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The potential of interreligious dialogue in China and globally; the continuation of Scriptural Reasoning in China^[1]

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Abstract: This article includes the following parts: 1) Surprises in Study Sessions; 2) Further Surprises: The Spread Globally, into Other Spheres of Society, to Other Religions; 3) Some Lessons for the Future; and 4) Some Hopes for Scriptural Reasoning in China. 5) At last, there is an Appendix “Foreword for Peter Ochs’ Religion without Violence, Teaching and Practicing Scriptural Reasoning (Cascade Books, Eugene OR, 2019)” by David F. Ford.

Key Words: Scriptural Reasoning; The Spread Globally; some lessons for the future; some hope for SR in China; Peter Ochs

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‘Surprising’ is a word that often occurs in relation to Scriptural Reasoning, as regards not only the unexpected things that happen in conversations around texts but also other aspects, such as its spread beyond the academy and around the world, its ability to enrich and deepen interreligious engagement, and its generative capacity in diverse contexts. This paper begins by inquiring into the reasons for such surprises, drawing some conclusions about key ingredients in Scriptural Reasoning. This leads into expressing some hopes for Scriptural Reasoning in China.

[1] This was presented in WORKSHOP of the international research project on “The Impact of Religious Values on Chinese Social Life” at University of Helsinki, funded by the Academy of Finland. * Time: Tuesday 20 August to Wednesday 21 August 2019, 14:00–17:00. * Place: Cultural Centre Sofia in Helsinki. The Fourth session (The potential of interreligious dialogue in China and globally; the continuation of Scriptural Reasoning in China) was chaired by Paulos Huang, presentations were by Prof. David Ford (presentation, 20 min) and Prof. You Bin (presentation, 20 min), responded by Prof. Tuula Sakaranaho (University of Helsinki, 15 min) and Prof. Mika Vähäkangas (University of Lund, Sweden, 15 min). Discussion (30 min) chaired by Paulos Huang. Closing remarks by Prof. Miikka Ruokanen.

Surprises in Study Sessions

I begin with the surprises that happen in Scriptural Reasoning sessions, the character of which is well described in Professor You Bin's paper, 'Scriptural Reasoning in China'. I remember, in the first years of Scriptural Reasoning in the early 1990s, as I took part in small groups of Jews, Christians and Muslims intensively discussing their scriptures on a particular theme, that I sometimes thought: probably never before in world history have these three particular texts been read together by members of each of the three traditions in a context that is not dominated by one of the traditions, and with an ethos of mutual respect.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that this engagement between diverse texts and their diverse readers results in surprising insights, new understanding, and fresh appreciation of both the texts one is most familiar with and the texts that are less familiar. Just limiting remarks for now to the Abrahamic traditions, consider, first, what was present on the table in those early sessions: extracts from three scriptures (and, in some cases, relevant extracts from commentaries on those scriptures, from Talmud, from hadith and tafsir, and from church teachings), each of which is broad and deep in meaning, and has been the subject of interpretation century after century and around the world today, now relating to over three billion of the world's people. For these streams of meaning to come together and interact, after centuries during which they mostly failed to interact, or only did so polemically in the context of often bitter conflicts; this is almost certain to produce new readings and surprising angles of interpretation. The horizon of each text is being brought into contact with new horizons, and this leads to new questions, and new comparisons and contrasts, opening up fresh possibilities of understanding.

Next, consider who were around the table. We were mostly academics with university posts, and came from several disciplines—text scholarship in Judaism, Christianity and Islam; theology; philosophy of various schools of thought, ranging through C. S. Peirce, Kant, Hegel, Ricoeur, Levinas, Cohen, Al Ghazzali, and more; social sciences; Greek and Latin classics; medical ethics; computer science; and more. Each person around the table approached these short text extracts with a considerable 'internal library' (a phrase introduced by the Muslim scholar, Dr Aref Ali Nayed, who later founded Kalam Research and Media), and it was fascinating to listen to people drawing on sources unknown to others, making new analogies and comparisons, offering linguistic, historical and hermeneutical insights, and experimenting with ideas. How could such diverse sources and participants fail to produce an unprecedented interplay?

Yet there was even more diversity, both within each of the religious traditions (for example, Orthodox as well as other Jews, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Catholic and Protestant Christians) and also in the contexts within which each participant was living and thinking. All were in some sense part of 'modernity', though with a strong sense that modernity was giving way to something hard to describe or name (post-modernity? late modernity? chastened modernity? post-secular modernity?) and that religion, which was newly prominent in public life in many parts of the world, was an important part of this transition. Even in Western academic institutions, many of which represented strong 'secularist' assumptions, it was being realized that, whatever one's own position, religion had

to be taken seriously as a formative element in our world. There were crude empirical reasons for this (such as over 80% of the world's population being directly related to some religious tradition), sharp practical reasons (the acute danger that some forms of religion posed, as well as the major contribution to human welfare—education, health, social care, and more—being made by religions in many parts of the world), cultural reasons (so much music, art, architecture, literature and the full range of the humanities), and intellectual reasons (the slow realization that there were Jews, Christians, and Muslims who were at least as educated and sophisticated in the arts, humanities and sciences as any secular people, and that their intelligent faith and religious ideas deserved to be respected and explored). In this context, where some Western universities were opening up in new ways to an academic engagement with the religions, Scriptural Reasoning was a welcome 'space' for intensive conversation that allowed for new exchanges and interactions. It also gave many academics a place of freedom from the limitations of their own discipline, enabling them to return to it with fresh ideas, perspectives, methods and dialogue partners.

Further Surprises: The Spread Globally, into Other Spheres of Society, to Other Religions

This was certainly a lively, often exciting and inspiring, space to inhabit, and it was a complete surprise to me—I had never experienced anything like it before. But there were more surprises in store—and they have continued to occur. The most obvious was the geographical spread. The greatest surprise has been what has happened in China, about which I will soon say more. But, having begun in North America and UK, it has spread further there, and also elsewhere. I have myself taken part in Scriptural Reasoning in Ireland, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Jordan, Oman, Israel, India, and China, but it has also been happening in many other countries, such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Pakistan, Chile, Singapore, Russia, and Australia.

Yet another unexpected development was its spread beyond academic and educational contexts into local congregations of various religions, and into hospitals, prisons, business settings, leadership programmes, civil society engagements, and a number of situations of division and conflict. It has proved helpful in efforts at peace and reconciliation in several contexts, and has led to the founding of a new organisation, the Rose Castle Foundation, which is based in a castle in Cumbria in the UK, that is now being renovated, and is dedicated to reconciliation, interfaith engagement, religious literacy, and environmental conservation. The Director of the Rose Castle Foundation, Sarah Snyder, is a leading practitioner of Scriptural Reasoning, and the castle acts as a hub for Scriptural Reasoning, hosting the www.scripturalreasoning.org website.

But perhaps the most important spread has been to other religions beyond the Abrahamic. This began in China, where, as Professor You Bin's paper described, Scriptural Reasoning has been developed to include Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, besides Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I will return to this, but need to note at this point the beginnings of the involvement of Hinduism and Sikhism. This is happening in India at DSVV University (Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya) in Haridwar. When I visited it in February and took part in Scriptural Reasoning with members of staff

and students, we studied together in a building now designated for Scriptural Reasoning. The hope is that the practice will involve Indian Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists as well as Hindus, and there are plans for this to happen first through leadership courses for those in leadership positions in universities, business, and religious communities.

Some Lessons for the Future

Before concentrating on China, I want to try to distil out of the first quarter century of Scriptural Reasoning some lessons for the future that seem to me to be fairly general. In other words, I consider these lessons are likely to be worth taking seriously wherever Scriptural Reasoning happens, if the practice is to be recognisably in line with what has been happening so far. I am taking for granted the basic description of Scriptural Reasoning given by Professor You Bin, and also the rules that spring from the experience of what works best. I offer three lessons.

1. Scriptural Reasoning is first of all a practice, and the most important thing is for groups to do it.

Academics love to begin by examining assumptions and presuppositions, sharing ideas, deciding on methods and criteria, setting goals, seeking outcomes, and so on. In other spheres of life there are often very practical agendas. None of these are bad, but in Scriptural Reasoning the first essential is to study specific texts together in groups. Given the significance of the texts, this is worth doing for its own sake—as Jews say, *l'shma*. Love of the practice of textual interpretation in conversation with others is fundamental. A Scriptural Reasoning session has some similarities with a liturgy, which makes deep sense to participants, but may not have any obvious use.

2. The desire for new meaning, a thirst to make sense of texts for oneself and to learn from how others make sense of them, is the main subjective orientation both in individuals and in the group.

This desire is at the heart of good learning, and is often evident in fruitful Scriptural Reasoning sessions in the way phrases such as ‘I wonder...’, ‘Perhaps...’, ‘Might this be understood as...?’, ‘What if you read this text in the light of that one?’, ‘What I do not understand is...’. It is a questioning humility before the text, combined with a willingness to follow the questions where they lead, and to explore alternative meanings.

3. Scriptural Reasoning is long term, just as the texts studied have long histories of interpretation, and it requires long term commitment in order to go deeper.

It was good to see that the pilot project described by Professor You Bin had ten three-hour sessions in the course of a year. That was clearly enough to enable the practice to be fruitful in various ways. But it needs to be followed through with even longer term commitments. I remember a key event in the history of Scriptural Reasoning when, at the annual gathering in the University of Cambridge, Professor Laurie Zoloth (now a professor of medical ethics in the University of Chicago) challenged the international group present to be committed to meet twice a year for at least the next three years for residential meetings. Not all could commit, but many did, and it transformed the group’s relationships and its practice. Good study of rich texts is not just about reading; it is about re-reading again and again and again, and listening and responding to other readings again and again, and that takes time. This slowness is counter-cultural in many academic and other settings. Perhaps

the 5000-year Chinese horizon on civilisation will help Chinese Scriptural Reasoning to have the required patience and long-term perspective needed. Without such patience one cannot fathom the depths that these texts open up.

I am tempted to draw further lessons, of which there have been many, but I stop here for two reasons.

First, I do think those are the essential ones, distilled into three imperatives:

Do it for its own sake! Seek new meaning! Commit long term! If those are obeyed (and assuming Professor You Bin's guidelines are taken seriously), then I am confident that worthwhile Scriptural Reasoning will result anywhere. It is likely to be highly diverse in different settings, between different groups of religions, and responding to different constraints, but that diversity is actually desirable; there will be continuing surprises.

Second, I invite you to consider whether you from your experience would want to add to these essential lessons.

Some Hopes for Scriptural Reasoning in China

I am hesitant to give my views on the future of Scriptural Reasoning in China, having only done Scriptural Reasoning in China during two visits, in 2012 and 2018. But we have in Professor You Bin's paper an insider Chinese view of the future, which I have greatly appreciated, so I will risk an outsider's view, which I will express in the form of some hopes.

Obviously, my first hope is that there will be found in China more and more people who will commit to doing Scriptural Reasoning in groups patiently, year after year, leading to the discovery of new meaning, fresh understanding, and the sort of mutual relationships that Professor You Bin writes about. In this extraordinarily rich civilisation with its diverse religious and other traditions, it is clear that Scriptural Reasoning is already at home, and is in harmony with much that has gone on in the past in engagement between the traditions. (I am not an expert in Chinese history, but from what Professor You Bin and others say it seems that over the centuries there has been more interweaving and mutual learning among Chinese religious and philosophical traditions than has been the case between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.) Yet it also seems that Scriptural Reasoning is enabling something new too, and my hope is that there will be sufficient people to commit to sustaining this practice in the years ahead. The desire for meaning and the desire for meaningful relationships are two fundamental human needs, and Scriptural Reasoning can make a significant contribution to satisfying both.

My next hope is that Scriptural Reasoning can help to shape the way in which scriptures and religions are taught in Chinese universities, seminaries, and other educational settings. I recently wrote a Foreword (given below as an Appendix to this paper—there is some overlap between it and this paper) to what promises to be the most substantial book on Scriptural Reasoning so far, *Religion without Violence. Teaching and Practicing Scriptural Reasoning* by Peter Ochs.^[2] It is a fascinating, multi-dimensional book, but the element I want to emphasise now is its wisdom about

[2] Forthcoming, Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019.

teaching Scriptural Reasoning. Ochs has many years of experience of teaching it in many educational settings, and he shows why this educational approach is so valuable. This has implications for anyone who has responsibility for shaping courses and research projects in the area of religious and theological studies.

The mention of research leads to a third hope: that there will be many more research projects related to Scriptural Reasoning, such as this one.

My fourth hope relates to the title of this research project, *The Impact of Religious Values on Chinese Social Life*. I am a complete outsider here, so I say tentatively: simply having many groups practicing Scriptural Reasoning, whether within academic life or elsewhere (Professor You Bin suggests it be introduced into Chinese religious communities) will improve the quality of social life in ways that are hard to quantify. There is immense diversity in Chinese society and this practice is well-suited to enabling better communication, mutual understanding, and collaboration for good purposes. A healthily diverse society needs those in different traditions to be able to go deeper into their own traditions while at the same time engaging with the depths of others, and this is something to which Scriptural Reasoning can contribute.

My fifth and final hope goes beyond China, and looks at the expanding global role of China. If I were choosing just one global issue to which I hope Scriptural Reasoning might make some contribution in the coming decade that would be the environmental crisis. Governments, international organizations, the scientific community, business, and many others are now mobilising to face the most serious global problem we have ever known. The religions need to be part of this too, and to contribute from their depths of meaning and commitment. Some time ago I was in the University of Tübingen taking part in Scriptural Reasoning between Christian and Muslim students, in which texts relevant to the environment from both traditions were being explored. It was a deeply moving time, and as I spoke with students and professors I felt I was witnessing one of the main gifts of Scriptural Reasoning: in this space of quietly reading and interpreting rich texts together they were forming understanding, habits, and relationships that would enable them to think and work far better for the good of the environment, not only with each other but also with all sorts of others, religious and secular, who will need to combine if we are to have any chance of avoiding ecological disasters. Might it be that, in this massive challenge facing us all, this quiet practice of Scriptural Reasoning, within and beyond China, might make a small but valuable contribution to the common good of our world?

APPENDIX

Foreword for Peter Ochs' *Religion without Violence. Teaching and Practicing Scriptural Reasoning*
(Cascade Books, Eugene OR, 2019)

by David F. Ford

Scriptural Reasoning is an extraordinarily important practice. It has far-reaching implications, not only for each of the religious traditions that takes part in it, and for their engagements with each

other, but also for the educational and academic study of religions, for peacebuilding in religion-related divisions and conflicts, and for how the multi-religious and multi-secular modern world can understand itself and address some of its most profound problems. Peter Ochs is co-founder of Scriptural Reasoning, and its leading practitioner and thinker, and this is his major book on it. The book distils what he has learned through over twenty-five years of doing and teaching Scriptural Reasoning, as it has spread around the world and into many spheres of life. But, beyond that, Ochs now takes his thinking further, and also challenges readers to read, think, relate, and act in new ways. I have been longing for many years to see this book appear, and it has been worth the wait.

Why is Scriptural Reasoning so significant? As I reflect on this book, and also on my own involvement with Ochs in Scriptural Reasoning since it began, what strikes me most is the way it has combined various dimensions of meaning and practice.

Scriptural Reasoning has enabled the exploration of multiple depths.

There are the depths of my own Christian scriptures that have opened up as I have engaged in intensive study and conversation with Jews, Muslims, and scholars who may not identify with any tradition—and, later, also with Buddhists, Confucians, Daoists and Hindus, as I have travelled to China and India and taken part in developments of Scriptural Reasoning there.

At the same time, the depths of the scriptures of those other traditions have opened up in joint reading—and in ways that, in my experience, have not happened through individual study.

There has also been a depth of understanding and engagement with our shared world and with the problems and challenges that we face. Many of these issues cannot be satisfactorily addressed by one religion alone, and some appreciation of the deep meaning that others draw upon is vital to worthwhile conversation and collaboration.

There is also depth of disagreement. As Ochs makes clear, Scriptural Reasoning is not about arriving at consensus (though that may happen on some issues); rather it can do something essential to a pluralist world, which is to improve the quality of our disagreements.

Then there is the depth of relationship that Scriptural Reasoning can enable, and the warmth that can come from what Ochs imaginatively describes as ‘hearth to hearth’ engagement. Some of my closest friendships, within and beyond my own tradition, have been formed through year after year of Scriptural Reasoning. I often think that, if we are to have a healthily plural world, it needs to have such a pluralism of multiple depths that are in conversation with each other and, if possible, also in collaboration.

The ever-widening breadth of Scriptural Reasoning has also been striking. Three obvious aspects of this have been its extension beyond the Abrahamic faiths, especially in China and India; its spread beyond academic and educational contexts into local congregations of various religions, and into hospitals, prisons, business settings, leadership programmes, civil society engagements, and a number of situations of division and conflict; and its simultaneous geographical spread, not only in China and India but also notably in North America, the United Kingdom, continental Europe, Egypt, Pakistan, Oman, Chile, Israel, South Africa, Australia, Nigeria and Kenya. Through my involvement with the Rose Castle Foundation, which is based in the UK, hosts the www.scripturalreasoning.org website, and acts as a hub for Scriptural Reasoning, I see something of the growing international interest in the practice, and colleagues in other countries report similar interest.

There is also the long term character of Scriptural Reasoning. Many inter-faith practices and relationships lack staying power. One advantage of gathering around scriptures is that they are inexhaustibly rich and gripping, and can sustain year after year of joint study, just as each has already sustained centuries of study and discussion in its own tradition. Ochs' own long term involvement is matched by others who began the practice and by many more who have been taking part consistently over the years. The result is an ongoing, expanding community of readers who have the potential of moving beyond what Ochs calls 'formative SR' into other forms of the practice that he describes, and through these into long term relationships, 'partnerships of difference' (Nicholas Adams), that can develop beyond study and conversation around texts into collaborations, and even into what one might call covenantal commitments.

Besides the depth, breadth and length, what about the height? By this I mean the relationship to God, or the transcendent, or however a particular faith relates to ultimate reality. My own conviction is that Scriptural Reasoning is at its best when it is done 'for God's sake', or whatever the analogy of this might be in non-theistic traditions. I have been repeatedly amazed by the insights into prayer, worship, and the reality of God that have been inspired (sometimes through disagreement) by intensive conversation around texts with those who pray, worship and identify God or the transcendent differently to myself.

At least two more points need to be made about the significance of Scriptural Reasoning, both of which are evident in what Ochs writes.

The first is its relevance to Western civilization's modes of thinking, especially some of its dominant ways of knowing and reasoning. These are particularly evident in the modern university and its disciplines, but also in international relations, secular attitudes to religion, and a religion's self-understanding today. Ochs has a remarkable range of reference across several disciplines both in the humanities and sciences, showing how Scriptural Reasoning relates to them both positively and critically, and also has some fascinating thoughts on international relations and the ways religion has been understood, internally and externally, in recent centuries.

The second is the capacity of Scriptural Reasoning to spring surprises. The practice itself is surprising in the people, texts, and contexts it brings together. I have often thought during a session that perhaps never before in history have these particular passages been discussed together by members of the traditions whose scriptures are being studied. Laughter is often one result of juxtaposing texts, topics, languages and people, leading to all sorts of humorous misunderstandings or mistranslations, unusual angles, and acknowledgements of sheer oddness or mismatch. Ochs also shows how fruitful novelty can be generated in understanding, imagination and practice, with far-reaching implications not only for interfaith engagement but also for other spheres, ranging from how academic disciplines relate to each other and the wider society to the ways conflicts of many sorts can be analyzed, diagnosed and healed.

This is the first book to combine engagement with all those features of Scriptural Reasoning, and it also adds yet another element, the relationship with Textual Reasoning. Ochs was one of the co-founders of Textual Reasoning too, and it was by sitting in on the extraordinarily lively, learned and argumentative meetings of that group in the early 1990s that I and others were attracted into co-founding Scriptural Reasoning with some of its members. Ochs in this book gives the first account of

how to integrate, in educational and other contexts, what has been learned from both practices, one focused mainly on how a scripture is read within its own tradition, the other on reading scriptures of more than one religion side by side with members of those traditions.

From within Christianity, I have found that one of the most helpful ways of understanding both Textual Reasoning and Scriptural Reasoning is by analogy with the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (Vatican II, 1962-65), which was one of the most important religious events of the twentieth century. The parallel was originally suggested by George Lindbeck, who was a Lutheran observer at Vatican II. He identified a threefold dynamic of *ressourcement*, *aggiornamento* and *conversazione*. *Ressourcement* is the return to sources, centred on rereading classic texts in relation to the present. *Aggiornamento* is engaging with modernity, and discerning, critically and constructively, how to respond to its challenges. *Conversazione* is the practice of conversation across differences, both internal to one's own community and across those with other communities. The wisdom of these three dynamics, and their analogous relevance to any religious or other community that is rooted in the past and wants a healthy future, has in my experience been generally acknowledged among Scriptural Reasoners, and Scriptural Reasoning has been found to be a fruitful way of bringing the three together.

I conclude with some words for readers of this book. It is a book in which, as the saying goes, mice can paddle and elephants can swim. No readers need feel it is not for them, but I hope it might be helpful to make some suggestions about how it might be approached by a range of readers.

The most basic thing to grasp is that Scriptural Reasoning is, first and foremost, a practice. As Ochs says, practice has been primary, and the apprenticeship of taking part in it has been the best way to understand it; then has come reflection and theory, which in turn have influenced practice, leading into further reflection, and so on. Even readers who have never practiced Scriptural Reasoning will probably have analogous experience of reading and discussing rich texts with others. This will be sufficient to appreciate a good deal of what Ochs writes and to follow its implications.

Yet it is undoubtedly an advantage to be able to read this book after having practiced it, especially in the apprenticeship that Ochs calls 'Formational Scriptural Reasoning'. What Ochs writes will obviously make more sense and be of more value to those involved in Scriptural Reasoning.

For practitioners who are new to Scriptural Reasoning, this book can give basic guidelines and concepts, encourage involvement in Formational Scriptural Reasoning, help in avoiding many pitfalls, and open up an horizon of its significance and potential.

For those who are more experienced, Ochs can enrich their reflection, challenge them in relevant- and sometimes very demanding-ways (whether they are ordinary members of religious communities, academics, teachers of Scriptural Reasoning, or peacebuilders), and help them navigate the complexities and depths that open up.

Yet none of the three groups-outsiders to Scriptural Reasoning, beginners, or experienced practitioners-need to feel discouraged if they fail to understand what Ochs sometimes calls the more 'technical' elements in this book, such as the theory of pragmatism or the passages expressed in logical symbols. These require quite a rare level of what might be seen as post-doctoral sophistication, and open up exciting pathways for the testing, refinement, extension and generalizing

of Scriptural Reasoning, but they are not essential to the main message of the book for many readers. To put it simply, readers should be willing to skip some difficult sections. But it will always be worthwhile to go back later (even a long time later) to wrestle with them.

Beyond all the above, the main guidance that I would give on how to approach this book is twofold.

First, recognize it as the most important distillation to date of knowledge and wisdom relating to Scriptural Reasoning, how to teach it, and what its implications are for both religion-related conflict and modern Western ways of knowing and reasoning. If you identify with a religious tradition, this book might enable wiser faith and wiser engagement with other faiths and the contemporary world. If you do not identify with a religious tradition, this book can enable wiser understanding of religion and faith, and perhaps also stimulate conversation and collaboration with religious people for the sake of the common good of our world.

Second, treat it a little like the scriptural texts it discusses. That will mean reading it not only individually but also in groups, ideally with Scriptural Reasoners from diverse religious traditions; exploring diverse interpretations for different contexts; helping to create around it a body of commentary that makes connections, both critical and constructive, with other rich texts and discourses; and being open to its passionate summons to wiser practices of reading, discussion, repair, compassion, and peace building.

中文题目：
宗教间对话在中国和全球化的潜力：经文辨读在中国

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提要：本文包括如下几个部分：1）学术研究中的惊喜；2）进一步的惊喜：经文辨读的全球化传播，进入到其他的社会领域和其他的宗教；3）针对未来的一些功课；和 4）经文辨读在中国的一些希望。5）附录：为彼得·欧克（Peter Ochs）的《没有暴力的宗教：经文辨读的教学和实践》（Cascade Books, Eugene OR, 2019）所写的序言”。

关键词：经文辨读；全球化传播；针对未来的一些功课；经文辨读在中国的一些希望；彼得·欧克