Long-Term Disagreement

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Philosophical Models in Scriptural Reasoning and Receptive Ecumenism

Nicholas Adams, University of Edinburgh

This article will explore points of contact between two practices of encounter between different traditions: scriptural reasoning (SR) and receptive ecumenism (RE). It will focus on shared philosophical shapes. This is not an area that has been explored much, and the findings of this inquiry should be treated as provisional. SR and RE will be characterised as strategies for dealing with long-term disagreement, that is as strategies that do not seek to preserve or promote such disagreement, but which face it in a non-utopian manner and seek to maintain a concern with truth while taking questions of tradition seriously. The significance of SR and RE lies in their mediation of a sophisticated anti-foundationalism and a rejection of secular universalism in practices whose participants are not experts in philosophy. This is significant, I shall argue, because the philosophical habits of participants in inter-faith engagement and ecumenical dialogue often display signs of foundationalism and secular universalism: SR and RE explicitly aim to change these habits. Their significance lies not in any new insights into philosophical method so much as in their capacity to embed certain philosophical developments, especially within pragmatism, in institutions, in such a way as to shape everyday practices.

There is a body of literature, from a variety of practitioners, about both SR and RE.[1] I shall comment on two short pieces, one by Peter Ochs, 'Rules for Scriptural Reasoning' and one by Paul Murray, 'Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda'.[2] Each is an introduction to their respective practices, naming the philosophical approaches that characterise them. These are named 'pragmatism', which for Ochs derives from the study of CS Peirce and for Murray

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[1] On Scriptural Reasoning see various issues of the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* (http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr last accessed 31 Dec 2012) from 2001 to the present; see also David Ford and Chad Pecknold (eds.) *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), which contains 12 essays. On Receptive Ecumenism see Paul Murray (ed.) *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), which contains 32 essays. See also the website for the project, https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/projects/receptiveecumenism/, whose documents extend up to the end of 2011. Last accessed 31 Dec 2012: at that date, the site had a number of broken links.

[2] Peter Ochs 'The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning' *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, May 2002, http://tinyurl.com/ochs-rules-2002. Last accessed 9 Dec 2012], my emphasis. Paul Murray 'Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda' in Murray (ed.) *Receptive Ecumenism*, pp.5-25

from the study of Nicholas Rescher.[3] This essay focuses on the significance of the philosophical methods they advocate in relation to SR and RE.

Both SR and RE are explicitly reparative practices.[4] They identify particular problems in existing practices, resolving them through diagnosis and presenting alternatives. RE is concerned with existing practices of ecumenism that display failure of various kinds. SR is concerned with existing practices of the study of religious life (and the errant philosophical methods they rely on). Where RE is described by Murray explicitly as an alternative to existing failed ecumenical strategies, Ochs is less interested in inter-faith encounter, and more concerned with problems in the academy. RE is oriented to the Church, SR to the University. (I shall ignore more recent developments in SR, in which its practices are extended outside the university. These merit further investigation requiring detailed fieldwork.)

There are significant differences between SR and RE: for reasons of space I consider only their shared philosophical orientation. Ochs and Murray suggest that everyday problems in universities and churches are expressed in and exacerbated by errant philosophical methods. These are not a matter for philosophers alone: they concern all those who study religious traditions and all those who engage in ecumenical dialogue. In the accounts by Ochs and Murray philosophical problems are treated alongside more local problems in the study of religious traditions and the practices of ecumenism.

Scholars of religious traditions and participants in ecumenical dialogue rely (whether implicitly or explicitly) on particular philosophical methods. Where these methods are problematic, Ochs and Murray recommend alternatives. The two most prominent errant philosophical methods identified in the study of religious traditions and in ecumenical dialogue are rationalist in character. Ochs and Murray do not mean that scholars of religious traditions or participants in ecumenical dialogue are advocates of such methods. Rather, certain philosophical habits can be discerned in their practices and their specific problematic features can be identified. These problematic features can arguably be traced back to Descartes and Kant, but it is the problematic features that are of concern rather than their intellectual heritage. These problematic features

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[3] See Peter Ochs *Peirce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998); Paul Murray *Reason, Truth and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), esp. pp.91-162. Murray's introductory chapter to the Receptive Ecumenism volume rehearses, in an abbreviated form, many of the arguments in the opening chapter of his book on pragmatism, which is also entitled 'Establishing the Agenda'.

[4] For a brief overview of this approach to philosophy see Nicholas Adams 'Reparative Reasoning' *Modern Theology* July 2008, pp.447-457

are named by Murray 'foundationalism' and 'the pursuit of neutral ground' and by Ochs 'Cartesianism' and 'Secular Universalism'.

Foundationalism

Foundationalism has three key features: its orientation to previous philosophical methods, its way of handling doubt and certainty, and its approach to starting points. These can be elaborated briefly in turn.

Foundationalism rejects the methods of its predecessors. Cartesian philosophy grew out of a dissatisfaction with Aristotelian Scholastic practices.[5] Instead of diagnosing problems in those practices and repairing them piece by piece, the entire nexus of practices was taken to be in error and a new method was developed to replace it *in toto.* The root problem was dependence on venerable authorities. In the various scholastic practices of both Catholic and Protestant thinkers appeals were made to authorities in support of arguments. Such authorities included pagan sources (especially Aristotle), Biblical sources (especially Psalms or the letters of St Paul), and ecclesiastical sources including Church Fathers (especially Augustine). Many debates between Catholic and Protestant leaders were resolvable, at least in principle, so long as there was agreement on what counted as an authority. Aquinas had already shown in his *Summa Theologiae* that the principal authorities did not agree on certain doctrinal points, and it was central to his presentation of arguments that these opposing views were identified at the start, in the form of '*objectiones*' and '*sed contra*' summaries. It was then the task of the theologian, in a '*respondeo*' section, to work through these oppositions and offer a reasoned provisional judgement that resolved them. By the time of the seventeenth century, however, there was disagreement not only about such provisional judgements but disagreement on what counted as an authority. The Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* tended to undermine appeals to pagan authorities, to the doctors of the Church, to conciliar settlements or (most emphatically) to papal judgements *ex cathedra.* The scholastic methods of argumentation were unable to resolve these disagreements about authorities, because they relied on prior agreement at this level, and arguments thus began to display a tendency towards interminable debate. Cartesian philosophy thus commended a method that refused appeals to *any* authority. Rather than develop a philosophical method that took into account different authorities, Cartesian philosophy rejected methods which appealed to authority and instead promoted a

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[5] See Jorge Secada *Cartesian Metaphysics: The Scholastic Origins of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000); Roger Ariew *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999). The sketch that follows is my own.

method which appealed to demonstrable truths. This method was intended wholly to replace its predecessors.

Foundationalism pits unlimited doubt against absolute certainty. Cartesian method rejects the provisional judgements of the theological 'I reply that': their starting points can be doubted. In their place, the method takes absolute certainty as the only rational starting point, in the expectation that a secure starting point will deliver more secure arguments. The uncertain conflict of competing authorities is replaced by the clarity of mathematical deduction. Only that which cannot be doubted counts as a starting point, and only that which can be deduced counts as a valid argument. The uncertainties surrounding the interpretation of authorities are removed. Doubt and certainty are no longer matters of 'more or less'; they become matters of 'yes or no'. Beliefs are no longer more or less doubtful or more or less certain. They are either doubtful (because they cannot be demonstrated) or certain (because they can).

Foundationalism starts with doubt and ends in certainty. It is a distinctive mark of Cartesian thought that the initial orientation of the thinker is one of doubt. This doubt is pervasive and unrestricted: any proposition offered at the outset is automatically placed in doubt, regardless of its content. Only those propositions that survive such a test are admitted. They are not merely accepted provisionally, as axioms, but absolutely, as certainties. For Descartes himself such certainties are clear and distinct ideas, given by God, but for any foundationalism there must be some certainties of this kind. Once they are secured, a process of deduction can get underway: its purpose is to build on these certainties in a quest for further certainties.

The pragmatism commended by Ochs and Murray is intended to repair the deficiencies that characterise foundationalism along three corresponding axes. It seeks to recover a concern with authorities, especially those that are scriptural (Ochs) or doctrinal (Murray). It attempts to soften doubts and certainties. It reverses the priority of doubt and certainty.

The first repair begins with an acknowledgement that different traditions privilege different authorities. The pragmatic repair readily acknowledges that there is a problem to be addressed but sees the rejection of philosophies that admit authorities into trains of argument as an over-correction. It is genuinely a problem if a member of one tradition attempts to argue against a member of another tradition through appeal to authorities if each participant privileges different authorities. This is, however, the normal state of affairs in inter-faith encounter and in ecumenical

dialogue. The pragmatic repair acknowledges that to understand another person's argument is to understand which authorities they privilege. The problem with the foundationalist method is its exclusion of authorities and thus of traditions themselves (because a tradition is the transmission of authorities). Foundationalism correctly diagnoses the problem: there are different authorities in play. But its repair is ruinously excessive: it refuses to admit authorities into argumentation. The pragmatic repair accepts the diagnosis, but commends investigation into authorities rather than the pursuit of demonstrable truths. Foundationalism fails partly because its demonstrable truths tend to be trivial. The interesting doctrinal questions are excluded from philosophy because few demonstrable truths can be found in theology from which to begin; but the whole point of the exercise was to debate doctrinal questions.

The second repair softens doubts and certainties. Instead of unlimited doubts and absolute certainties, the pragmatic repair deals in occasional doubts and provisional certainties. To those afflicted by a residual Cartesianism to speak of something as certain is to strip it of its provisionality. To be certain is not to be provisional. The pragmatic repair denies this. To be certain is merely to be undoubted. It might be placed in doubt at some point in the future, and it might survive or be defeated by such doubt. Something is certain because, for the time being, it is not doubted. Its certainty is provisional. Such provisionality may be long-term; if that is so, it is because it tends, as a matter of fact, not to be doubted. This is not because it is indubitable; it is because there is no good reason to doubt it. The pragmatic repair refuses unlimited doubt. *Doubts need reasons.* In the absence of reasons, there is an absence of doubt. A philosopher who says, 'well I just doubt it' is not a serious thinker for a pragmatist. A philosopher is entitled to doubt if a reason for doubting can be given. A thinker who says, 'well it can be doubted' utters a triviality for a pragmatist. Anything can be doubted; the question is whether anything stimulates such doubt. A foundationalist is committed to a method of saying 'well it can be doubted' until something is found that cannot be doubted. Few of the things it finds are of much interest, theologically, because the important doctrinal questions tend to be provisional (if long-term) certainties. The pragmatist is thus 'certain' of a great deal more than the foundationalist, but is more provisional about this certainty. The pragmatist also doubts a great deal less than the foundationalist, because she requires reasons for doubting. The pragmatist may also be indifferent to a range of claims: they are neither provisionally certain nor rationally doubted. One might say that they are trivially hypothetical.

The third repair reverses the priority of doubt and certainty. The foundationalist begins with doubt and labours until certainty is found. Once this basis is secured, a deductive method builds further certainties. The pragmatist begins with a web of provisional certainties bearing complex relations to each other. From time to time one or more of these certainties is placed in doubt, because a reason to doubt them arises, and this stimulates various investigations. An axiom (a certainty) becomes an hypothesis (it is doubted) which is then tested (by investigations). The hypothesis either survives such testing, in which case it becomes an axiom once again, or it fails to survive it, in which case its denial becomes certain (provisionally). The key question for the pragmatist is when to convert an axiom into an hypothesis. The thinker who says 'any axiom can be converted into an hypothesis' utters a triviality for the pragmatist. The pragmatist begins with axioms, with a complex of provisional certainties, and introduces doubts only when good reasons stimulate a shift of orientation. Whereas for the foundationalist everything starts out as an hypothesis requiring investigation, for the pragmatist everything starts out either as an axiom or as trivially hypothetical: neither requires investigation until a reason presents itself.

Ochs and Murray make explicit the ways in which the pragmatist repairs of foundationalism inform inter-faith and ecumenical encounter. Foundationalism is likely to be corrosive not only of the claims of other traditions, but of one's own tradition. The need for the pragmatic repair persists so long as foundationalist habits are widespread. These are audible whenever one hears, 'well I doubt that' without good reason, or 'that can be doubted' or other variants. But it is also audible whenever one hears 'I will only be satisfied by absolute certainty' or 'unless you can demonstrate it, I will not believe it'. These are widespread intellectual tendencies, and they are particularly ruinous when members of different traditions encounter each other. If both sides agree that only absolute certainty is satisfactory, then they will be doomed to fix their gaze on trivial certainties, and to relegate the things that matter most to them to the realm of irrational 'blind' belief.

Secular Universalism

Like foundationalism, secular universalism (or the pursuit of neutral ground) is a pervasive intellectual habit which calls for repair.[6] Like foundationalism it rejects tradition. Where foundationalism seeks absolute certainty in the place of the provisional certainties of tradition, the pursuit of neutral ground explicitly refuses appeals to authorities and instead recommends 'neutral' appeals to reason. The main

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[6] Ochs 'Rules', §4; Murray 'Establishing the Agenda', p.7

assumption that underlies the pursuit of neutral ground is that the criteria for judgement are innate and invariant. This is a development of the Cartesian notion of the 'natural light' which itself is a very late development of the Augustinian topos of divine illumination which accompanies his epistemology.[7] Its implications for philosophical method, especially in relation to questions of disagreement between members of different traditions, are serious. Because criteria for judgement are considered innate, they are taken to be necessary. An opponent in debate thus does not merely deny something that I affirm; my opponent denies reason itself.

To argue in a way that is contrary to reason is not just to be mistaken. It is to be grievously in the wrong. One's utterances do not merely require correction: they call for a particularly strong repudiation. Someone who teaches things that are contrary to reason does not merely provoke disagreement. They have no business teaching at all, and do not belong in a university devoted to the pursuit of reason.

In the realm of inter-faith engagement and ecumenical dialogue, such secular universalism, such pursuit of neutral ground - of criteria that are true *a priori* - is particularly toxic. It displays a tendency to treat opponents as irrational. Your arguments, in such a framework, are not just products of a different tradition: they are expressions of a refusal to think. I am liable not just to reject your arguments, but you yourself as a serious partner in discussion. Instead of disagreeing, we become engaged in mutual dismissal.

The pragmatic repair of the pursuit of neutral ground is to refuse to attribute criteria for judgement to neutral reason, but to identify them as reasons located in traditions of thought. Some criteria - trivial ones, from a theological perspective - are so widespread as not to need any such explicit attribution. There is no 'Muslim' periodic table of the elements and no 'Lutheran' trigonometry. By contrast, it is obvious that different traditions interpret texts in a distinctive way. Interpretations of the Talmud, of the New Testament and of medieval Islamic legal texts are not covered by a single discipline of 'hermeneutics' which specifies a single set of interpretive rules applied to a range of different materials. Different traditions treat different texts differently. The nineteenth century fantasy of a unified hermeneutic theory, which typically attempted to harmonise methods for interpreting Classical and Biblical texts, produced some fascinating insights and clarified a number of previously obscure

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[7] John Rist 'Faith and Reason' in Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), pp.26-39. This is a classic example of a concept whose meaning changes radically as it is transmitted. See Lydia Schumacher *Divine Illumination The History and Future of Augustine's Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

questions. But it attempted to regulate the interpretation of texts - to specify the rules an interpreter *must* follow - rather than to describe, in a more ethnographically attentive way, how texts are actually interpreted. It was strong on theory but weak on case studies.[8] It described reasonably well the practices of university scholarship but failed to do justice to the practices of ecclesial reading (and ignored the Jewish sages and Muslim jurists). The pragmatic repair of secular universalism, of the pursuit of neutral ground, is also a repair of the over-generalisations found in nineteenth century hermeneutics. This does not take the form of a more adequate universal hermeneutics. It notices that there are, and attends to, different traditions of interpretation. Participants in SR and RE are stimulated to make small-scale investigations into another's practices of reading.[9] This does not yield a hermeneutic theory; it produces something analogous to ethnography: a description of something observed combined with an attempt to understand it.

The refusal of foundationalist method and of the pursuit of neutral ground in philosophy is a familiar topos in the discipline of philosophy in the university: such refusals are commonplace in German Idealism, in French Phenomenology, in English Analytic Philosophy or in American Pragmatism. Their significance for SR and RE is that such refusals are not only for disciplinary specialists. Their significance is their gradual institutionalisation into the practices of theologians whose training is in doctrine, biblical interpretation, Talmud, Da'wah, and other non-philosophical disciplines. SR and RE embed the fruits of specialised philosophical investigation - in this case those of pragmatist philosophy - in everyday practices of inter-faith and ecumenical engagement. One of the most regrettable failures of modern philosophy in the twentieth century is the limited scope of its application outside a small guild of philosophers. SR and RE show a capacity to mediate the later repair of these traditions, whether in idealist, analytic or pragmatist variants, in popular practices.

Having cast the discussion as one of repair - in this case the repair of rationalist method in philosophy - we can now turn to the fruits of this repair and attempt to discern the shapes of thinking displayed in SR and RE. Our concern here is with the shapes of thinking rather than their genesis and transmission.

The shapes of thinking in SR and RE display two notable features: a willingness to consider triadic as well as binary forms, and a privileging of positive over negative truth claims.

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[8] See Nicholas Adams 'The Bible' in Adams, Pattison and Ward (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 545-566
[9] Ochs 'Rules', §6E

Triadic Forms

Everyday forms of judgement tend, quite properly, to be binary. Words have meanings, claims are right or wrong, beliefs are axiomatic or hypothetical. A binary form assigns a value to a variable. As Descartes and Spinoza grasped so well, the most easily demonstrated examples are mathematical. A triangle is a polygon with three corners or vertices and three sides or edges which are line segments; the area of a circle is expressed as π multiplied by the square of the radius; we can treat as axiomatic the belief that a submerged object will displace its own volume whereas a floating object will displace its own mass, and so forth. In the realm of mathematics judgements quite properly take a binary form. The same is true in the realm of theology, for the most part. The world is God's good creation; Jesus is fully human and fully divine; we can treat as axiomatic the belief that God is Trinity, and so forth. Systematic theology within any one tradition is rightly taught as a nexus of axiomatic claims which then permit the investigation of various hypotheses such as 'God shares in human suffering' or 'Capitalism is incompatible with the doctrine of creation'.

As is well known, however, things are more complex in classic doctrinal arguments. 'The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son'. 'Salvation comes by faith alone'. A Catholic theologian affirms the *filioque,* whereas an Orthodox theologian affirms its absence. A Lutheran affirms the formula *sola fides,* whereas an Anglican may or may not affirm it. What is positively axiomatic for a Catholic theologian is negatively axiomatic for an Orthodox theologian. What is axiomatic for a Lutheran is hypothetical for an Anglican. In a binary form of judgement, questions of truth are decided in a yes/no fashion. For a Catholic theologian, the Orthodox omission of the *filioque* is errant; for a Lutheran theologian the Anglican equivocation over *sola fides* is errant. I am right and you are wrong. This is a familiar shape of thinking with a bloody history. The nineteenth century liberal Protestant approach to such questions was to recast 'objective' dogmatic claims about God's being as 'subjective' claims about human experience of the divine. This too is a binary shape of thinking: objective dogmatic claims are errant.

In ecumenical and inter-faith encounter, binary shapes of thinking are problematic. What I affirm, you deny. What is axiomatic for you is hypothetical for me. There are a number of strategies for addressing this problem, and these can be cast as ideal types. One is a conservative strategy of agreement. 'We should focus on our shared affirmations and denials and should seek to minimise contrary cases.' This strategy

tends to produce documents with forms of words which both sides can affirm. Another is a liberal strategy of agreement. 'We should assume that we approach a single truth in different ways: we are "essentially" the same and only "inessentially" different.' This strategy, which over-generously permits the speaker to assume authority for identifying what is, and what is not, essential, tends to produce generalised truth claims and to avoid dogmatic forms that are particular to traditions. Both strategies preserve the binary shape of judgement. Where I affirm X and you affirm Y, an agreement can be forged where we affirm Z.

SR and RE offer alternatives to strategies of agreement. They furnish strategies for long-term disagreement. Instead of identifying the problem as one of substance, namely my affirmation of X versus your affirmation of Y, it identifies the problem as one of form. It is the binary shape that provokes conflict: I am right and you are wrong. In a binary shape, it is a problem that what I affirm you deny and that what is axiomatic for you is hypothetical for me. In a triadic shape, it is not a problem: it is merely a fact. Instead of confronting a triadic problem with a binary solution, it confronts a binary problem with a triadic solution. Instead of replacing the 'for me' and the 'for you' with a 'for us', it preserves the 'for me' and the 'for you' structure. A binary form assigns a value to a variable. A triadic form describes how, or rather names for whom, a value is assigned to a variable.

This produces some significant changes to the form judgements take.

Consider the binary form: 'X is true; Not-X is false.'

A triadic form is quite different: 'I affirm X; you deny X.'

Consider another binary form: 'X is axiomatic; Y is hypothetical.'

The triadic form includes qualifications:

'X is axiomatic for me but hypothetical for you.
Y is hypothetical for me but axiomatic for you.'

Truth claims do not disappear in triadic forms. They are preserved but qualified:

'I affirm "X is true"; you deny "X is true".'

It is worth considering the problematic claim: 'X is true for me but false for you'.

This last claim is confused. A binary claim assigns a value to a variable. A triadic claim describes for whom a value is assigned to a variable. The problematic claim assigns a value (indeed two contrary values) to a variable; it does not properly describe for whom (or how) a value is assigned to a variable. That is not the main problem, however. The deeper problem is that it misuses the word 'true'. X is either true or not true. A triadic form does not modify the assigning of a value to a variable. Triadic forms do not adjudicate truth claims at all. A triadic form preserves that act of assigning without modification. It adds a description: it specifies who assigns the value to the variable.

SR and RE are specialised forms of discourse which deal in a disciplined way in triadic forms. They avoid claims about what is 'essential' and 'inessential'. They also avoid, in an interesting way, 'we' or 'for us' claims. SR and RE tend not to seek common ground in the face of difference. Instead they tend to produce forms of thought which describe difference in ways that preserve long-term disagreements.

This might appear a rather meagre benefit. After all, it is no great shock to those engaged in ecumenical dialogue to discover that Catholics affirm, but Orthodox deny, the *filioque*. Likewise it is no great surprise to those engaged in inter-faith encounter to learn that Muslims deny, but Christians affirm, the divinity of Jesus.

There are two benefits. The first is that SR and RE tend not to pursue strategies for agreement, whether of the 'conservative' kind (through documents with approved forms of words) or the 'liberal' (which aggressively identify a common 'essential' core and treat differences as 'inessential'). Instead they pursue strategies for long-term disagreement, in which binary claims are preserved in triadic forms. The second is that the triadic forms tend to stimulate new investigations. The claim 'I am right and you are wrong' stimulates a rather limited investigation. I seek to demonstrate my rightness and your wrongness. The criteria for judging my rightness and your wrongness will most likely be uniform. If I adopt a triadic form, 'I affirm, you deny' then this permits more sophisticated approaches. The binary form 'X is true or false' requires X to be univocal. The claim 'I affirm X; you deny X' normally indicates that X is univocal, but this is not necessarily so. I might mean something different by X from you. The case of the *filioque* is instructive. This appears to be a case in which Catholics affirm, but Orthodox deny, X. But as every student of theology knows, it is not straightforwardly true that what Catholics affirm, the Orthodox deny. Catholics

affirm something about God's love in affirming 'and the Son'. The Spirit here is an expression of a relation of love. The Orthodox affirm something about the Father's authority when they affirm 'from the Father'. They do not take themselves to be denying something about God's love when omitting 'and the Son'. Catholics and Orthodox are affirming different things when they include or omit the *filioque*. This is a commonplace in the study of theology. To say 'X is true or false' in this case is highly misleading. To say 'C affirm X; O deny X' is misleading if X is taken univocally. But the triadic form permits equivocation in a way the binary form does not. A failure to equivocate over the *filioque* is arguably a failure to understand Catholic and Orthodox doctrine. *Triadic forms stimulate investigation into equivocation.*

A Christian-Muslim conversation can clarify some further benefits of this way of proceeding. Take the claims 'Jesus is divine and human' and 'Muhammad is a prophet'. These are binary claims as they stand: they assign a value to a variable. They can be easily rendered in triadic forms:

Christians affirm 'Jesus is divine and human'.
Muslims deny 'Jesus is divine and human'.

This case is fairly straightforward.

Muslims affirm 'Muhammad is a prophet'.
Christians do not affirm 'Muhammad is a prophet'.

This case is more complex, because 'Muhammad is a prophet' is not a claim on which Christian doctrine typically takes a view. The two cases, about Jesus and about Muhammad, are thus not of the same kind. A further triadic clarification is needed.

It is axiomatic for Christians that Jesus is divine and human.
It is axiomatic for Muslims that Jesus is not divine and human.

It is axiomatic for Muslims that Muhammad is a prophet.
It is hypothetical for Christians that Muhammad is a prophet.

This triadic form does not stimulate investigation, for Muslims, into whether Jesus is divine: it shows that such investigation is not needed, because there is nothing introduced that might unsettle the axiom. But it does stimulate investigation, for

Christians, into whether Muhammad is a prophet. Such investigation is, in this case, unlikely to lead to a consensus in Christian theology, although it might provoke some interesting sermons. The prophethood of Muhammad is likely to remain a hypothetical matter. That suggests that it is unlikely to become an axiom for Christians that Muhammad is not a prophet. This has very significant benefits for inter-faith engagement. It is not possible to achieve the same level of sophistication with binary claims. Consider the following four:

Muhammad is a prophet.
Muhammad is not a prophet.
Muhammad may be a prophet.
Muhammad may not be a prophet.

The second and fourth claims are not innocuous for Muslims. Any Christian who utters them is assigning a value to a variable in a way that will make conversation prickly, to say the least. Sometimes such prickliness is appropriate or at least unavoidable. But in this case it is eminently avoidable. To say, 'it is hypothetical for Christians that Muhammad is a prophet' is to suspend the assigning of a value to a variable. It does not make any claim about Muhammad. The binary forms cannot avoid making such a claim, however optative its mood. The triadic form permits a theological investigation of a noticeably different kind.

An issue of trust underlies this difference. It will be difficult to sustain trust in conversation if it appears that a participant is not saying what he really believes. Many Muslims are taught, disastrously, that Christians deny that Muhammad is a prophet. This teaching is vague: it is not clear whether it is an empirical claim ('some Christians deny it') or a grammatical claim ('to be Christian is to deny it'). It is a dangerous teaching because it can insinuate the grammatical claim (which is false) by proving the empirical claim (which is true). If a Christian is asked a question in a binary form, 'Is Muhammad a prophet', any answer in a corresponding binary form is likely to be problematic. A Christian who affirms it may appear a liar; one who denies it is no friend; one who says 'He may be' is making the best of a bad binary job (and probably sounds a bit shifty). By contrast, a triadic form offers a rather different complexion: 'For Christians, this is a question that merits investigation'. This is obviously not a lie; it is not unfriendly; and it is not shifty. It keeps the conversation going, which is no small matter, and in such a way that the participants are likely to learn more about each other's theologies. Triadic forms may promote

peace, at the same time as they not only permit but require members of traditions to remain true to their traditions.

Positive and Negative Truth Claims

SR and RE are practices which tend to privilege positive truth claims and to be suspicious about negative ones. This might appear to be a sign of their lamentable wishy-washiness - an indication that they lack backbone in the face of difficult conversations. Perhaps participants are just too polite to speak plainly, and for this reason such practices just delay the inevitable and are best avoided. That is possible. But it may, more positively, be a consequence of attending to triadic forms. When judgements are offered in a binary form, an affirmation entails the denial of its negation. 'Jesus is divine and human' entails denying 'Jesus is not divine and human'. This case is straightforward. When judgements are offered in a triadic form, however, entailment works differently. 'Muslims affirm the prophethood of Muhammad' does not entail 'Christians deny the prophethood of Muhammad'. There is no entailment at all: triadic forms stimulate investigation rather than offering *a priori* judgements. 'Jews privilege law' does not entail 'Jews refuse grace'. There is no entailment; there is only a possible investigation into Jewish understandings of law and grace.

This latter case is worth considering further. The Council of Trent articulates its canons on justification in a properly binary fashion.

> Canon I. If any one says that man may be justified before God by his own works, whether done through the teaching of human nature, or that of the law, without the grace of God through Jesus Christ; let him be anathema.

This is properly binary because its function is to regulate theological claims; it quite properly assigns a value. Its explicit task is to clarify Catholic doctrine in the face of Protestant challenges. The first canon is interesting, in this regard, because it would be hard to find a Catholic or a Protestant who might contradict it. The important point is that claims made in such a binary fashion, such as this canon, make no claims about what people believe. This Catholic canon makes no claims about Protestants or indeed about Jews. Those who drafted it certainly intended that Jews be anathema. They were doubtless certain that Jews refused the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Yet the canon itself makes no such claim: it is not a statement about what Jews do or

do not believe. The canon can be cast in a triadic form: For Catholics it is axiomatic that if any one... No further claims are entailed by it.

The problematic claim 'Jews say a man may be justified...without the grace of God through Jesus Christ' has a triadic form: it specifies for whom a statement holds true. This claim, however, is not entailed by the canon expressed in binary form. To cast that canon in triadic form can only yield a claim about what Catholics believe, because it is a Catholic canon. The only canon that could be cast in a triadic form to express a claim about what Jews believe would be a Jewish canon. A Catholic canon that said, God forbid, 'Jews say a man may be justified...without the grace of God through Jesus Christ' still has a binary form. It can be cast triadically, but this will be informative in a rather different way: 'For Catholics it is axiomatic that Jews say a man may be justified... without the grace of God through Jesus Christ.' One is still unable to generate a triadic claim about Jewish belief: it can only produce a binary claim about Jews and a triadic claim about Catholics. Other essays in this journal issue, especially those by David Ford and Paul Murray, have drawn attention to the ways in which documents from the Second Vatican Council contrast with, if not contradict, the claims of previous documents, including those of the Council of Trent. It would be a travesty to attempt to generate triadic claims about contemporary Catholicism on the basis of those older documents. But my deeper point is that even those older documents offer resources for inter-faith and ecumenical encounter when one is equipped with intellectual tools relating to binary and triadic forms.

It is in this sense that SR and RE are reserved about negative claims. By negative I mean the identification of some shortcoming or deficiency. Triadic forms are typically generated by taking binary forms and specifying for whom the claims hold true or false. This requires a statement made by someone; the triadic form specifies that someone. *Triadic forms that are not produced in this way are suspect for SR and RE.* Catholic claims about Protestants have a binary form; Christian claims about Muslims have a binary form: they assign a value to a variable. Catholic claims about what Protestants believe admittedly have a triadic form. But it is crucial how this is generated. If it is produced from a Protestant claim, it has the character of reported speech, and is likely to command Protestant assent: 'Yes, we do believe that'. But these are likely to be positive claims: 'Only by faith.... only by scripture...' It is easy enough to produce negative claims, of the kind 'Protestants have an inadequate account of sacraments'. But this has a binary form. A triadic form is also relatively easy to produce: 'It is axiomatic for Protestants that X'. This will require some prior investigation, for sure. But it is a positive claim, not a negative one. Even the claim

'It is axiomatic for Protestants that not-X' is a positive claim in this sense. The attempt to produce, in a triadic form, a negative claim about another tradition, in the sense of specifying its deficiencies, is much more difficult. It is difficult to identify deficiencies in Jewish thinking, by producing triadic claims about what Jews believe about grace, without a great deal of investigation into Jewish claims about grace. This is rather rare.

Typically, Christian statements about Jewish belief will turn out to be statements of Christian belief. They are thus informative, but perhaps not in the way that those who make them intend. They are properly triadic. If they are produced by specifying the 'for whom' of a binary statement made by Jews they will tend to be positive. If they are produced by specifying the 'for whom' of a binary statement made by Christians, then their proper form will be 'Christians believe that Jews believe that...'. These may well be negative, in the sense specified above, but for practitioners of SR and RE, they will tend to be treated as guides to Christian rather than Jewish belief. It is for these reasons that SR and RE tend to privilege positive claims about other traditions: negative claims are easily produced but they are uninformative, or at least they are not informative in the way that those who utter them intend.

Three Grades of Long-Term Disagreement

SR and RE share a pragmatic repair of certain tendencies in modern philosophy. These tendencies have long been diagnosed and addressed in philosophy itself from the late eighteenth century onwards, but at a more popular level they are persistent and in the cases of inter-faith and ecumenical encounter they are damaging. This repair, in SR and RE, concerns the handling of doubt and certainty, a higher tolerance of provisionality, and a facility in handling triadic as well as binary forms. I want to end by elaborating three grades of long-term disagreement, focusing on the positive possibilities that accompany the pragmatic repair, in ascending order of sophistication.

The goals of SR and RE are not primarily those of agreement. They are practices which make deep reasonings public, and which foster understanding and collegiality in the face of enduring differences.[10] The possible forms of understanding and what

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[10] See Nicholas Adams 'Making Deep Reasonings Public' *Modern Theology*, June 2006, pp.385-401; Nicholas Adams 'Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics' in David Cheetham, Ulrich Winkler and Oddbjørn Leirvik (eds) *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp.59-78

Murray terms the 'call' of learning are multiple, however, and extend to qualities of engagement that have hitherto proven rather rare.

The first grade of engagement might be named simply 'claims'. In practices of engagement, this level is reached when a member of one tradition can rehearse the claims made by a member of another tradition. The Baptist minister who rehearses the contours of Catholic Eucharistic theology engages at this level. The Muslim who rehearses what Christians mean by 'I believe in one God' does the same. This is a significant raising of the level of discussion and mutual understanding between traditions; it has tended hitherto to be confined to those who have undergone formal study of a tradition other than one's own. One of the potential benefits of practices like SR and RE is that they enable participants to express this form of learning even when their expertise tends to lie (as it does for most theologians, most of the time) in their own traditions. It is no great surprise when a Christian scholar of rabbinical texts displays an understanding of Jewish interpretation of Genesis 22. When a Christian theologian shows such understanding, as a result of the experience of reading Genesis 22 with Jewish interpreters, something rather different has occurred. It is not just a display of learning; indeed it is a rather meagre and unreliable display because it is not rooted in thorough study of the relevant scholarship. It is a decidedly limited display of learning; but it is also an act of collegiality which expresses a changed relation between members of traditions. Part of the promise of SR and RE is their provision of occasions where members of one tradition learn to rehearse the claims of members of other traditions. As I suggested above, these will often be claims expressed quite properly in binary forms, which can then generate triadic forms in which various small-scale investigations can be launched.

The second grade of engagement might be named 'conflicts'. In practices like SR and RE, this level is reached when a member of one tradition can identify and rehearse disagreements within another tradition. A Catholic theologian who can rehearse disagreements within Reformed theology over the doctrine of election engages at this level. The Christian theologian who can rehearse rival accounts of Tawhid in medieval Islamic thought does the same. This is obviously a deeper and more sophisticated form of engagement, and it is also rather riskier. Forms of inter-faith and ecumenical engagement sometimes generate a temporary unity within denominations, for example, especially when there are more fundamental differences with other traditions in view. For a member of such another tradition to disrupt this temporary unity, by reintroducing the conflicts that have been suspended, can prove surprising and unsettling. It also deepens engagements in various ways. To know

another tradition's conflicts is to be able to identify nuances that might permit more fruitful forms of collegiality. Engagements between Christians and Muslims which focus on the oneness of God have a different character if the Muslim participants are familiar with internal Christian conflicts over the Trinity and if the Christian participants are able to rehearse different and perhaps rival strands in the medieval Islamic traditions. Again this is a commonplace in scholarly discussions between experts. The promise of SR and RE is to introduce conversation at this level of sophistication between those whose primary focus of scholarship is their own tradition.

The third grade of engagement might be named 'obscurities'. Each tradition has its settled habits of speech and action, the beaten paths through familiar territory and the deep grammars on which one draws to negotiate the strange and the new. But each tradition also has its blind spots: those areas of expression where language is stretched to breaking point, zones of experimentation, paradox and wilful self-contradiction. These are found in the mystical traditions, in negative theology, in the more speculative regions of philosophy, in the areas of theology that, in those traditions who practise or have practised censorship, are considered too dangerous for popular teaching. Areas of obscurity show up where experience contradicts the deep grammars, and where mutating social forms stimulate descriptions that extend beyond the reach of settled categories. In these cases certain voices of authority may insist all the more strongly on the familiar categories, and refuse to acknowledge any reality that cannot be cast in the old language; but in the long run this rarely proves satisfactory. Languages change, in spite of those who refuse to let them. The latter turn out not to be conservatives but dangerous innovators who speak undead words, uttering incantations strangely frozen in a state of arrested development. At the same time human wickedness has shown itself agile and adaptable down the ages and it is often the deep grammars and the settled categories of religious traditions that act as a brake on their wild and destructive adventures. It is a matter of obscurity whether a tradition is facing a new and strange expression of the good or yet another cunning face of human sin. Theological debates over political forms, sexual practices, and medical interventions are often marked by conflicts between deep grammars and new words, and by categories being stretched and shrunk as they are pressed into unfamiliar use. The third grade of engagement is reached when a member of one tradition is able to identify and rehearse the obscurities that mark another tradition. This is not a simple matter of rehearsing a tradition's claims, nor even of tracing the course of its conflicts. It is to give voice to its obscure utterances, to participate as a stranger in its attempts to say the unsayable. This is an experience found most

commonly in literary historians who learn to inhabit the poetry of the past. It is as yet a largely untapped potential of SR and RE: mutual engagements between the mystical traditions are nonetheless on the horizon and it will be interesting to see how they develop.

In conclusion, the philosophical shapes displayed in SR and RE have a reparative character, at least initially, as they work to re-tool a new generation of ecumenical and inter-faith practitioners. Old habits of foundationalist method and a leaden pursuit of neutral ground pose deep problems for encounter between traditions, and SR and RE offer better pragmatic models to facilitate engagement. Those philosophical shapes, which foster a facility in handling binary and triadic forms, harbour other more-than-reparative possibilities, however. They hold out a range of new modes of interaction, including the three grades of engagement elaborated here. Time will tell how generative they prove to be as the world's religious traditions learn new ways of living with their long-term disagreements.