

Wales Ecumenical School of Theology

WEST theological monograph promotes interfaith dialogue

Charles Soper and [Peter Nicholson](#)

The WEST Theological Monograph Series has recently been extended by the publication of Roger Abbott's study *Sit on Our Hands, or Stand on Our Feet*.¹ The book is the final form of a doctoral dissertation written under supervision at the University of Wales Trinity St David and at WEST,² where the author now serves as a Research Supervisor.³ It is a work noteworthy for its rigour, depth and excoriating self-examination. At its core is the author's painstaking account of his own perplexity and bewilderment at being ill-equipped both theologically and practically to meet an intensely demanding situation after the 1989 air crash at Kegworth on the M1, near his own fellowship. He expresses this with candour: "I appeared to have 'lost the plot'".⁴ The thesis, whilst anchored by this experience, is a nuanced and deeply read attempt to recover his bearings and to beat a more general path for other pastoral carers facing similar horrors. The author's courage in confronting his own natural fears and doubts to minister to the needy is commendable, when others might have unworthily shrunk away. However, there is sadly much more to criticise than to commend, and as a work by a professed evangelical, it must also be regarded as one of serious disobedience, both of the author and of the institution he represents.

Roger Abbott has been an active participant in the Bradford Churches for Dialogue and Diversity,⁵ is a member of the ecumenical British and Irish Association of Practical Theology and the multi-faith College of Health Care Chaplains,⁶ interacts cooperatively with other ecumenical fora like the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom (IFNUK)⁷ and the UK Board of Healthcare Chaplaincy,⁸ and freely acknowledges his participation in ecumenical services of worship.⁹ We make these observations not only because organisations of this kind always operate on the basis of

¹ Roger Philip Abbott, *Sit on Our Hands, or Stand on Our Feet. Exploring a Practical Theology of Major Incident Response for the Evangelical Catholic Community in the UK* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013) (hereafter *SOOHSOOF*).

² The primary supervisor of this research was Dr Eryl Davies of WEST – *SOOHSOOF*, ix.

³ <http://www.webcitation.org/6Hk4iOoVj>

⁴ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 51.

⁵ *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 351 n. 165, 340 n. 118. The initiative's website is at www.bcdd.org.uk.

⁶ <http://uk.linkedin.com/pub/roger-abbott/27/321/190>; <http://www.biapt.org.uk/aims.shtml>; <http://www.healthcarechaplains.org/about/index.html>.

⁷ *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 333-335; "my local Council of Faiths" – p. 335 n. 103.

⁸ *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 336-337. The Board's website is at: <http://www.ukbhc.org.uk/>.

⁹ *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 87, 83 (at the latter service he avoided the clerical procession).

a “commitment to work ecumenically”,¹⁰ but also to give context to Abbott’s remarkable statement that pastoral care “has no proselytizing agenda”.¹¹ He supports this statement with the opinions of two other writers, who say that “proselytizing involves unworthy motives, unworthy methods, and an unworthy message to meet the desired ‘conversionist’ result” and is “vocationally unethical”, and by reference to the policy statement of the College of Health Care Chaplains of which he is a member, which defines proselytizing by health care chaplains as “spiritual abuse”.¹² Former generations of pastoral theologians had good grounds¹³ for taking a different view, and one can only dread the prospect of the UK’s evangelical pastorates being populated with WEST graduates schooled in this standard mantra of ecumenism.

Another alarming feature of the research is its emphasis on what it calls “practical theology” and its concurrent lack of a demonstrated biblical basis. Claiming that he is writing in a context “for which there are often no direct scriptural rules”,¹⁴ the author says that “Practical theology is notoriously short on definition [...]. It is often allied with the social and human sciences, and has been dominated by both liberal and postmodern constituencies, with little take-up by the evangelicals”.¹⁵ Instead of exploring this evangelical reluctance,¹⁶ he says that “It is the aspect of significant engagement with the practical realities of living prior to the interpretive processes of Scripture that is appealing about practical theology”, adding that “This key core aspect is enormously attractive to me as an evangelical researcher.”¹⁷ He goes on to explain that “Evangelicals should acknowledge the postliberal reminder that Scripture gives priority to living above knowing”¹⁸ and that “it is doubtful if a valid theology can be constructed prior to real engagement in the drama of doing the faith.”¹⁹ From this approach, Abbott goes on to construct the backbone of his research on the model provided by the liberal narrative philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, with which he expresses a strong sevenfold affinity.²⁰ “The genius of Ricoeur’s theory”, he concludes, “is that it approximates the

¹⁰ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 4 n. 7.

¹¹ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 9.

¹² *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 9-10 n. 30.

¹³ Acts 4:18-20, 1 Corinthians 9:16b, Ephesians 4:29c, Philippians 2:16a, Colossians 4:6, 1 Peter 3:15, Psalm 40:9b, Psalm 71:15a, Psalm 119:46, Proverbs 12:18b, Proverbs 15:4a, Proverbs 16:24, etc.

¹⁴ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 39.

¹⁵ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 34.

¹⁶ The author also makes a similar observation concerning the IFNUK: “among its many member bodies there is no concerted Evangelical representation”, and instead of explaining why this is so, adds that this is “an omission that seems theologically unnecessary” – *SOOHSOOF*, p. 335.

¹⁷ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 34.

¹⁸ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 37.

¹⁹ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 37.

²⁰ *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 46-50.

wisdom of a biblical approach”.²¹ Once again, one can only dread the prospect of the UK’s evangelical pastorates being filled with WEST graduates schooled in using Ricoeurian models to approximate the wisdom of a biblical approach.

In Chapter 10 of the book, entitled *Contribution—Ecumenical and Interfaith Friendship*, Roger Abbott goes on to develop this approach “to explore a practical theological model that has potential for supporting ecumenical and interfaith friendship”,²² and it is Abbott’s eager advocacy under this heading of meetings for what is termed Scriptural Reasoning that should raise the gravest concern. The concept of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) is an oxymoron. Firstly, the scriptures to which the author refers, when writing “Scripture interpreting Scripture, primarily in the plain text sense”,²³ include not only the inspired Biblical texts, but also the Qur’an, the Mishnah, Gemara, Rabbah Midrashim and Targumim, perhaps the Kabbalistic texts,²⁴ the Apocrypha, and of course the books of participating “non-Abrahamic” faiths.²⁵ Secondly, the reasoning or exegesis applied to these texts is governed by principles which can only emasculate Gospel work and blight the Spirit’s work of illumination, depriving us of the mind of Christ and leaving us to the vagaries of profane human speculation. One can only imagine at what stage the “convener” would politely cough and interrupt the Apostle Paul during his argumentation with pagans at Athens or his disputation with fellow rabbis at Rome to remind him of the need to respect “the cardinal rule of an egalitarian speech situation”, or to “intervene in the discussion to quiet a particularly strong voice”.²⁶ Philip, attending his Scriptural Reasoning session with the Ethiopian eunuch, would also have to be gently corrected to remember that our “hermeneutical openness to a multiplicity of meanings for scripture differs widely from a fundamentalist or literalist hermeneutics.”²⁷ In line with his non-proselytizing approach, Abbott says “the purpose of SR is not evangelistic”²⁸ but is “a forum for serious intertextual and intratextual dialogue in the pursuit of spiritual wisdom for living in a multifaith world”.²⁹ According to Abbott,

²¹ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 52.

²² *SOOHSOOF*, p. 309.

²³ *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 344-345.

²⁴ “SR is a practice of group reading of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” – *SOOHSOOF*, p. 344.

²⁵ “There is no particular reason why [SR] cannot be expanded to involve other religions and philosophies as well” – *SOOHSOOF*, p. 339. The author even thinks that SR might incorporate secularist participants from the NHS, social services or emergency planning (*SOOHSOOF*, p. 349). What scriptures would these participants bring to the discussion table? Dawkins, perhaps?

²⁶ Steven Kepnes, *A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning*:

<http://jsrforum.lib.virginia.edu/writings/KepHand.html>; see *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 314 n. 18, 342 n. 126, 343, 344 n. 135, 346 n. 147, 352, 353 n. 172.

²⁷ Kepnes, *Handbook*: <http://jsrforum.lib.virginia.edu/writings/KepHand.html>.

²⁸ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 347. Abbott’s concern in this chapter is not with “soteriological” (p. 309) or “salvific” (p. 318) issues.

²⁹ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 347.

“Claiming to possess the truth and proclaiming it is insufficient”,³⁰ and this kind of dialogue “is essential” because we have to face “the reality that objectivity in understanding and interpretation of truth are achievable only in dialogue with a Christian community (ecumenical dialogue) and with communities of others (interfaith)”.³¹ To put it plainly, we need interfaith dialogue of this kind “in order to understand the Christian revelation more deeply”.³² It is in this context that Abbott does finally attempt to furnish biblical grounds for his ideas, justifying the need for interfaith dialogue of this kind by reference to Romans 12:18, Hebrews 12:14a, 1 Peter 2:1, 1 Peter 2:17a,³³ Hebrews 13:2a³⁴ and the fact that God spoke to Israel and Judah “by the providential rise to prominence of her surrounding nations” (i.e. Philistia, Assyria, Egypt and the Chaldeans and Persians).³⁵ If a similar level of understanding is applied to the religious texts discussed at SR meetings, we do not expect much wisdom of any kind to emerge.³⁶

The rules of SR are a predictable series of hackneyed interfaith catchphrases, such as that “It is a basic assumption that each text is ‘taken as true’ but without attempting to prove it.”³⁷ Its proponents “do not claim that other non-monotheistic religions are false or incapable of serving the goals that we have set”.³⁸ And while Abbott thinks SR is an “embryonic practice” which is at an “early” stage and which originated in the early 1990s,³⁹ the truth is that it has been around for much longer, as meetings of precisely this kind were being held in interfaith circles in the UK as long ago as the early 1980s.⁴⁰ It is therefore not surprising to note the similarities between some of the ideas contained in Abbott’s book and those propounded in 1985 by Roman Catholic syncretist theologian Paul Knitter in a book entitled *No Other Name?*,⁴¹ a book which liberal missiologists greeted with acclaim, quickly recognising it as “a primary text”.⁴² The principles of interfaith dialogue and SR

³⁰ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 318.

³¹ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 318.

³² *SOOHSOOF*, p. 339.

³³ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 318.

³⁴ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 341.

³⁵ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 319.

³⁶ The man who enjoined us to do everything possible to live peaceably with all men was the cause of rioting in several cities which he visited. This was not because he was unwilling to sit down and talk with people, but because he determined not to know any thing among them, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

³⁷ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 344.

³⁸ Kepnes, *Handbook*: <http://jsrforum.lib.virginia.edu/writings/KepHand.html>.

³⁹ *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 330, 338, 339.

⁴⁰ One of us (PN) was personally invited to observe an already established series of meetings of exactly this nature in 1984.

⁴¹ Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1985).

⁴² http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/9-3_Finality/9-3_Robbins.pdf

endorsed by Roger Abbott are cast in the same mould as Knitter's interreligious dialogue.⁴³ This is particularly ominous in the light of the final chapter of *No Other Name?*, entitled *Doing Before Knowing—The Challenge of Interreligious Dialogue*, and Abbott's views on practical theology which we noted earlier. Professor Knitter proposes interreligious dialogue as "a means of doing before knowing",⁴⁴ saying that "as recent discussions on theological method are making clear, the role of practical theology is not simply to apply what a religion holds true to particular ethical questions (theory leading to praxis), but also, more importantly, to use those concrete questions as a means of understanding and revising what a religion believes (praxis leading to theory)."⁴⁵ Abbott too, as we have seen, talks of the priority of living above knowing and of the need for engagement in the drama of doing the faith prior to construction of a valid theology. Knitter's ideas on praxis as a theological method are also reflected by Abbott. In the words of Professor Knitter, "to know the truth, one must do it. Praxis is not simply the outcome of what is already known to be true; rather it is 'the originating and self-correcting foundation' of the truth."⁴⁶ According to Roger Abbott, "The traumatic nature of major incident contexts calls for an inductive method wherein the contemporary context of tragedy and trauma interrogates the Scripture, and then Scripture interrogates these contexts in a praxis", and "Through such praxis it is hoped that truth can be discovered and more rightfully applied".⁴⁷ Knitter insists that "any viable method of theology will have to make use of two sources", one of which is scripture, the other of which is "human experience (which includes both thought and praxis)."⁴⁸ Just whose side is Abbott on?⁴⁹

⁴³ See, for example, Knitter, *No Other Name?*, pp. 207-213.

⁴⁴ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 205.

⁴⁵ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 229.

⁴⁶ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, pp. 205-206.

⁴⁷ *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 34-35.

⁴⁸ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 91.

⁴⁹ It is imperative to note, too, the strong similarities here to the seminal thought of Rudolf Bultmann. "If the truth of the New Testament proclamation is to be preserved, the only way is to demythologize it. [...] The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially. [...] the importance of the New Testament mythology lies not in its imagery but in the understanding of existence which it enshrines. [...] The saving efficacy of the cross is not derived from the fact that it is the cross of Christ: it is the cross of Christ because it has this saving efficacy" – Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology", in Hans-Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, Volumes I and II, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London, SPCK, 1972), Volume I, 1-44, pp. 10-11, 41. "The formulation of a question, however, arises from an interest which is based in the life of the enquirer, and it is the presupposition of all interpretations seeking an understanding of the text, that this interest, too, is in some way or other alive in the text which is to be interpreted, and forms the link between the text and its expositor. [...] the presupposition for understanding is the interpreter's relationship in his life to the subject which is directly or indirectly expressed in the text. [...] every interpretation is guided by a particular purpose; for a question which has some kind of orientation about it is only possible on the basis of the conditions of a context of living experience. And in the same way it is understandable for this reason, that every interpretation incorporates a particular prior understanding—namely, that which arises out of the context of

Whilst we can appreciate why a tool like SR is enthusiastically endorsed by Churches Together⁵⁰ and cautiously explored by organs of the Vatican,⁵¹ it is extraordinary and shocking to see a professed evangelical scholar officially endorsing on behalf of a professedly evangelical seminary a profane method, so deeply inimical to scriptural principles. Roger Abbott claims to wish to apply it in the limited context of interactions between pastoral carers who respond to major incidents, and that his interest in SR is to “encourage *conscientious* friendship” to foster “practical cooperation in a collaborative response”.⁵² He seeks to restrict his own engagement to building relations, avoiding a focus on “theologies or salvific values”,⁵³ but it is easy to see how an evangelical practitioner would have to act deceptively to participate meaningfully, as “each must behave in the public arena as if its truth was as tentative as an esthetic [sic] opinion or a scientific theory.”⁵⁴ This is to sacrifice God’s truth for a community-based deceit. No surprise too then that Roger Abbott expresses his gratitude “for the contributions from postmodernism and postliberal theology for the dismantling” of an intolerance of error.⁵⁵ It may be argued that the tolerance to let other faiths speak is welcome, and may be distinguished from embracing their errors. More Biblically, we posit that tares, for such *is* the position of every false faith, are to be left till the final judgement to be burned.⁵⁶ They are not to be engaged with or entangled with other than in needful social intercourse,⁵⁷ certainly not cooperated with as spiritual yokefellows.⁵⁸ Is SR an appropriate foundation for any contact with other faith groups? Should we fraternise with enemies of the Gospel? Shall we enter round table with Satan? The Spirit beseeches us “to mark them which cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine you have learned and avoid them”;⁵⁹ shall we then meet them as spiritual teachers in a commitment to respect their damning errors? The Apostle warns us that for those that preach any other hope, we

living experience to which the subject belongs” – Rudolf Bultmann, “The Problem of Hermeneutics”, in Rudolph Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, trans. James C. G. Greig (London, SCM Press, 1955), 234-261, pp. 240, 241, 242. The Bultmannian pedigree of this and other aspects of Abbott’s dissertation is confirmed by Bultmann’s approving reference to the progenitor of the mimetic theory adopted by Roger Abbott from Paul Ricoeur, Erich Auerbach, and his book *Mimesis*, saying that the method developed by Auerbach was “masterly” – Bultmann, “The Problem of Hermeneutics”, p. 248.

⁵⁰ [http://www.churches-](http://www.churches-together.net/Articles/79255/Churches%20Together%20in/Features%20Reviews/Features/Scriptural%20Reasoning.aspx)

[together.net/Articles/79255/Churches Together in/Features Reviews/Features/Scriptural Reasoning.aspx](http://www.churches-together.net/Articles/79255/Churches%20Together%20in/Features%20Reviews/Features/Scriptural%20Reasoning.aspx)

⁵¹ <http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-111871623X,subjectCd-RE30.html>

⁵² *SOOHSOOF*, p. 349.

⁵³ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 349.

⁵⁴ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 347. The canonical theodrama has after all reverted to Ricoeur’s fiction, despite careful disavowal: *SOOHSOOF*, pp. 49 n. 66, 55, 52-53 n. 81.

⁵⁵ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 355.

⁵⁶ Matthew 13:30.

⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:9-10.

⁵⁸ 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

⁵⁹ Romans 16:17b.

must “let them be anathema”,⁶⁰ something not to be touched or handled. The betrayal Abbott thus enjoins will drive away the Holy Spirit.

Roger Abbott would like us to think his research is “groundbreaking”,⁶¹ but the small print admits that it is something which “contradicts and challenges some current Evangelical cultures and their practices.”⁶² His publication poses a grave threat to the evangelical cause, and marks another milestone in WEST’s advanced departure from the witness for Biblical truth once maintained on its premises. However much errorists now blur it, Martyn Lloyd-Jones crystallised the watershed, using the adjective “ecumenical” as a direct antonym of “evangelical” in the context of theological seminaries.⁶³ Until last year, the FIEC apparently also agreed, saying that ecumenism was “confusing and unbiblical” and a “contradiction of the gospel”.⁶⁴ The School of Theology at Bridgend can choose either to be ecumenical or evangelical, unashamedly kerygmatic or engaged in a deepening syncretistic dialogue, but it may not choose both. If it continues on its present path, it will soon become as unrecognisable as evangelical as its Polish partner, EST.⁶⁵

20 July 2013

⁶⁰ Galatians 1:8-9.

⁶¹ *SOOHSOOF*, p. 369.

⁶² *SOOHSOOF*, p. 367.

⁶³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 357.

⁶⁴ <http://www.strateias.org/ecumenism.htm>. We do recognise that Roger Abbott does not have a background in the FIEC, but we wonder whether everyone in [the FIEC and the AGBCSE](#) is aware of the dangers of accepting training at WEST as valid preparation for service within their constituencies. Just what are they letting in, under cover of academic respectability and being “essentially” evangelical?

⁶⁵ The WEST-linked “Evangelical” School of Theology in Wrocław: <http://www.strateias.org/wroclaw.htm>.