentary trustees."

Therefore, considering the context in which Imam Reza had to act, there was no alternative but to engage the religious scholars in the way of debates and arguments. Nevertheless, even through such debates and arguments, Imam Reza displayed the triadic approach to religious dialogue.

The main aim of Scriptural Reasoning is to learn to disagree better, thus the term 'reasoning' is used, instead of the term 'debating'. The term 'debating' has the connotation, although not necessarily in this strict sense, of trying to prove one right and the other wrong, with the intention of winning the argument with persuasion. This is what one may witness in Imam Reza's encounters with other religions; however, those circumstances led to such an approach as he was operating within a specific context different from the context of the present-day global society. Yet, he calmly announced, "People, if any of you is familiar with Islam and wants to question (me), then let him question (me) without any shame". (al-Qarashi, 2001).

Fadlallah (2014, 115) encapsulates the methodology which Imam Reza employs in his interaction with other religions. The following quote explains this fact lucidly:

On various occasions, al-Ma'mūn tried to force Imam ar-Ridha [Reza] into the arena of complex debates with various groups and creeds. He used to conduct scientific and intellectual sessions to which he invited giant thinkers, leading scientists, the atheists of the century, and debaters whose scientific might was feared and before the stubbornness of whose complex arguments the evidence was muted and due to the fierceness of whose doubt the proof was weakened. In all such debates, the Imam would come out victorious over his opponents due to the tremendous power of knowledge he possessed without forcing himself into the sophistry of arguments to which some might have resorted in order to demolish the structure of his opponent's argument and weaken his ability to provide evidence. Rather, he depended in his debate upon honest arguments in order to prove right to be right, his miraculous ability of conviction, and his calm stylistic method.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to introduce the concept of Scriptural Reasoning with a focus on a triadic approach to religious dialogue. It also seeks to bring into light the method that Imam Reza employed when he engaged people of other religions, including those from his own religious tradition. Imam Reza ultimately employed a triadic approach to religious dialogue, albeit perhaps not with this intention in mind.

The debate and argumentative approach of Imam Reza in religious dialogue was found to have been conducted within a context which would not be a normal context in today's contemporary global society. Hence, Imam Reza resorted to another approach for achieving a different outcome. which was to fulfil a different outcome.

Finally, in today's contemporary world, a Scriptural Reasoning triadic approach may be a more logical approach when it deems necessary to get involved in religious dialogues.



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