



Flamenco, Tai Chi and Six-Text Scriptural Reasoning

David Ford reports on his recent visit to China where he spent two weeks lecturing, giving seminars and facilitating Scriptural Reasoning dialogues.



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Dancing and more dancing – that is what went on every day in the public park near the Vienna hotel in Beijing. The daily life of this lovely park in autumn sunshine, with people of all ages taking part, and dancers ranging from experts in the flamenco, guiding students dressed in something like Spanish style, to complete beginners trying to follow steps and rhythms, gave me the image I needed to try to do justice to the new experience of Chinese Scriptural Reasoning. I had never done group study on Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist texts before – the Scriptural Reasoning that began in the mid-1990's has mainly been with Tanakh, Bible and Qur'an.¹ Now all six were on the table – short extracts on a theme (suffering; human beginnings and human nature; the good person), read out in the original language and in Chinese and English, briefly introduced, then discussed one by one and in relation to each other. It felt like when an elderly Chinese woman in the park invited me to dance with her to a music I had never heard before, and I spent some minutes trying to move in step with her.

The introduction to strange texts, helped by those who know them better, was an obvious parallel, but so too was the uncertainty of the categorising. Is Confucianism a 'religion'? What makes a text 'scripture'? It was obvious that trying to settle such issues in advance was going to postpone indefinitely actually reading together (and Scriptural Reasoning on Jewish, Christian and Muslim texts has likewise found that plunging into reading for a few hours is the best way to proceed – though there are always complex preliminary issues, such as how to choose the texts). In reading together some traditions were clearly more like formal waltzing than free improvisation, and the range of reading and discussion styles was

striking. How to be sensitive to the less argumentative, less authoritative, more meditative or more tentative? How to allow ourselves to be led into each interpretative pattern in turn, the 'steps' often having hundreds of years of tradition behind them? Yet all these texts are also used in contemporary living, shaping individuals and communities, so they are constantly being asked to inspire answers to new questions – there must be improvisation too. The setting encouraged new questions from beginners and experts, and discussion that brought different texts into interaction, seeing the long familiar in new light, and exercising interpretative 'muscles' we were hardly aware of having till they started being stretched. These texts had already sustained reading and argument for centuries, so there could be some confidence in their capacity to generate further meaning now.

I found two of the hallmarks of Scriptural Reasoning, as I have known it, happening with the Chinese readers too. One was argument – it did not take long for someone to be challenged by a comment and take issue with it. The other was laughter – the juxtapositions of texts, topics, languages and people made for all sorts of humorous misunderstandings or mistranslations, unusual angles, and acknowledgements of sheer oddness or mismatch. Several times the rapid exchanges in Chinese outstripped the pace of my translator, so I just sat back and enjoyed observing the intensity, which often led to a burst of laughter. In one session in the University of Shandong in Jinan the discussion of a text on 'chaos' in relation to creation or innovation led into laughing recognition of the session as an example of it. This combination of argument and humour made me think of the men and women practising Tai Chi in the park with swords and spears: a

martial art has been turned into a dance, competitive fighting into a different kind of striving together.

There were all sorts of problems in the actual sessions – too many texts, too little time (except when we allowed a full three hours), some introductions too long, some excessive looking to ‘experts’ instead of risking interpretations. But these seemed to me to be just teething problems, relatively easy to overcome through frankness, practice and reflection on experience.

Genesis of the New Chinese Religious Studies and the ICS

I had been invited to China after accepting a position (along with Professor Peter Ochs of the University of Virginia and Professor Francis Clooney of Harvard) as International Advisor on the Academic Committee of the new Institute of Comparative Scripture and Inter-religious Dialogue (ICS) in the Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies in Minzu University of China, Beijing. Modelled on Scriptural Reasoning and Comparative Theology, this was set up in 2011 ‘to conduct comparative research in the classical or scriptural traditions of the great world religions and to engage in interreligious dialogue ... The Institute not only focuses on a purely academic or scientific comparison of texts, but also allows for a study of one’s own scripture as authoritative Scripture in the context of one’s faith community as well as of other faith communities.’ Minzu is the ‘University of the Nationalities/Ethnicities’ so its whole ethos is to do with diversity. Since many of the groups also are religious in distinctive ways, it seems ideally suited to a practice that tries to deepen relationships and understanding across deep differences.

The ICS is part of the remarkable development of religious studies in Chinese universities in recent years. In a frank and informative co-lecture with me in Minzu University, Professor Zhuo Xiping, Director of the Institute of World Religions in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Chair of the Chinese Association of Religious Studies, summed up this transformation: ‘Before the reform era, religion in China was characterised as a private affair, which should have no connection with the society. So the study of religion was mainly from an ideological perspective. Nobody paid special attention to the academic study of religion. But now, the academic study of religions in China plays a leading role.’ This was confirmed in my meeting with the Vice Minister of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, Jiang Jianyong. He strongly affirmed the importance of university academic study of the religions and also of high quality seminary education. He also emphasised the number of inter-religious initiatives China had begun or taken part in, nationally and internationally, and he explained that Chinese religious organisations are trying to learn from the West how better to be involved in charitable and social service work of many sorts. It is recognised that in the twenty-first century a world-class university needs to engage well academically with the religions, although, predictably, there is some resistance from those who are anti-religious or do not see the point of taking religions so seriously.

In his lecture, Professor Zhuo referred to this transformation as ‘the beginning of open religions in an open society of China’ and named some of the dilemmas this is posing. How, for example, is ‘cultural nationalism’ to be related to Chinese Marxism? He noted unresolved issues and conflicts, but said that ‘the Chinese government is trying to divert from the classic Marxism in Europe to a ‘harmonious culture’ in Chinese society, that emphasises diversity as the ultimate leading ideology. This new policy, on the one hand, creates space to open up and absorb new ideas from other cultures. On the other hand, it gives room for self-recognition and self-realisation through Chinese cultural identity ... In the dialogue between Chinese traditional culture and Marxism, or in the process of Sinicisation of Marxism, we can find the subtle influence of religion.’ There is a tension between wanting to separate politics from religion and wanting to control the religions (e.g. through having a say in the appointment of religious leaders). There are also pressing questions of religious freedom and human rights, and what it means for religions to be under Chinese law.

It is now taken for granted in many Chinese institutions (at least by those I know well, who include those of various religious affiliations and none) that a religious studies department will be a plural space, embracing those of many religions and none. It is also taken for granted that there can be theology in those departments, in the sense of both studying theological thinking and exploring issues raised in current discussions. Some Chinese academics have realised that the binary oppositions (notably between theology and religious studies) inherited from Western history are not well suited to the twenty-first century, and Scriptural Reasoning is being seen as helping to mediate between or move beyond them. This is because Scriptural Reasoning requires the scholarly disciplines related to texts and contexts and yet also allows for discussion of contemporary issues of interpretation and application. It has two further features that seem to suit at least some Chinese departments well: it is intrinsically hospitable to many traditions, enabling a plural collegiality; and it does not insist on coming to conclusions – it tends to operate in an interrogative and exploratory mode, and while individual participants may come to conclusions there is no pressure to do so, or any demand for agreement.²

As I understand it, the two main ways until now of relating across religious traditions in Chinese departments of religious studies (often in fact heavily philosophical or sociological) have been through philosophy and the social sciences, both for many years largely Marxist, though now diversifying. A disadvantage of both is that they are external to the religions, and tend to interpret or explain them through ‘foreign’ categories – which may be illuminating, but are inadequate for enabling in-depth understanding of their particularity. Scriptural Reasoning allows each tradition to speak for itself; in addition it allows them to speak to each other, and also, through the hermeneutical process, to draw on philosophy, history, philology, psychology, sociology, etc., as appropriate – what Dr Aref Nayed once called the ‘internal libraries’ of those around the table. I am sure that in China, as

NOTES

1. There have been some variations beyond the Abrahamic – e.g. Peter Ochs and Gavin Flood on Jewish and Hindu texts in a course in the University of Virginia; prison chaplains in five training sessions in early 2012 covering most English prisons, which included Buddhist, Jewish and pagan chaplains with their texts; and a range of non-scriptural sessions (on liturgies, poems, commentaries, works of art) – but none of those so far has been sustained over years.

2. I was struck that Professor You Bin wrote in the brochure for ICS: ‘We aim to promote “a better quality of disagreement between religions” ... through reading each other’s authoritative texts’ – using a phrase about Scriptural Reasoning originally coined by Professor Ben Quash of King’s College London. The brochure here and elsewhere implicitly corrects, or enhances, the common Chinese ideal of ‘harmony’ by conceiving it in a way that allows for continuing differences and enduring disagreements which yet do not degenerate into destructive binary oppositions.

3. The origins of Scriptural Reasoning were in Textual Reasoning, in which Jewish text scholars, philosophers and theologians studied and argued about texts together in small groups inspired by the chevrotah practice of rabbinic Judaism.

4. The difficulty in China, as elsewhere in universities, is likely to be the busyness

in the Scriptural Reasoning I have known, there will be some tensions between philosophers or theologians and textual scholars or those in related historical or social scientific disciplines,³ and indeed some of those I studied with reported very different emphases among those doing Scriptural Reasoning. The main thing is to go on giving priority to the practice of reading together, and then arguing about whatever issues arise, drawing on whichever philosophy or other discipline is considered by any participant to be relevant.⁴

Scriptural Reasoning – Chinese Version

The Chinese practitioners are not simply taking Scriptural Reasoning over as it exists already. The most obvious innovation is that they are adding scriptures that are important in China – Confucian, Daoist and a variety of Buddhist texts. For example, they have started using Confucianism as a relatively uncontroversial Chinese point of reference. Since Scriptural Reasoning was developed specifically through reading together three ‘sibling’ scriptures, the addition of three scriptures unrelated to the Abrahamic ones, and more distantly related to each other, poses new challenges.⁵

A second innovation is in drawing on Comparative Theology as well as Scriptural Reasoning. Professor You Bin has recognised the affinity by having Francis Clooney, the pioneer of Comparative Theology (which so far has dealt mainly with Christian and Hindu or Buddhist texts) as an International Advisor on the Academic Committee of ICS. A key difference between the two is that Scriptural Reasoning is inherently conversational and collaborative, and never assumes that anyone will be at home with more than one scriptural or theological tradition, whereas Comparative Theology requires that one scholar be at home with more than one tradition, and conduct an interior dialogue.

It is, I think, very important that they are not using the numerical scarcity of Jews in China to drop or marginalise Judaism. One of the pleasant surprises in Shandong University was to meet the Professor of Jewish Studies, Fu Youde, who is a fellow-member of the Academic Committee of the ICS. He even had two Israeli Jewish doctoral students, Sharon Small and Shamir Inbal, studying with him, and their presence in our Scriptural Reasoning session completed the Abrahamic representation around the table.⁶

A further Chinese innovation is a new disciplinary setting for Scriptural Reasoning: comparative literature. They have seen that comparative literature is a natural home for Scriptural Reasoning. Comparative literature heightens awareness of the importance of translation, both of the scriptural texts and commentaries themselves and of the discussion around the table – I became more aware of the limitations of having so far done Scriptural Reasoning mainly in settings where the lingua franca is English.

Looking ahead

The future of Scriptural Reasoning seems to me rather different now than it did before I visited China. Four

distinctive pioneering features of the Chinese version, as already mentioned, are the addition of three Eastern religions to the three Abrahamic, the combining of Scriptural Reasoning with Comparative Theology, the role of Confucianism, and the additional disciplinary setting of comparative literature. In the light of the ICS’s research projects one might add to those a strong historical dimension in inter-textual research and thinking.⁷ All five of these features are likely to be developed further and have an impact elsewhere. But in addition there is the whole ‘applied’ side of Scriptural Reasoning. To see it being welcomed and institutionally established in a politically, economically and religiously dynamic society such as China, energising students who are likely to be future leaders, and opening up ways of deepening engagements across divisions, was encouraging; and to hear talk about its potential global impact opened up a further horizon of contributing to the peace of plural societies. It is quite possible that Scriptural Reasoning and allied forms of inter-faith engagement might contribute to improving understanding and religious literacy, and building peaceful societies. I began to glimpse the potential of collaboration with the Chinese in a ‘partnership of difference’ that could have impact through education in other parts of the world.

A final thought is about the relationship of Scriptural Reasoning to recent Chinese history. The roots of Scriptural Reasoning in Textual Reasoning were inseparable from the attempt of some Jewish academics to discern how to be Jewish in the aftermath of the Shoah (Holocaust). They came to see that this involved seeking wisdom through reading their classic texts of Tanakh and Talmud afresh together, through engaging deeply with modernity, both critically and constructively, and through coming together with others in different religious traditions that have also had to wrestle with modernity. China too has had its twentieth-century traumas, and is now faced with the challenge of rediscovering what its identity might be in their aftermath. I also found many Chinese had some sense of identification with the Jewish people – perhaps related to sustaining an identity over thousands of years. Each of those key elements of Textual Reasoning (which are shared with Scriptural Reasoning) is deeply relevant to the Chinese situation – retrieving and reinterpreting classic texts, grappling with the transformations of modernity, and learning and being formed through partnerships across different communities and traditions. The deepest learning may happen through suffering, but so too may terrible disintegration, despair and meaninglessness. In China, as Professor Zhuo recognises, many people are being drawn beyond traditional Chinese and modern resources into the world religions, and the identity issue is about more than what it means to be Chinese. It is of considerable importance for the world of the twenty-first century how the situation develops. This two-week visit to China, especially seeing the impressive developments in academic religious studies and taking part in creative improvisations on Scriptural Reasoning, was for me a sign of considerable hope.

of academics and their reluctance to give the time to reading together – which can seem an unproductive process. The ICS is focusing on a regular reading group made up of students, in particular postgraduates. This is apprenticing a good number of the rising generation of academics to the practice.

5. One source of guidance is likely to be the practice of Comparative Theology – see below.

6. There was also an articulate Chinese Muslim presence here – for example, a student who was not confident of her ability to recite the Qur’an in Arabic without making mistakes brought along a recording of the part of Surah 2 that we were studying and, after playing it, expounded it energetically. In Minzu there was also a strong Muslim presence, including Dr Yang Guiping – she is Minzu’s Professor of Islamic Studies.

7. This has to a lesser extent been present in Scriptural Reasoning, for example in the Princeton Center of Theological Inquiry three-year project involving sixteen Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars, including several Medievalists, which produced the book edited by Peter Ochs and William Stacy Johnson, *Crisis, Call, and Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).