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Scriptural Reasoning:
Response to Professor David F. Ford and Professor You Bin

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Abstract: This is a response to professor David Ford and professor You Bin on Scriptural Reasoning. After a brief review, it includes the following parts: Globalization, Future prospects of SR in China, and General societal value of SR. Finally, she considers how to put theory into practice as the most important challenge.

Key Words: David Ford; Scriptural Reasoning; China; Globalization; from theory to practice

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To begin with, I want to thank professor Miikka Ruokanenwho invited me to the steering group of the Academy of Finland-funded research project on "The Impact of Religious Values on Chinese Social Life", and subsequently to this seminar where I have the honour of commenting on the most fascinating papers on Scriptural Reasoning by professor David Ford and professor You Pin. What helped me to put these papers into perspective was an article on "Scriptural Reasoning as a Method of Interreligious Dialogue in China", sent to me by Professor Ruokanen in advance. Thank you for that as well.

This article was very helpful, especially, when taking into consideration that I am not a specialist on SR. I am really out of my depth here. I am not a theologian, and hence not working in the field of Systematic Theology or Biblical studies, but rather I approach religion form a sociological perspective. Hence, my comments below are of someone looking at SR as an outsider, whose scholarly background is in the Study of Religions and whose research has focused mainly on Muslims in Europe. Concerning China, I have taught for three decades courses on world religions and in relation to these courses have also covered the Chinese religious situation, which is naturally very complex. China has a long history and it is not all that easy to comprehend all the changes that have taken place there over time. So, I have familiarized myself to some extent with China but am not a specialist in anyway. I need to say that my interest in China has also been kept alive by a decade's long collaboration with Dr. Paulos Huang, who is a docent of the University of Helsinki.

Concerning research, my interests mainly lie in societal issues where I have come to see that all human interaction involves, in one way or another, the question of power. Hence, I was really happy when reading the above-mentioned article on SR in China, where it is stated that SR, as interreligious

dialogue,aims at enhancing inclusivity,equality and democratic discussion as well as shaping a good society and the promotion of civil society. At the same time,we all know that these lofty aims are not easily achieved,in particular,when social structures are marked by a rigid hierarchy and strong authority. I suppose this is a challenge that SR has to face in different parts of the world,including China,which is nicely presented in professor Ford's and Yo Pin's papers.

In sum,SR is something new to me and I have enjoyed immensely reading these papers. I will not comment on professor Ford's and professor You Pin's papers individually but will focus on the questions about the future prospects of SR in China,which are covered in both of these papers. Finally,I will highlight what in my opinion is the societal value SR in general.

In brief

Inbrief,Professor Ford explains in his paper the key ingredients of SR,and ponders why SR gives rise to "surprises". Finally,he lists some hopes for SR in China. Professor You Pin,based on his research,describes,first,the reception of SR in China and its development by Chinese scholars; second,he outlines ten month's experimental practice of SP in Minzu University;and,third,discusses the prospects of SR in China. In his paper,he very succinctly writes about the contours in history of Chinese religions and how there has been an impact on Chinese religiosity from outside for centuries. As I said earlier,I have no time to go in detail into these papers,which include so many fascinating ideas that one could discuss. Both of the papers conclude with a discussion about the future of SR in China and that is where I will focus and will summarize the findings of these papers in a form of questions.

Globalization

First,some general observations. Reading Professor You Pin's paper one realizes very clearly that we live and have always lived in a global world,even though globalization might be different now than what it was in the past. In history,people and ideas travelled along the commercial routes such the Silk Road,which stretched from China to the Mediterranean.

What is also impressive in China,for someone coming from Finland,is the religious pluralism that has marked its society from the past to this day. In Finland,we like to think that our society is very homogenous. Of course,this image has in recent decades been very much challenged,but still, when taking into consideration the history,the size of the country and the size of the population, Finland and China could not be more different. In trying to understand religiosity in China,one is faced with daunting rich historical traditions and vast amount of texts that have been produced by philosophers during the centuries.

With respect to globalization,every time has its own challenges and SR seeks to give an answer to the challenges in its own way. There is and has always been interaction between religious traditions. In this respect,it is very interesting to read about SR that it started in the UK and the USA but has spread to other parts of the world,including China. Professor Ford gives a long list of

places where SR has been done and it is amazing that it has spread so widely in a reasonably short span of time. SR is a global phenomenon. I suppose in time the experience of SR in China, and also in other Asian countries such as India, will have some bearing on how SR is understood and undertaken in the countries where it oroginated, and something new can grow out this global interaction.

If you look at religions in todays's world, interaction beween religions takes many forms—— both peaceful and violent. What we mainly hear in the media is about terrorism and very negative aspects of religions. In this respect, SR highlights something positive that is taking place in the interaction between religions. It gives you some hope that religions have something good to offer to this world, something peaceful in a violent world. It gives a model for peaceful interaction between religions of the world, which is very important.

Future prospects of SR in China?

Next, I will move to some questions whereby I will summarize the discussion about the future and prospects of SR in China that I have elicited from professor Ford's and professor You pin's papers. However, these questions can be read also n relation to SR in general.

• How to promote the practice and commitment of religious communities at various levels in SR?

This is a question that is addressed in both of the papers in question. Concerning commitment in SR, I can see that it must be a real challenge, in the hectic world in which we live, to find people with enough motivation to give their time and have enough patience to take part in a process that is vert time-consuming, and, where you not only express your own ideas but also learn to listen to others who come from a very different religious backgrounds. Professor You Pin says in his paper that SR is mainly undertaken by academics in China, but how to involve people without academic background and with a very different level of expertise in religious matters is another challenge related to commitment. After all, religious communities are very heterogenous. How is SR able to overcome differences——not only between religious traditions-but also within a tradition? How is it possible to make people to see the value of the kind of interaction involved in SR? Huge work is being done in SR and it is admirable if these kind of challenges can be overcome.

• How to incorporate SR in different educational settings and to use it as an inspiration for the interpretation of religious texts?

• How to enhance research on SR in general and to use it in the study of Chinese religions in particular?

Professor You Pin discusses these questions in relation to Biblical studies. I can understand that, by means of SR, one can gain new theological insights when one is also open to the interpretations of those who represent religious tradition other than one's own. At its best, it can give new horizons for the interpretation of the text.

It just came to mind that utilizes SR in teaching world religions might also be useful. SR could be used in order to look at how representatives of different religions actually interact, what kind of discussions and issues come up, what kind of texts people want to read and what is important about

these texts for each religion.

• How SR can improve social life and contribute to a healthily diverse (civil) society with "multiple religious belongings"?

This is a key issue at the moment. We live in a diverse society. Hence, the question as to how SR can enhance the functioning of civil society is of utmost importance. When reading about the research and survey of SR undertaken by professor You Bin and Miikka Ruokanen in China, what came to my mind was research that I am doing myself at the moment about the interaction between Abrahamic religions in Finland. This interaction is like a network. We live in a world of networks and there are many kinds of networks nowadays around religious issues. The main idea in a network is that it is horizontal, it is democratic and people taking part in it are equal. That is the basic idea of a network. But if you look at a network carefully, soon you will start to see it is not that simple. One of the basic problems lies in the fact that, when we are in interaction with other people, we carry with us our economic, social and educational background. We can aim at being equal but it ls hard to be equal in a world that is not equal, and in a society that is not equal. It becomes a real challenge how to put into practice the idea that whether you are a scholar who knows a lot or an ordinary practicing person with limited theological knowledge, whether you have education or you don't, whether you are wealthy or not, that everybody in the interaction is on the same footing. I suppose, these fairly simple observation are also at the heart of SR when it is aiming at constructing a healthy society with the acknowledgement that there are many ways to be religious, as mentioned in the above list of questions.

• How can SR contribute to solve global environmental crises?

I must say that this questions, discussed in professor Ford's paper, took me by surprise-although, looking at today's world - it should not have done so. After all, we are facing daunting environmental crises, which are more and more taken into consideration also in fields such as business that are not traditionally interested in environmental matters. For example, one can mention the University of Helsinki, which at present is revising its curricula and aims at including a course on environmental issues for all students, irrespective of their faculty and subject of their studies.

Representatives of different religions around the world have come together to discuss human rights andworld peace but now it is the environment that is on the top of the list of priorities, globally, and, it is important for SR to take heed of this, as noted by professor Ford.

General societal value of SR

Finally, I will look at a general societal value that I see in SR. First, SR, simply, brings together people who would not otherwise interact, and this is exactly what we need in today's world that is fraught with all kind of conflicts.

Second, SR teaches tolerance for difference with respect to religion. I was very happy to read about this emphasis, discussed in professor Ford's paper. Perhaps, too often religions are associated with strong truth claims and consequently with intolerance of different views and ways of life. If SR can help to build bridges between people who do not necessarily see eye to eye, it can be an important

player in enhancing world peace.

What I found very refreshing about SR is the exact idea that in the interaction of religions you do not start with universal claims that all religions can share but that you allow space for differences and in actual fact take that as a starting point. In SR, you start with particular traditions and their wisdom and you bring that wisdom together. That is something special about SR, and it fits well to this post-modern global age where the so-called big narratives do not work anymore. People are very diverse and live in different realities. If I understand right, in SR you are not trying to deny this but simply acknowledge it and try to make use of it.

Third, SR helps to address topical issues of civil society, shows the (global) relevance of religion in the contemporary world and enhances our understanding of what religion is about (at its best).

The final challenge in SR, as in any enterprise with idealistic aims, is, how to put theory into practice. In SR, as in any other context of human interaction, this is one of the fundamental questions, as for example the challenge of commitment discussed above. To me, SR does seem a bit like some sort of utopia but at the same time it can be and it is done in practice. I suppose, what we can all agree on is that creating something new is never easy and takes time.

Thank you!

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