Summary
Seven faculty members met, along with three Jewish and Muslim scholars who joined us via Skype, for consultation on how to educate students for pastoral ministry in multifaith settings. We had thirteen hours of face to face meetings and multiple email discussions. Two educational foci were the practice of prayer in hospital settings and the practice of receiving and extending hospitality during academic courses that take place in cross-cultural settings. Our theological focus was practicing “God’s shalom and Christ’s peace,” concepts that figure prominently in Bethany’s Anabaptist heritage and current mission statement. One distinctive feature of this consultation was the amount of time spent reading about, arguing over, and experimenting with “scriptural reasoning” (or SR), a term that refers to the activity of the Scriptural Reasoning Society, started in 1994. The practice of SR brings together Jewish, Christian, and Muslim participants for the purpose of reading sacred texts; participants “offer each other hospitality” to read one another’s sacred texts as they would their own.1 As a result of this ATS-funded project, six of the seven faculty participants decided to alter their teaching by revising course syllabi and by integrating new insights into Bethany’s ongoing curricular review.

Introduction
Bethany is the one seminary for the Church of the Brethren, an Anabaptist and Pietist denomination started in Germany in 1708. Though fairly small, largely rural and somewhat tribal, the Brethren have a history of serving in international and multifaith settings. In the last century, for example, members began the Heifers for Relief project (now Heifer International), and Bethany Seminary was the first headquarters for the Christian Rural Overseas Program (CROP). Today’s Brethren continue to be active overseas. Some church members work on Christian Peacemaking Teams in Africa or the Middle East. Two Brethren missionaries are currently serving in North Korea, where they teach agriculture. A large percentage of young people go to workcamps each summer, and many spend a year or more doing volunteer service before or after

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1 Peter Ochs (2010), The free church and Israel’s covenant (Winnipeg, Canada: CMU Press), p.58.
college. Our students come to seminary with the assumption that God might well be sending them out to work in a wider world, among people of different faiths.

Efforts to extend hospitality in multifaith settings have often proceeded from the premise that common bonds of human experience can enable people to avoid or even transcend their different religious convictions. In recent years, Brethren have worked with Quakers and Mennonites (two other historic peace churches) to organize conferences on three continents, as part of the World Council of Churches’ “Decade to Overcome Violence.” A key component of these peacemaking conferences was storytelling. The act of storytelling became a vehicle for forming a community of common values where people could recall old wisdom and imagine new endings to familiar patterns of violence.\(^2\) When the common ground is human experience, the sacred texts of each religious tradition often remain in the background.

Without minimizing the value of such an approach, this project was intended to start from a different place with a different premise. In a figure-ground shift, the sacred texts and religious convictions were brought to the forefront, while stories of human experience formed the background. The aim was to explore a way of practicing hospitality in which revelations from God, and convictions of people about them, could stand at the center. Though religious convictions may sometimes become the cause or justification for violence, adherents of Abrahamic traditions still confess that their sacred texts offer paths to peace.

For members of the Scriptural Reasoning Society, reading together is the central practice. The basic act of hospitality is not sharing food but sharing sacred texts. For example, Christians are invited to read the Qur’an or hadith literature and to say what it could mean to them. Likewise, Jewish participants are invited to read the New Testament and say what it could mean to them, and so on. The focus is not the ontological status of the revelation, but rather the open-ended meaning of the words on the page. As a guiding principle: the goal is not consensus but friendship, when discussing themes such as resurrection, hope and recreation—themes that arise commonly but become understood differently in different faith traditions. The process is depicted not as a big tent under which everyone lives, but a common porch on which people gather to talk before returning to their own religious homes.

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Are there implications here for theological education? Can our students learn ways of interacting with people of other faiths that do not require suppressing particular convictions but making them explicit? Can these convictions be made explicit in a manner that is not coercive or abrasive, but invitational and hospitable? These questions formed the impetus for this project. Since the questions are far ranging, it was decided to choose two specific “test contexts” to keep the discussion more focused and concrete: (a) the practice of prayer in hospital settings, since most of our students become pastors and many do CPE; and (b) the practice of receiving and giving hospitality during academic courses that take place in cross-culture settings, since a course of this type is required for a graduate degree.

Design of the Project
Seven faculty members who teach a range of disciplines agreed to hold four meetings of 2.5 hours each. A fifth meeting was added after the project started. Following are the sequence and structure of the meetings:

1. Meeting of six Bethany faculty members plus one professor of Earlham School of Religion (our partner school) to review the process and goals of the project, then discuss
   (a) examples of multifaith situations we have encountered,
   (b) multifaith situations of ministry our students are likely to encounter, and
   (c) ways we have tried to teach about multifaith ministry in the past.

2. Meeting with Rashied Omar, research scholar of Islamic studies and peacebuilding, University of Notre Dame, and Peter Ochs, professor of modern Judaic studies, University of Virginia. In two separate meetings, via Skype, discuss with them
   (a) how sacred texts guide their thinking on peace and hospitality,
   (b) examples of multifaith situations they have encountered,
   (c) ways they have experienced Christians as being hospitable and ways Christians have failed or neglected to practice hospitality, and
   (d) advice they might offer about the practice of prayer in multifaith settings.

3. Meeting with Rashied Omar and Peter Ochs together, via Skype to
   (a) discuss the purpose and process of Scriptural Reasoning (Dr. Ochs is a founder of the SR Society),
   (b) engage in SR by reading hadith qudsi 18: “O son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit me…”, and
During the third meeting, we decided to add another meeting to experiment more fully with the practice of SR. Dr. Omar needed to return to South Africa, where he serves as an imam, so Dr. Ochs invited a friend of his to join us—Basit Koshul, associate professor of social science, University of Lahore, Pakistan.

4. Meeting with Peter Ochs and Basit Koshul together, via Skype, to
   
   (a) engage in Scriptural Reasoning by reading Surah 5:112-120: “The disciples, said: ‘O Jesus the son of Mary! can thy Lord send down to us a table set with viands from heaven?’ Said Jesus: ‘Fear Allah, if ye have faith...’” and
   
   (b) engage in SR by reading 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (Hannah’s prayer).

5. Meeting of Bethany and ESR faculty to discuss what we learned from our interactions, our readings, and our experimentation with SR.

In between meetings, we read scholarly literature on multifaith ministry; this literature is listed in the Appendix. We also had lively email exchanges, totaling about 25,000 words. The seven Bethany/ESR participants each wrote final reports. The ATS grant funded these activities by paying for stipends to participants and by paying for food and beverages during the meetings, and for some reading materials.

**Results of the Project**

It was hoped that the project would help to provide

(1) better teaching and learning on pastoral practices in multifaith contexts, by helping faculty to see ways to revise their course syllabi and by providing insights that could figure into an overall curriculum review;

(2) greater clarity about key concepts of our mission, in particular the phrase “God’s shalom and Christ’s peace”; and

(3) improved collegial relations with a potential for collaborative scholarship.

The written reports of participants indicated a fair amount of success in meeting these goals. Jim Higginbotham, who teaches pastoral care, had been involved in many multicultural and interfaith conversations and workshops prior to this project; however, he reported that “these discussions were, by far, the most in-depth I’ve had regarding interfaith pastoral practice,” and therefore the project was “an extraordinarily valuable
learning opportunity.” He appreciated the way that our Muslim and Jewish conversation partners spoke about “subtle religious oppression,” due to the place of Christianity in American society, and noted that the power differential is increased when a Christian pastor or chaplain is offering prayer, counsel or care to a Muslim or Jewish patient lying in a hospital bed.

He wrote: “In contrast to the asymmetrical relationship of chaplain and patient, our group examined Scriptural Reasoning (SR) in which participants agree to try to listen to one another as equals and read each other’s authoritative texts as if they were their own.” Even if this egalitarian ethos cannot be transposed into hospital ministry, other aspects of SR can be. For example, SR promotes attention to what is authoritative to people of other faiths, in all its particularity. Attempts to translate faith into common denominators, such as a common existential issue, may actually be experienced as oppressive by the other person. Neither caregiver nor the person cared for can bracket out the particularity of their religious faith. As a result of this project, Dr. Higginbotham incorporated one of the book chapters on our reading list into his Introduction to Pastoral Care course. Finally, as the Earlham School of Religion representative in our colloquy, he expressed appreciation for the way that “collegial relations have been significantly deepened through this grant.”

Daniel Ulrich, who teaches New Testament, reported that he could envision curricular changes for two courses as a result of this project. The experiment with Scriptural Reasoning led him “to think that I could include a scriptural-reasoning study of a passage from the Qur’an or the hadith literature as part of a New Testament exegesis course.” For another course, which focuses on exegesis of Matthew, he teaches about the “world in front of the text” (i.e., in keeping with P. Ricoeur’s three-worlds model); here he could assign a passage from the Qur’an or hadiths that parallels a passage from Matthew, then invite an Islamic scholar to lead an hour-long discussion of the text via Skype. “Such a discussion could shed light on both Christian and Islamic scriptures,” he wrote, “and it could be an occasion for modeling respect and hospitality.”

Dr. Ulrich commented that this practice could also be an occasion for some students to feel uncomfortable. During our experiment with SR, our group noted ways the Islamic text gave variant readings of New Testament passages, leading Peter Ochs to interject, somewhat lightheartedly, “Now you know how we feel.” Dr. Ulrich anticipated that a similar experience would be beneficial to his students: seeing and feeling how the Qur’an revises the New Testament could help them appreciate how the New Testament
in turn reinterprets Jewish sources, and this act of empathy could help students avoid reading Matthew in ways that might “fuel anti-Semitism.”

Malinda Berry, who teaches theology, found that this project with its “confessional” focus provided a nice counterbalance to previous interfaith dialogue she had experienced, where the focus was more upon “personal” or “sociological” issues. Hoping to inspire her students to be conversant in all three approaches to theological reflection, she named “some concrete changes I plan to make” to her courses as a result of this project. In the course entitled Introduction to Theological Reflection, she will add content on Jewish and Muslim perspectives on the theme of revelation and scriptural authority (“particularly how each tradition conceptualizes ‘Word of God’”), and in her lecture on *shalom* she will include more multifaith themes. In Theological Understandings of Jesus, she plans to “incorporate the scholarly work and personal testimonies of colleagues with extensive experience in Scriptural Reasoning,” and to offer final student paper topics that include multifaith themes. In Feminist Theology and Thought, she plans to “add readings from Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and/or Taoist perspectives on the Feminine Divine/Feminine Principle.”

Dan Poole, who coordinates our ministry formation placement (sometimes called field education), reported several insights he gleaned from the project and planned to integrate into his teaching. For example, our Jewish and Muslim dialogue partners observed that informal, spontaneous prayer is more distinctive of Christian traditions than their own. He also recalled the comment of Dr. Omar that praying to God as Father has “a strong association with Trinitarian theology.” It is one thing for students to have this information; knowing what to do with it is another. Dr. Omar also recounted how, when some Muslims in South Africa invited a Christian pastor to pray for someone who was sick, the Muslims were somewhat disappointed that this pastor did not pray in the name of Jesus, since they had come to expect this is how Christians pray; they wanted an “authentic” Christian prayer. He advised that pastors ought to be sensitive in multifaith settings, but at the same time interact with integrity. As a simple, basic rule: when in doubt about how some word or action will be received by others, consider asking them.

Steven Schweitzer, our academic dean, also teaches biblical studies. As a Hebrew Bible scholar, he has had many interactions with Jewish scholars, but this project was “the first real time spent with Muslim scholars reading and reflecting on the Qur’an.” He appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the themes of peacemaking and hospitality,
and in particular valued our discussion about tension and liminality. Hospitality, it could be said, does not necessarily mean the reduction or resolution of tension; it could mean the creation of a liminal space in which the tension becomes heuristic rather than antagonistic or debilitating.

As academic dean, Dr. Schweitzer appreciated how the project clarified “three [multifaith] contexts for our graduates” that Bethany faculty need to keep in mind: (1) chaplaincy and pastoral care, (2) local clergy associations, and (3) academic settings such as professional meetings. He also remarked that this project “comes at an opportune time,” given our current curricular review. He is guiding the faculty to consider “adjustments to courses and other educational opportunities” that take into account the new ATS Standard A.2.3.2.3

Scott Holland teaches courses in theology and culture; his report on the project continued a dialectical conversation that began during the consultation in email exchanges with Russell Haitch, the project director, and that focused especially on the question of whether the postliberal theology of Peter Ochs is conducive to peacemaking. Tracing the theological lineage of SR, he placed it within “an older Yale School of Theology” expressed in the work of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and others. As a Chicago graduate, Dr. Holland pointed to ways he thinks “Scriptural Reasoning helps and hinders interfaith hospitality.” On the plus side, it helps to recognize the problem inherent in many modern liberal attempts to find “some common core of belief” among people of different faiths. Each expression of public truth is also in its own way provincial, and there is danger in making one’s particular reading of things universal and absolute: it is the danger of doing violence, physical or otherwise, to those who adhere to a different reading of things. Dr. Ochs himself highlighted this problem in critiquing Christian pacifists who annex the Jewish exilic tradition when describing the politics of Jesus. Exile is indeed one strand of the Jewish tradition, he said, but so is “landedness,” and it is necessary to keep the two strands intertwined.

Agreeing with postliberal critiques of modern liberalism, Dr. Holland, as perhaps a postmodern liberal, stated that “the path to public peace and [multifaith] cooperation

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3 “M.Div. education shall engage students with the global character of the church as well as ministry in multifaith and multicultural contexts of North American society and in other contemporary settings. Attention should also be given to the wide diversity of religious traditions present in potential ministry settings, as well as expressions of social justice and respect congruent with the institution’s mission and purpose.”
might in fact be via the particular.” At the same time, he took issue with the particular ideology he found to be implicit in the thinking of SR practioners he has known. He questioned the place of privilege they give to “antique holy texts,” as opposed to contemporary texts or ancient pagan myths or nontextual forms of human experience. Further, he wondered whether the category of divine revelation, as something that stands above human experience, hinders the cause of peace because it permits people to advance unassailable claims. Dr. Holland named the Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin as an ally in this critique, and named specifically the concern that the “protection of cultural linguistic particularity” can become “translated smoothly into a politics that privileges the rights of Israelis over the rights of Palestinians.” This latter discussion did not come to the surface during our Skype interactions.

For Russell Haitch, the project director and writer of this report, the project was remarkably meaningful on two levels—what I learned in organizing it and what I plan to carry into my teaching. To talk about the latter first: Like my colleagues, I was intrigued by this experiment with SR and can envision doing it with students, whether during cross-cultural courses I teach in Kenya, or in an on-campus class entitled Youth and Mission. Already this class has global and multifaith dimensions; in discussing themes such as fundamentalism and proteanism, we look at structural similarities between young people of several religions; this project has improved my attunement to such convergences. It also inspired me to have further discussions with Peter Ochs and to do further research into SR. I have learned, for example, that SR has been practiced with young people in Britain, even in State-run schools. I hope to investigate this activity when visiting England for an academic conference in January.

Overall, in organizing multifaith interactions for this ATS project, I found that our research on hospitality became a kind of case study in hospitality. The points in our discussion that grew most interesting and pertinent were also the points of tension and potential disharmony. How to ensure that the liminality, of which Dr. Schweitzer wrote, could remain heuristic and not antagonistic? In working through this question, the historic antagonism of crusades and pogroms may have loomed in the background, but the more pressing concern seemed to be the more immediate history of theological alliances, where people turn not only to Jerusalem, Rome, or Mecca, but to places like Yale, Chicago, or Princeton to define each other’s positions.

Multifaith endeavors in the wider world need to reckon with ways that peoples’ daily lives have embedded economic interests; likewise people in the academic world are
properly invested in theological interests that enable alliances or disputes to form within and across faith traditions. It is no secret that within western Christianity new coalitions have been forming between conservative or orthodox Protestants and Catholics, as well as between liberal or progressive Catholics and Protestants. It is also worth attending to similar alliances among western Christians, Muslims, and Jews. One could even redefine the “faith” in multifaith hospitality so that it focuses on structural patterns of thinking or frames of mind, rather than only historic faith traditions.

To illustrate this last point, I can recount a portion of our discussion on revelation. Dr. Ochs said that as an Orthodox Jew he believes God’s Word exists exactly in the very shape of the Hebrew letters on the parchment of Torah (which is sometimes called “God’s flesh”); these letters are God’s Word, prior to any human cognition or recognition. Likewise Dr. Omar said that as a Muslim he believes God’s Word exists exactly in the very sound of the Arabic syllables of the recited Qur’an (which name means “recitation”); on this point, he said, all Muslims absolutely agree. Here it is not hard to see structural similarities with orthodox or neo-orthodox Christians who claims that God’s Word is exactly enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth, as well as fundamentalists who claim that the Bible is literally and exactly God’s Word.

Without glossing over very real differences between the three traditions, one can recognize a shared category of divine revelation that stands above human reason and natural language. Within both Christian and Jewish traditions there are cultured dissenters to this position. For this reason, the liberal Jewish scholar may feel more at home in a liberal Christian seminary than the conservative Christian. One challenge of our seminary, and perhaps many modern seminaries, has been figuring out how to practice Christian hospitality when asking conservative students to practice critical thinking. As someone who values critical (and postcritical) thinking as well as the category of divine revelation, I found our project very valuable for working on this issue. I found it interesting that Dr. Ochs, when asked to give “an example of Christian inhospitality,” decided to tell us about a Jewish professor who dismissed his early scholarship as being irrational, because it did not appear to conform to the canons of Enlightenment reason. This Jewish professor was teaching at an institution once Christian and now secular. Due to this and similar experiences, Dr. Ochs has concluded that Christian educational institutions are most hospitable to orthodox Jews and Muslims when they stay most true to their Christian roots.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Scriptural Reasoning is a useful method for increasing multifaith understanding. Creating a space in which people of different traditions can invite each other to read their sacred texts is an act of hospitality. It could be seen as an attempt to seek out the highest rather than lowest common denominator. What an SR group shares in common, however, is not a particular interpretation of the texts, of even a particular doctrine of revelation, but a shared sense that these words matter—and a shared sense that it is good to talk about what matters most to people of different faiths. Basit Koshul, one of our Muslim participants, remarked that he was happy to make time for this project because it focused on what is most important; if we were holding a multifaith gathering just to play chess or table tennis together, he would have no time for it.

Because SR is noncreedal, participants can enter into the practice hoping to receive a direct revelation from God—or simply hoping to learn more about the religious experience of other people. Though many SR practitioners may have a “high” view of scriptural authority, no particular view of authority is required. As Dr. Ochs noted: “There is no authority except the plain sense of the words on the page, but nobody knows what that is.” Stepping into the practice, people shed, temporarily, the authority of their academic degrees or clerical positions. Though theoretically open to all people of Abrahamic traditions, it is reasonable to suppose that SR will have the least appeal to the most liberal and the most conservative groups within a tradition: the former may reject the value of reading sacred texts as opposed to engaging in other activities; the latter may reject the value of reading a text that does not belong to their own tradition.

The final reports of participants focused largely on SR, though we spent time in meetings covering a lot of other ground. In retrospect, this project could have focused exclusively on SR, and it is recommended that schools wishing to undertake a similar project could potentially benefit from being more single-minded in their topic. With a more pointed focus, our project might have been called: “Scriptural Reasoning as a way to practice multifaith hospitality.” However, there seemed, at least at the outset, to be good reasons for not taking this more simplified approach. First, the project director did not have prior confidence that faculty colleagues and Muslim participants would be open to experimenting with the practice of SR. Second, discussion on the theme of “God’s shalom and Christ’s peace” was a clear institutional priority. Third, the educational focus we chose—how to pray in hospital settings and how to practice hospitality during cross-cultural courses—seemed to connect most directly to the needs of our students and goals of the ATS grant.
The main benefit of our more diffused approach was that it gave us a variety of ways to think about multifaith hospitality; approaching the topic from various angles was generative and stimulating. One participant, a biblical scholar, said in his final report that a more narrow focus—on preparing students for hospital chaplaincy and cross-cultural immersion experiences—would have been much less pertinent to his own teaching. The main weakness of our wider focus was that it hindered sustained attention to one context. Praying with patients in a hospital setting is one activity that takes place in one context; practicing SR is a different sort of activity that takes place in a different context. Despite the differences, however, the report of our pastoral care professor suggested that the juxtaposition of the two activities and contexts was beneficial for thinking through issues.

As a next step, there are plans to meet with the project participants after the ATS consultation in Pittsburgh, so that I can report what other schools have done, and so that we can reflect further on our own work after some time has passed. I also plan to make reports to the full faculty of Bethany Theological Seminary and Earlham School of Religion, during a joint faculty meeting.
The work of this project could be advanced in these ways:

(1) Participants could meet after we implement the anticipated changes to our courses, to report and assess what difference these changes made to teaching and learning.

(2) A group of faculty and students could arrange to meet with Jewish and Muslim faculty and students in order to practice SR. We could choose passages of sacred texts that address the theme of peace. (During the project, we discussed our school’s mission of practicing “God’s shalom and Christ’s peace” with both our Jewish and Muslim dialogue partners, but the scriptural passages chosen for SR focused on the theme of hospitality.)

(3) Two or more participants in the project could continue to work on the structural issues of divine revelation and human experience that this project brought to the surface. Specifically we could ask what it means for so-called conservatives and liberals to practice hospitality within seminaries or denominations—on the premise that hospitality also needs to happen close to home, and on the observation that the fierce internal fighting of Brethren and of Quakers has not helped their peace witness.

Finally, it is recommended or hoped that ATS will be able to continue to support projects of this nature, which improve theological education by addressing the pressing concerns of today’s world.

Appendix

The following are readings our group did during the course of the project.


Harris, Terri (Spring 2009). Supporting your Muslim students. *Journal of Reflective Practice*.


Ochs, Peter (Fall 2011). Nonviolence and Shabbat. *Conrad Grebel Review*.


Omar, A. Rashied (2012). Muslim extremism: Myth or reality? University of Notre Dame OpenCourseWare.


