# Blessed Transgression: On Serving Communion to Jews[1]

Jon Paul Sydnor

*The sharing of religious rituals across religious boundaries is increasing. More and more, we invite our religious neighbors to practice our rituals, and they invite us to practice theirs. In this autobiographical essay, I will reflect on my Christian community's experience of inviting Jews to take communion, and the surprising results of that invitation. First, I will sketch the working theology of ritual operative in our church. Then, I will describe the event of shared worship and shared ritual participation. I will conclude with an analysis of the event based on interreligious thought and ritual theory. This analysis will lead to a positive, ethical prescription: religious traditions should selectively embrace interformation—interreligious transformation through shared religious practice, especially ritual practice.*

*Keywords: Jewish-Christian relations, Eucharist, Communion, ritual studies, liturgical theology, interreligious studies, interfaith*

## *Jews, Christians, and History*

### *Introduction*

On August 12, 2014, in Walpole, Massachusetts, a small, progressive Jewish gathering, the Sharon Family Chavurah, joined a small, progressive Christian gathering, Grace Community Boston, for a shared worship service. The leaders of each group had agreed to perform a ritual with and for the other group. The gathered participants were free to observe the others' ritual, or participate in it, as they preferred. The two groups met in the home of the progressive Christian pastor, Rev. Abby Henrich.

Usually, writing on interreligious ritual participation focuses on participating in the others' rituals. In this instance, I would like to reverse that and focus on inviting others to participate in our own rituals. What is it like to invite someone of a different religion into your community's sacred spacetime? What is it like to practice your own ritual alongside the religious other? For me, serving communion to Jews was a powerful experience; more powerful, perhaps, than it would have been to serve communion to a Buddhist or Muslim. Below I will explain why.

### *Nowy Targ, Poland*

Certain aspects of my personal biography influence my experience of inviting Jews to take communion. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Poland from 1992 to 1994. Prior to World War II

[1] I would like to thank Axel Marc Oaks Takács and the anonymous reviewers, whose constructive criticisms dramatically improved this article.

Poland was about ten percent Jewish. By the end of the war it was about one percent Jewish, and now it has very few practicing Jews.[2]

*Figure 1:* The author with his host sister, Agata Ligas (now Stramek), in traditional Polish highlander garb (1993).

The town that I lived in, Nowy Targ in south-central Poland, about an hour and a half south of Krakow, had been 20% Jewish prior to the war.[3] When the Nazis invaded Poland, they either slaughtered the Jews of Nowy Targ on site or shipped them away to death camps. A memorial downtown, where German soldiers gunned down hundreds, marks the horror. During the German occupation, Nazis vandalized the Jewish cemetery.

Prior to World War II, the Jews in Nowy Targ had been a vital community, simultaneously distinct and integrated. After World War II, and the resulting establishment of the State of Israel, most were dead or gone.[4]

[2] *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (2007), s.v. "Poland: Independent Poland."
[3] Czeslaw Brzoza, "The Jews of Nowy Targ in the Inter-War Period," The American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies, accessed January 12, 2017, http://www.aapjstudies.org/index.php?id=45.
[4] *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (2007), s.v. "Poland: After World War II."

I imagine a pre-war Nowy Targ with synagogues, Jewish traders and merchants, where children spoke Yiddish on the streets, youth studied Hebrew at home, and families read the Torah with devotion. But I knew only a homogeneous Nowy Targ, 99% Polish and 99% Roman Catholic.

To intensify the sense of loss, Nowy Targ is only about an hour and a half away from Auschwitz, or Oświęcim in Polish. I went there twice, once with a class from my school and once when my parents visited. Auschwitz can't be understood. Auschwitz silently insists that the human capacity for evil is absolute, and it will leave your emotions and intellect agitated until you accept this plain fact.

Reminders of Polish Jewry and their extermination are everywhere in Poland. You can visit the Museum of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in Warsaw, or Kazimierz, the old Jewish quarter in Kraków. Whenever I visited a friend in the Peace Corps, in another town, they would have their own local history to relate—this is where the Jews lived, that's where they were killed, that store over there used to be a synagogue, the Jewish cemetery is on the far side of town. If you know Polish history, then you know that something is missing, and it's missing everywhere you go. There is—pardon the cliché—an inescapable presence of absence. Missing persons stroll the streets, and when you feel agitated to find them, and recover them, you realize that you can't. You are powerless, and you now walk in a hidden tragedy.

### *Tragedy, affect, and thought*

Due to these experiences, the Shoah has a very affective dimension for me. After living in its epicenter for two years, it became a concrete event, not a historical abstraction. The Shoah is not just something I think about or ponder, it has become something that I feel. My indirect experience has increased my sympathy for those who were directly affected—the survivors and the bereaved.

Of course, these experiences also changed my attitude toward Judaism. I acquired a defensive attitude on behalf of the tradition, an abhorrence for historical Christian persecution of it, and an increased allergy to anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in all their forms—historical, cultural, biblical, theological, etc. I read the Gospel of John in Poland and its anti-Semitic passages disturbed me—and changed my biblical hermeneutic. When America's Southern Baptist Convention announced its plans to convert Jews, I got angry.[5]

### *Grace Community Boston*

Now, let me speak a little about how we came to celebrate worship with the Sharon Family Chavurah. Quite simply, my wife knew one of the congregants, who put her in touch with the chavurah's 80-year-old female cantor. They willingly agreed to meet with us.

[5] Southern Baptist Convention, "Resolution on Jewish Evangelism," accessed January 21, 2017, http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/655/resolution-on-jewish-evangelism.

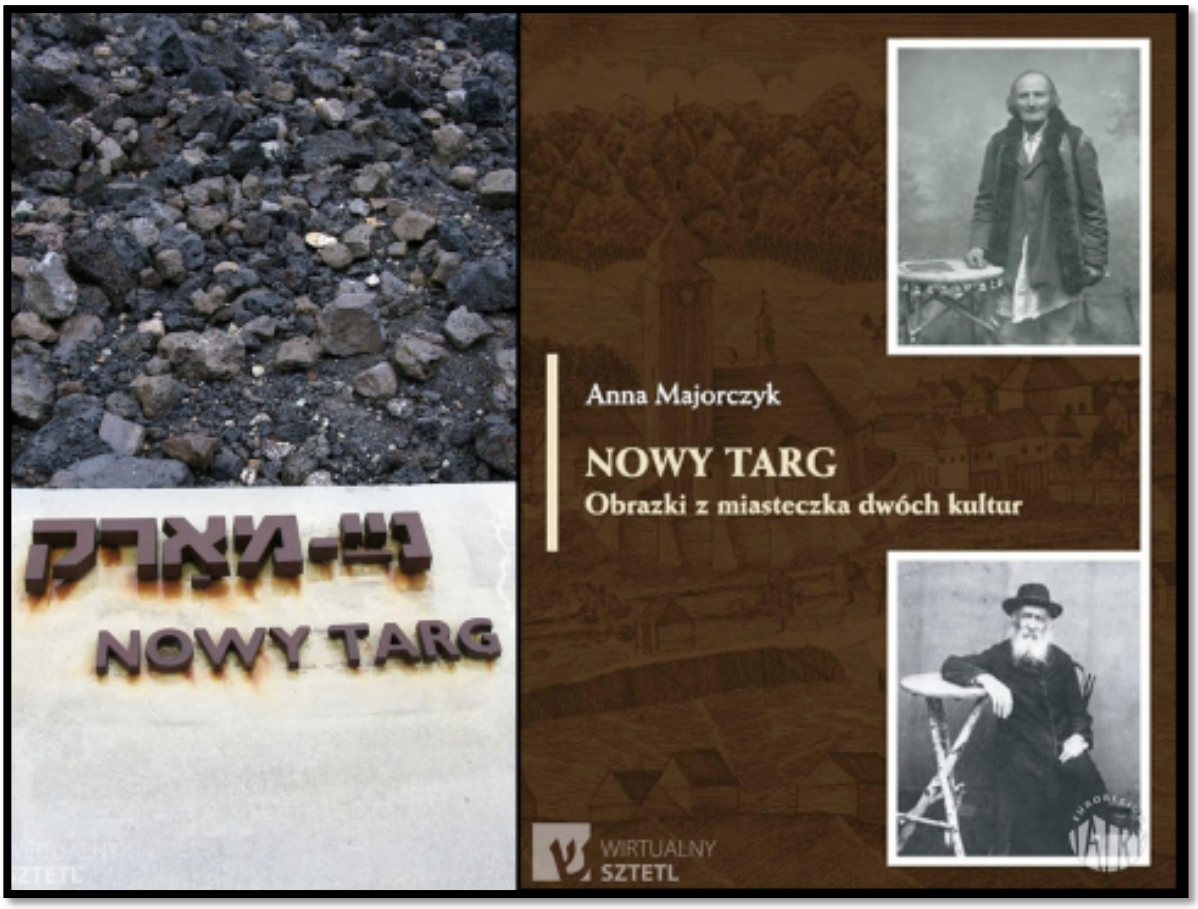


*Figure 2: Nowy Targ: Pictures from a Bi-cultural Town* by Anna Majorczyk. (Credit: Wirtualny Sztetl)

On the night that we met together, the two groups first shared a meal and got to know one another, then gathered for worship. The leader of the Jewish community performed a Shabbat evening home ritual. She invited the Christian children to participate, and all of them did.

The Christian pastor, Rev. Abby Henrich, had to choose what ritual to perform at this shared service. A full disclosure is warranted here: The pastor of Grace Community Boston is my wife and I am the theologian-in-residence. However, when making decisions of consequence such as this one, the pastor rarely consults with the theologian-in-residence.

Nevertheless, multiple safe options occurred to her—lighting prayer candles, *lectio divina* over a Hebrew text, writing one's regrets and sins on paper then burning them. She had the option of performing a generically spiritual rather than specifically Christian ritual. But generic spirituality isn't risky enough for the characteristically bold Rev. Henrich, who never plays it safe.


***Communion***

She chose to serve communion instead. The Lord's Supper. Eucharist. The central Christian ritual from which Jews have been excluded, 99% of the time, for the past 2,000 years. The central Christian ritual that probably most Jews would have no interest in joining. A Christian ritual that made their decision to observe or participate a big deal.

Why did Rev. Henrich choose communion instead of a politically safer, theologically simpler, and historically less fraught Christian ritual? As she explained to her jittery husband, communion is the chief means of grace in the Christian church. It is the symbolic action that expresses God's incarnate love for humankind. It symbolizes God's action for us, God's presence with us, and God's purpose for history.

Abby did not want to share a lesser ritual with our Jewish friends. She didn't want to do something that we normally don't do because Jews were present. The purpose of sharing ritual is to share one another, not to change ourselves into interreligious digestives. Crossing boundaries might be easier if we hide our differences behind a more politically, theologically, and historically palatable mask. But it would not be as authentic. Grace Community Boston is a Christian

community that takes Christian communion every week. Honesty demanded that we share ourselves through shared communion.

## *A Working Theology of Ritual*

### *Broken history, ritual power*

Sharon Family Chavurah and Grace Community Boston inherited a tragic world, and that tragedy persists in our day. We regularly learn of the vandalism of Jewish cemeteries, threats to synagogues, a surging neo-Nazi movement, anti-Semitic websites and social memes, intractable interreligious conflict in the Holy Land, and ignorant statements by atavistic Christian thought leaders. Our uncontrollable, everyday world is not what it should be. As faith communities, we did not want to socialize ourselves or our children into these patterns. We wanted to resist, to re-pattern ourselves, to be transformed.[6] And we shared a hope that this endeavor would be more successful through our shared effort and trust in God. Stated differently, we placed our hope in union with the religious other, and in a supernatural power that, like us, seeks the healing of history.[7]

As the communities' leaders determined how we might heal these wounds, they turned to shared ritual. To understand why they did so, we must propose a working theology of ritual, augmented by a working theology of interreligious ritual participation, or "inter-riting" as Marianne Moyaert calls it.[8] Inter-riting offers a shared experiential intimacy that exceeds any thought about it. The world is broken but, as Jonathan Z. Smith has observed, religious ritual can momentarily perfect our environment, allowing us to momentarily *experience* the way life should be. Then, we can carry the memory of this perfection back into the everyday, where inspired memory repairs a broken world.[9] Certainly, this was one goal of our communities as we gathered. In a world of error and division, we wanted to attend to one another, briefly yet deeply.

Our leaders chose inter-riting for its transformative power. Ritual at its most powerful engages the entire person—mind, body, senses, imagination. *Significata*—meaningful actions and emblems that saturate performance with emotion—elevate ritual's effectiveness.[10] Ritual at its most effective is something that you do with your whole self, which produces holistic feeling. As a result, any thinking about ritual will derive from the doing of ritual, from embodied experience, not disembodied thought. The doing of ritual may lead thought from reason to rumination, and theologians may even translate ritual experience into doctrinal concepts, but ritual resists the separation of thought from body. Translation is diminution. So, explanatory conceptualizations of

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[6] Lisa Schirch, "Ritual, Religion, and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, eds. R. Scott Appleby, Atalia Omer, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2–3, DOI: 10.1093 /oxfordhb/9780199731640.001.0001.

[7] Peter Collins, "Religion and Ritual: A Multi-Perspectival Approach," *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199588961.001.0001.

[8] Marianne Moyaert, "Introduction: Exploring the Phenomenon of Interreligious Ritual Participation," in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*, eds. Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 3ff.

[9] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53–55.

[10] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 28–29.

ritual will never contain ritual, which inevitably resists interpretative closure.[11] Ritual exceeds cognition, just as reality exceeds system.

Axel Michaels and William S. Sax have drawn attention to the efficacy of religious performance. Paralleling their thought, Grace Community Boston has a pragmatic concept of ritual. Since ritual resists reduction to doctrine, it need not be "true" in the sense that a propositional statement might be "true." At the same time, since (for us) the primary purpose of ritual is pastoral, and pastoral needs change with pastoral circumstances, the performance of ritual need not hew closely to any pre-existing pattern. We adapt rituals over time. We don't have to "get it right," as does an ordained Roman Catholic priest consecrating the Eucharist. But we hope that it "works," as does medicine on a disease.[12]

Due to the evocative nature of ritual, our liturgical practice is *creative*. Just as architecture can evoke God in space, ritual can evoke God in time. And, as gracious as God is, the skill of the architect and the skill of the ritualist influence the evocative power of their creations. This power is fundamentally aesthetic: Grace experiences "truth" in ritual as help, sustenance, reconciliation, repair, and healing—not as correspondence to doctrinal demands or conformity to traditional formulas. James Baldwin best describes our ritual ideal: "They sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy. There had never been a time when John had not sat watching the saints rejoice with terror in his heart, and wonder. Their singing caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord; indeed, it was no longer a question of belief, because *they made that presence real*."[13]

### *Invitation to communion, invitation to community*

Baldwin was very much worshiping with his own, but interreligious ritual hospitality invites the other to transgress. In the Jewish-Christian relationship, this invitation is particularly fraught given two millennia of aggressive, sometimes violent, persecution and proselytization of Jews by Christians. Horrified by this history, not a soul at Grace sought to convert our Jewish guests. Christian attempts to convert Jews appall us. Likewise, our Jewish guests had no interest in converting us, or converting themselves. By sharing rituals we may have been inviting one another into our own sacred spacetime, but only for a visit, not to stay.

Moreover, at Grace we don't even use the terms "convert" or "conversion" because they are too categorical. Humans are never this or that—we are a stew of qualities. We exist as an intersection of innumerable roles, drives, fears, virtues, vices, memories, hopes, desires, and associations. At Grace, some of our members find religious stimulation in science, some in Buddhism, some in charitable service, others in justice work. Some are rationalistic and others are enthusiastic. As a community, we have no essence—we are a dynamic collective of individuals.

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[11] Pamela Klassen, "Ritual," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, ed. John Corrigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5–9, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195170214.001.0001.

[12] Axel Michaels and William S. Sax, "Performance," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2–3, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198729570.001.0001.

[13] James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1952; repr., New York: Dell Publishing, 1985), 7. Italics added.

As dynamic, we try to stay in spiritual motion. The concept of conversion suggests event, as if you have shifted from unchanging status A to discrete, unchanging status *B*. But the concept of journey suggests *process*, as if you are always seeking, always growing, hence never the same. At Grace, when we discuss our spiritual life together, we prefer the term "journey."[14] Favoring process, participants at Grace are naturally suspicious of simplistic categories, inflexible claims, and unchanging dogma. We prefer fluid experiential terms like healing, meaning, and purpose, as well as challenging ethical terms like charity, justice, and service. Together by grace, we try to be transformed and always transforming.

As we entered the historically challenging reality of Jewish-Christian relations, our primary concern was ethical. We tried to abide by the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Luke 6.31). The Golden Rule is an important ethical plumb line for anyone involved in interfaith relations. At the same time, it is an inadequate guide since religious practitioners hold varying attitudes toward otherness.[15] A very open religious person may be willing to practice the rites of her neighbors, and to invite them to practice her own. She may believe that, to the cosmic God, all boundaries are humanly manufactured fictions. Hence, transgression enacts the divine imagination. Others may interpret boundaries as divinely imposed safeguards that preserve truth, scripture, or community. For them, transgression may imply contamination. They may not want to invite her to practice their rites; they may not want to be invited to practice hers.

Christianity is the majority religion in America. For a majority religion to invite a minority religion into shared worship is different from a minority religion inviting a majority religion into shared worship. The majority invites from a position of numerical strength and cultural reinforcement. The minority lacks these bulwarks.[16] Any simplistic application of the Golden Rule to interreligious ritual participation will inadequately account for the complexity and ambiguity of the invitation. We may invite and be invited, but we must do so with great respect and humility. As Ruth Langer notes, interreligious hospitality is a skill that requires discernment, especially in Jewish-Christian relations.[17]

### *Communion as ritual, ritual as communication*

By choosing to serve communion, Abby was emphasizing the *communicative* nature of ritual. Oxford linguist J. L. Austin, resisting logical positivist concepts of language, focused on the role that language plays in felt human relationships. According to Austin, the primary purpose of language is not to convey verifiable or falsifiable information. Language is rarely a container for data, so its proper goal is rarely descriptive precision. Instead, language is a creative activity, a social cause with social effects. Language creates feeling, provokes action, signals intention, and reveals emotion. A speech-act can threaten, warn, promise, or assure. Sometimes, a sentence will

[14] Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4–9.
[15] David A. Kunin, "Multifaith: New Directions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 104–106.
[16] Sheila K. Marshall and Carol Markstrom-Adams, "Attitudes on Interfaith Dating Among Jewish Adolescents: Contextual and Developmental Considerations," *Journal of Family Issues* 16 (November 1995): 794–796. This article describes American Jews' concerns regarding cultural assimilation as a minority group, and how those concerns influence attitudes toward interfaith dating and its potential consequence of interfaith marriage.
[17] Ruth Langer, "Parameters of Hospitality for Interreligious Participation: A Jewish Perspective," in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 211–213.

utilize formal syntax and precise language to convey information, but that is only one thing that language can do.[18]


*Figure 3:* The cantor (not seen here) and an assistant light Shabbat candles for the children.

Similarly, the primary purpose of ritual, as Grace interprets it, is not precise repetition of a ritual grammar. For us, ritual is not a technology that only works if properly performed, as a positivist sentence only works if it accurately states a proposition. Instead, we endorse the communicative *power* of ritual. Rituals, whether they include language or not, do things. Baptism reminds our congregation of the infinite value of the new life before them, and the infinite love of God for that life. Laying on of hands communicates our community's concern for the suffering and offers God's healing and protection, of and through us. Weddings remind us that relationships are not utilitarian contracts between signatories; they are sacred commitments and celebrations of joy. The point of ritual is not just to remind us of these "truths"; as Baldwin makes clear, the point of ritual is for us to *feel* them.

[18] Michaels and Sax, 3–4.

***Open table***

There was an added complication to Abby's decision, which made the choice even more fraught. When Grace Community Boston formed in 2010 as an independent, progressive, emergent (experimental) Christian community, we had many discussions about who we wanted to be. Amongst other things, we clearly wanted to be *open*. We wanted to center ourselves on Jesus Christ, yet remain open to the Holy Spirit working in other faiths. We wanted to have an identity with porous boundaries; we wanted to be an "us" without a "them."[19]

As progressives, we engage and alter tradition according to our norm: the agapic, universal love of God revealed by Jesus Christ. This unconditional love draws us forward into the Kingdom of God. Traditionally, Christian communion has been an exclusive ritual. But, since Grace's primary source of inspiration is God's future, we feel free to break with tradition. In many ways, this breaking with tradition is traditional. As Tom Driver notes, rituals change through history. They are created in times and places according to the need of those times and places; as needs change rituals change.[20] A new world will need new rituals, and any community moving toward the Kingdom of God strides toward a new world.

In celebrating the openness of history to God, Grace Community Boston opened its table to all—we welcome everyone—adult or child, baptized or unbaptized, faithful or doubtful, even Christian or nonchristian. Our invitation to communion has no exclusive wording, which might demand that participants be baptized, or believe in transubstantiation, or accept Christ as Savior. Instead, we say generally, and said on this particular occasion (I paraphrase since Abby leads worship conversationally), "The only people excluded from our communion table are those whom Jesus himself would exclude and that is nobody. All are welcome."[21]

For us, an exclusive ritual cannot express the universal love of God. So, we have opened the ritual; we have changed our practice. By adopting the new practice, we have invited the new ritual to offer us new knowledge—embodied, experiential, communal, *ritual* knowledge—and, in this case, *interreligious* knowledge.[22] We weren't just inviting our Jewish guests to *watch* us take communion. In a constitutive expression of our open theology, we were inviting our Jewish guests to *participate in communion with us*.

Inviting our Jewish guests to participate in communion risked multiple misunderstandings. Our guests, most of whom were meeting us for the first time, could have interpreted it as an attempt at proselytization. They could have interpreted it as clumsy outreach by naïve liberals who are overly impressed with their own openness. They could have interpreted it as inhospitable, forcing them to risk offense by refusing their hosts' generosity. And they could have interpreted it as a threat to the continuation of Judaism, which Alan Dershowitz asserts is more threatened by

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[19] Stephen Edmondson, "Opening the Table: The Body of Christ and God's Prodigal Grace," *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 224.
[20] Tom F. Driver, "Transformation: The Magic of Ritual," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996. 182.
[21] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Table and font: Who is welcome?," accessed January 10, 2017, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Examples_of_Communion_Invitations.pdf.
[22] Driver, "Transformation: The Magic of Ritual," 183.

contemporary openness and assimilation than medieval exclusivity and ghettoization.[23] Would this be just one more example of insensitive Christian triumphalism in the hard history of Jewish-Christian relations?

*Figure 4:* Rev. Abby Henrich leads the second half of the joint service. Cantor Iris Jacobs sits behind her.

### *Universalist imagery*

The open table heightened the import of Abby's choice to serve communion, but another decision alleviated it somewhat. When we started Grace Community Boston, in addition to choosing an open table, we also discussed the imagery we would use for communion. Crucially, we allow all children to take communion unconditionally. As soon as a child can digest solid food, they are welcome to be brought forward for communion.

[23] Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 6–9.

Children tend to think literally. The capacity for metaphorical thought develops with age and life experience. Since we were serving communion to very young children, we became concerned that their literal interpretation of Eucharistic imagery would make them think that we were all, literally, cannibals.[24]

In order to investigate, we asked our parishioners what they remembered about communion from their childhood. The results disturbed us. The body and blood language of the Eucharist had conjured up some gruesome imagery. One parishioner thought that her church had Christ's corpse in the back room, behind the apse, and from this corpse carved up the body and drained out the blood for each week's service. Others had similar memories and were convinced that they were eating and drinking (or their parents were) the literal flesh and blood of Jesus. And they remembered being, let us say, discomfited by this regular occurrence.

Grace Community Boston believes that all good theology is pastoral theology, so we were more than willing to adapt tradition to this pastoral discovery.[25] In the invitation to communion, and in discussion of the meaning of communion, we began to avoid body and blood imagery, emphasizing instead remembrance of Jesus' absolute ethical courage, the presence of Christ among us through table fellowship, and the promised eschatological banquet at which all will be filled. Like the early church, and like many contemporary emergent churches, communion became similar to an agape meal or love feast—we replaced wafers with large chunks of fresh-baked bread and goblets of grape juice.[26] Utilizing pastorally revised yet biblically grounded language, we began referring to the elements as the "Bread of Heaven" (John 6.51) and "Cup of Salvation" (Psalm 116.13, see also I Corinthians 10.16). As we made these changes, we found inspiration in Isaiah:

> *On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare*
> *a feast of rich food for all peoples,*
> *a banquet of aged wine—*
> *the best of meats and the finest of wines.*
> *On this mountain he will destroy*
> *the shroud that enfolds all peoples,*
> *the sheet that covers all nations;*
> *he will swallow up death forever.*
> *The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears*
> *from all faces;*
> *he will remove his people's disgrace*
> *from all the earth.*
> *The Lord has spoken.*
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> *In that day they will say,*

[24] James Geary, *I is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes The Way We See the World* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), 158.
[25] Jon Paul Sydnor, "Christ Was Not an Inerrantist, so Christians Should Not Be Either: How Jesus Read His Bible," *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (August 2016): 757.
[26] Marianne Moyaert, "Religious Pluralism and Eucharistic Hospitality," *Liturgy* 31, no. 3 (April 2016): 49–50.

> *"Surely this is our God;*
> *we trusted in him, and he saved us.*
> *This is the Lord, we trusted in him;*
> *let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation." (Isaiah 25.6-9* NRSV*)*

Following these deliberations, Grace Community Boston ended up with an open table, minimal body and blood language, and Isaiah's banquet imagery for our celebration of communion.

These changes made it easier to invite our Jewish guests to take communion. Other traditions' theology and practice of the Eucharist make such invitation more difficult. For example, the Roman Catholic Church's doctrine of ontological transubstantiation, independent of the participants' experience, renders Eucharistic hospitality toward Jews problematic. First and foremost, Jewish dietary law forbids the consumption of certain animals' blood (Leviticus 7.26). This prohibition has been inferentially extended to human blood. Indeed, the strong halachic prohibition against blood consumption makes Jesus' declaration at the Last Supper, "This is my body . . . this is my blood" (Luke 22.19-20), startling.[27] Roman Catholic liturgical practice and Jewish law conflict in this instance. Generally, the feasibility of interreligious ritual participation depends on the ritual under consideration, the role that ritual plays in the host community, and the guest community's potential interpretation and experience of the ritual.

### *Interreligious trepidation*

Despite the power of ritual, or perhaps due to the power of ritual, I felt conflicted about Abby's choice to serve communion. I'm much more cautious by nature than Abby is, so I probably would have played it safe. And due to my academic background, I knew that interreligious rituals can go wrong, particularly in a context as historically fraught as Jewish-Christian relations. Anya Topolski, a Jewish philosopher married to a Catholic theologian, notes the pain they experienced as an interfaith couple mourning the loss of their young daughter, Hannah. The tragedy was inherently horrendous, but insensitive leaders, competing calendars, exclusive traditions, conflicting symbols, and different interpretations of death all complicated the bereavement process. In the end, friends, family, and faith helped the distraught couple through their pain, but not without missteps.[28]

On the one hand, inviting our Jewish neighbors to take communion with us could lead to hurt feelings and harmed relationships. On the other hand, this event could be a daring and important opportunity for healing the rupture between these sister faiths, or between two small communities therein, at least. Maybe we could repair a little part of the world.

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[27] Michael J. Cahill, "Drinking Blood at a Kosher Eucharist? The Sound of Scholarly Silence," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32, no. 4 (November 2002):168–189.

[28] Anya Topolski, "Mourning the Loss of My Daughter: The Failure of Interfaith Bereavement Rituals," in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue*, 195–204.


*Figure 5:* Peaceable Kingdom by Edward Hicks. (Credit: Wikicommons)

## *Serving Communion to Jews*

### *Sharing sacred time*

So, what happened that night? The gathering began with a shared meal and informal conversation. A certain interreligious comradery arose between the two communities, as both shared their struggle to reconcile Enlightenment rationality and progressive politics with contemporary faith.

The cantor went first, and the Chavurah and Christian community together participated in the lighting of Shabbat candles, unison prayer, and song. The children were enormously pleased to hold real live candles, as children always are. Grace, as an open and unthreatened congregation, participated freely and universally.

To be clear, we participated in the Jewish worship *due* to our Christian faith, not *despite* our Christian faith. Marianne Moyaert describes the tensive relationship between openness and identity, and the fragility of our religious truth when placed into relationship with the other's

religious truth. Drawing from Ricoeur, Moyaert asserts that this tension is unsolvable: no algorithm can determine beforehand to which religious truth we should be open or to which religious truth we should be closed. We are free, vulnerable, and dynamic, hence fragile: "The condition of human existence is characterized by an irremovable tension between what is given and what is possible."[29]

Our congregation's participation in the Jewish ritual reflects an implicit theology that largely concurs with Moyaert's. We are much more interested in what is possible than what is given; hence, our identity is processual. We have purposefully not adopted any confession or creed because, as one parishioner volunteered, "If we came up with one we would just outgrow it in a few years." Our defining metaphor for spiritual life is journey; the image suggests that we are engaged in Moyaert's "hermeneutical project that never ends."[30] But we fully embrace this fragile, dynamic identity. As an emergent church that prioritizes growth over stability, we seek out those experiences that change us. Religious isolation might protect our identity, but it would also halt our journey. Seeking to move onward, we view con-fusion (the unstable situation produced by interreligious fusion) as a state of great potential.

Returning to the shared worship, the service then shifted to the Christian portion, which also consisted of song and prayer. Rev. Abby Henrich explicitly advised our Jewish sisters and brothers that everyone was *welcome* to take communion but no one was *expected* to take communion. She consecrated the elements in her usual hospitable way, which avoided reference to the body and blood of Christ (referring instead to the "Bread of Heaven" and "Cup of Salvation," as noted above), emphasized Isaian eschatological imagery, and explicitly opened the table to everyone present. Remarkably, approximately half of the 20 Jewish congregants came forward. The Jewish couple in front of me, for example, looked at each other quizzically, nodded, and went forward together. Another Jewish friend of ours, who frequently came to our church service because he loves sacred music, but had never taken communion before, went forward for the first time.

The outcome was wholly unanticipated. We were surprised, warmed, and perplexed. We felt that something important had happened, in our little house, between our two little congregations. But we weren't sure what, or why. The Jews' confident faith, even after historical catastrophe, amazed us. Their trust, after millennia of Christian persecution, humbled us. And we marveled at their courageous openness despite threatened-minority status.

Please note that the Jews' affirmation of our communion was entirely pluralistic—they were all faithful to their tradition and remained faithful to their tradition (as we found in our later meetings with them). No conversions took place, *thank God*. Both communities were celebrating particularity, creating community across difference rather than striving for a bland homogeneity.

As the two groups conversed after the joint worship service ended, the energy level was high and the mood positive. Victor Turner would say that we had transcended *societas* (the injured everyday order) to experience *communitas* (energized social solidarity). This heightened state of consciousness is in itself anti-structural, challenging things as they are by conjuring things as they

[29] Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (New York: Rodopi, 2011), 278–281.
[30] Ibid., 281.

can be.[31] In our instance, we had ritually enacted our moral convictions of solidarity, flooding cognition with emotion, thereby transforming a propositional command (thou shalt respect the religious other) into an inspired passion (love for religious other as neighbor).[32] For millennia, Christian communion was an event that separated Jews from Christians. But this night, it was an event that brought a few of them together.

Afterwards, as the collective effervescence settled down, the Christians were too polite to ask the Jews why they had taken communion. We just wanted to enjoy each other's company, and no one wanted to break the spell. As I mentioned above, there was one Jewish man who frequented our church because he loves sacred music. It was his wife, a friend of Abby's, who had arranged our shared worship service. A couple of months later, that man's mother died. My wife went to sit *shiva* with the family, and saw several of the congregants again, many of whom remarked warmly on our shared time together. So, the *communitas* may have been effervescent, but apparently it wasn't ephemeral. Something real had happened, perhaps something enduring.

What are the implications of this event for interreligious relations in an ever-globalizing world? What do we learn, comparatively, theologically, and spiritually, by inviting the religious other to participate in our own religious rituals?

Before I begin to address these questions, let me offer a brief note on method. This essay is phenomenological and autobiographical. Indeed, it might even be solipsistic, since it focuses primarily on my thoughts and feelings about taking communion with Jews. Everything that I'm about to write is from my own perspective. You can ask the question, "But what about their perspective?" That is an entirely legitimate question, and I'd love to do ethnographic research to answer the question, but it would also be a different essay. With that caveat, let us proceed.

## *Interpreting Ritual Transgression*

### *Magic and meaning*

Ritual theorists interpret ritual as magic, or as a meaning-making activity, or as both.[33] From the perspective of faith, the Christian communion that our Jewish guests participated in was a *meaning-accessing* activity. We did not manufacture meaning from nothingness or from pre-existing material, as the term meaning-making suggests. Instead, we accessed a pre-existing meaning that was there by grace. Thus, ritual is symbolic action in the Tillichian sense of the word. For Tillich, a symbol does not just point to a reality beyond it; a symbol participates in and mediates that reality. A symbol is ontologically amplified by the reality it points to, the very same reality that informs the symbol. A symbol receives power from elsewhere and shares that power with us. Hence, our experience of a symbol always exceeds what we would expect, what the material object alone might promise.[34] The symbol invites us beyond it, indeed beyond our own conventional, everyday life, into a richer way of being.

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[31] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1995), 131–165.
[32] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 30.
[33] Driver, "Transformation: The Magic of Ritual," 72-174.
[34] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 42–43.

This definition of symbol enriches our understanding of religious ritual as symbolic action. Any ritual action is greater than the sum of its parts. In fact, it is *other than* the sum of its parts, because it *participates* in a reality beyond the actions themselves. Or, more accurately, a reality beyond the actions participates the ritual, actualizes it, and amplifies it into what dreary materialism suggests it could not be. Understood this way, symbol becomes a portal, not into another world, but through which another world flows into this one. Religious ritual sacralizes the mundane so that ordinariness becomes enchanted.[35]

With this ritual theory in mind, the experiential success of our interreligious rite has important implications. Clearly, Grace Community Boston is working with a nonmagical concept of communion. That's why we, as a community, felt so free to revise the words of institution. The precise working of the formula does not make communion what it is. According to our sacramental theology, the *feelings* it produces, feelings of communion with God and one another, make it what it is. We are spiritually pragmatic. Communion is an opportunity for our community to remember Jesus, feel the Spirit, and anticipate God's future, which we then work toward. Since our rituals are not technologies, they do not demand rare ingredients or precise formulas, and we do not anticipate that they will produce any supernatural outcomes unmediated by community.

The choice of our Jewish guests to participate suggests a similar interpretation of ritual, although a different sacramental theology. Perhaps they anticipated that, by acting in the same way, by performing the same ritual action, they would feel something analogous—certainly not the same thing that the Christians were feeling (none of whom were feeling the exact same thing), but something similar in kind. Perhaps our Jewish guests saw the ritual as an act of inclusion after millennia of exclusion, hence as a symbolic act of healing. Perhaps their participation was an expression of existential solidarity, a recognition that our religious traditions are distinguishable but inseparable. Or, maybe they agreed that a power greater than our own courses within the universe, whose greatest desire is to help us, to love us, and to be loved by us. Maybe this power can heal even the most gaping historical wounds. Maybe it can repair the world, if we allow it to *form* us.

### *Flowing across borders*

As we have seen, for those communities open to interreligious practice, the sharing of ritual offers a powerful opportunity for interformation. By extending the right hand of ritual fellowship, we invite flow across borders—not just one way, but both ways. Interreligious ritual hospitality is reciprocal. It makes transgression *our* business and *their* business, thereby putting us on equal footing with the other methodologically (though never historically or politically).

With regard to experience, inviting the other to participate in your most meaningful rituals makes an implicit assertion: that we can share religious feeling across religious boundaries, that my depth is accessible to your depth. As noted above, my religious feeling will not remain the same as it crosses into the interpretative field of the other. But the other's activated sympathetic imagination may catch a glimpse of my religious life, a glimpse that may provoke the other to even more fruitful

[35] Driver, "Transformation: The Magic of Ritual," 176–177.

wonder.[36] By practicing interreligious ritual hospitality, we assert that this attenuated knowledge is not only possible—it is worthwhile. Crucially, Jews and Christians who share sacred space and worship together on occasion note that such sharing does not produce assimilation. Instead, it leads to "a richer appreciation of one's own tradition, a deeper respect for the theology and practices of the other, and a growing ability to articulate one's own commitments."[37]

### *God and human boundaries*

In interreligious ritual participation, we are acting and feeling across religious boundaries. We are transgressing the borders of identity and interpretation that separate us from one another. Are these boundaries of identity real, or are they simply semantic markers by which we demarcate human communities? Are they ontological or functional?

Interreligious ritual participation asserts that religions are not isolated islands of religious experience, amongst which commerce is impossible. Instead, religions have *experientially permeable borders*.[38] They are distinguishable but interpenetrating. Based on the intersubjective evidence gathered during our shared religious rites, God is not a monarchist who wants one religion, one rite, and one experience. Nor is God a separatist who acknowledges multiple religious rites but demands their segregation. Instead, God is a *federalist*—she wants difference *and* unity, particularity *and* solidarity, distinction *and* transgression, freedom *and* cooperation. She wants us to be ourselves, yet "pass over" into one another.[39] She wants difference that flows.

The efficacy of a religious ritual for a practitioner of another religion suggests that the dividing lines between religions are social conveniences, not ontological realities. They are more humanly constructed than divinely ordained. Jews can take communion and it will work. That is, for some, it will heal, support, quicken, inspire, or center. A Christian religious identity is not a necessary ingredient for a Christian religious ritual to help someone. Instead, the Christian religious ritual can work for non-Christians who are open to its mediating power. Naturally, this capability now applies, selectively, to diverse rituals from diverse religions. By applying criteria of evaluation, we can attempt to discern ahead of time which rituals invite participation and which do not. If the ritual is relevant, and its practitioners are open, and we see in the ritual some promise—then it just might help, no matter where the ritual is from or where we're from. Even if the ritual is other to us, or we are other to the ritual, it can still transform.

### *Ratification by the other*

The particularity of the other—their sacred difference—need not scandalize us. Overemphasis on otherness and difference and their challenge to our assumptions can make us forget the benefits of diversity. Certainly, new relationships will relativize our particularities.

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[36] Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966), 549–554.
[37] Samuel N. Gordon and Stephanie Perdew VanSlyke, "A House of Prayer for All People: Can Jews and Christians Share Ritual Space?," *Liturgy* 25, no. 1: 38–46 (2009), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/04580630903209835.
[38] Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 315.
[39] Jon Nilson, "Doing Theology by Heart: John S. Dunne's Theological Method," *Theological Studies* 48, no. 1 (March 1987): 69–82.

Isolation may grant us the certainty of obviousness, and relatedness may deprive us of that false and stultifying comfort. But thankfully, relativization does not have to result in attenuation. Instead, it can produce *amplificatio*n. Amplification occurs through sheer difference—*a* is more in relation to *b* than *a* is alone; it becomes, at least, *not b*. This added quality of being *not b* also grants *a* an internal expansion, a heightening of its own qualities that is experienced as increase in being. We become more in relation to the other than we are in isolation. Fullness presumes contrast.[40]

The other grants *amplification* by the sheer act of existing, but the other can offer *ratification* by the willing affirmation of our own particularity. Interreligious ritual hospitality offers a unique demonstration of this possibility. For when "they" participate in "our" ritual—voluntarily, seriously, meaningfully—they provide a ratification of our own difference. They declare our particularity rich in potential as they declare our ritual rich in meaning. And if a ritual's meaning can spill out of that ritual's community, then its power derives from a source beyond the subjectivity of its host community. The meaning comes from *beyond* us and them, and declares this origin by making itself available to *both* us and them. Now "they" no longer scandalize us with our own particularity; instead, they celebrate our particularity with us, providing it with their own legitimation, a legitimation hailing from them and through them.

This legitimation is particularly powerful. Usually, the same ratifies us within an atmosphere of homogeneity. Indeed, the same frequently seeks out sameness simply for the communal ratification of individual opinions that homogeneity provides. When we rely on sameness for reinforcement, we experience difference as a destabilizing intrusion. Heterogeneity denies communal values of their obviousness, and homogeneous communities can react angrily to this loss.[41]

But interreligious ritual hospitality reverses this situation. When the other joins your ritual with seriousness and vulnerability, then the other actually serves to affirm your particularity even as they present a contrast to it. This affirmation of your particularity does not affirm its exclusiveness or hegemony, since their uniqueness always exists alongside your own. But it does affirm your ritual's effectiveness and, by implication, your tradition's potency. Hence, the existence of an other's particularity does not need to compromise the worth of one's own. They exist side by side, and in that neighborly existence, they ratify one another.

When you practice your own rituals with your own community for a long time, you can start to wonder, "Are these rituals just our own little fantasy world, our own eccentric, idiosyncratic language, intelligible only to ourselves, devoid of any meaning other than what we manufacture for it?" But when someone from another religion participates in your ritual, and seems to benefit from it, then suddenly your community's ritual acquires more universal power and relevance. Maybe it doesn't just work for you. Maybe it just *works*.[42]

In their choice to participate, in a certain way, our Jewish guests were saying "This ritual works. This ritual does something important. This is worth doing. For us, at least this once."

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[40] Jon Paul Sydnor, "Complementary Reasoning and Interreligious Dialogue: A Case Study in Interdisciplinary Reflection," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15, no. 2 (2005): 173–175.
[41] Ali Rattansi, *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 98–104.
[42] Driver, "Transformation: The Magic of Ritual," 171–173.

***Difference within ritual experience***

So, when our Jewish sisters and brothers took part in our Christian communion, it ratified the efficacy of our ritual. As we briefly noted above, they could not have experienced it in the same way that we did. They are not disciples of Jesus, they do not think that he is a peculiarly transparent window onto God, their interpretation of God's intention for history is different from ours.[43] These differences will produce a different experience of communion, but they do not reduce our Jewish guests' participation to empty mimicry or an act of mockery.[44] What pervaded the room at the time was solemn respect and surprising solidarity.

In fact, we can be sure that everyone in that room had a different experience of both rituals, Jewish and Christian, since ritual experience is as diverse as ritual experiencers. But this diversity does not compromise the unity of practitioners. Instead, diversity of experience is a methodological resource, providing an abundance of interpretations by which we can better conform theology to God's vision.

I am fortunate enough to teach near the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, to which I frequently send my students. If a student cannot attend the MFA with our class, then I allow them to go later, with one caveat. Since I subscribe to Josiah Royce's concept of the Community of Interpretation, I ask that they go with another student and converse throughout the visit. According to Royce, only communal interpretation allows us to progress from simpler to "higher stages" of communal being, characterized by greater humanity.[45]

Applying this hermeneutic to the experience of art, I ask my students to place their experience of the work into conversation with their partner's experience of the work, in the hope that the resulting dialogue will enrich each individual's experience. In other words, I hope that intersubjectivity will inform subjectivity. Indeed, this is a quality of great art, be it visual, literary, or musical: the meaning will always overflow any one individual's interpretation; hence, it demands a Community of Interpretation. Faced with this inexhaustible surplus of meaning, we turn to others in order to plumb the depth and breadth of the work. Through interlocutors we learn more, and by learning more we become more. The other, and the other's difference, expands our own being.

At its best, inter-riting produces a Community of Interpretation, providing a glimmer of insight into the ritual experience of the other, and maybe even a clearer vision of one's own ritual experience. This glimmer acts as a window onto another possibility of being, of which the participant was previously unaware. Most importantly, it suggests the possibility of a world in which difference is harmonious, like the notes in a musical chord, the colors in an abstract painting, or the words in a majestic poem.[46] God's fulfillment of time is unimaginable, although Isaiah paints a powerful picture of it. Nevertheless, through interreligious ritual participation, we may be able

[43] Moyaert, "Religious Pluralism and Eucharistic Hospitality," 53–54.
[44] Ibid., 54–55.
[45] Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 315–318.
[46] Jon Paul Sydnor, "The Dance of Emptiness: A Constructive Comparative Theology of the Social Trinity," in *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*, ed. Michelle Voss Roberts (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 37–38.

to experience it a little. We may have all been looking through a mirror dimly, but what we saw was beautiful.

By way of consequence, interfaith leaders should, as Kenneth Burke advised, "Use all that can be used."[47] Due to the spiritual benefits of interreligious ritual participation, it should serve as an important interfaith practice. Like every method, it presents opportunities, poses dangers, and enforces limits. It engages the whole person, including the body and its senses, allowing us to think as an embodied, feeling consciousness. It frees interreligious experience, partially and briefly, from the linearity of language that characterizes intertextual approaches. It offers its own form of knowledge, knowing through activity, which can resonate well beyond the limited spacetime of the ritual itself. It can change our interpretation of life and our conduct in life, because it arises from life.[48]

### *Interreligious ritual participation as interformation*

All good theology is pastoral theology—theology that helps us to negotiate the depths of life, theology that makes us more alive, theology that meets us where we are but does not leave us there.[49]

Similarly, all good religious ritual is pastoral religious ritual. Interreligious ritual participation is a pastoral practice that deepens practitioners' relationship with God and one another. Boundaries blur as a shared ritual event offers a shared experience of the sacred and a shared transformation. Now, the ritual has changed both communities. It has changed them through its own meaning-accessing power, but it has also changed them because they accessed this meaning together, having joined hands across difference. God transgresses religious boundaries and blesses us through that transgression. Interreligious transformation occurs. *Interformation*—spiritual growth with and through another religious community—is possible. No longer may we interpret the religious other as a threat to our faith. Difference is a stimulant, not a contaminant. Through interformation, the religious other becomes our spiritual ally and an accelerant toward God.

In the end, we do not know what the outcome of interformation will be. Interreligious ritual participation is like a true conversation. If we give ourselves over to it, then no one controls it, and no one knows where it will go. Yet there is a certain exhilaration in this communication, in which two selves lose themselves to a new creation. Shared, absorbed creativity implies both trust and hope: trust of the other, and hope for difference to create beauty. Eventually, the conversation will end and the two will return to themselves, possibly transformed. Interformation will not produce what we expect, but it might produce what we need, God willing.

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[47] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 259–261.
[48] Theodore W. Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, 331–333.
[49] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 143.

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*Jon Paul Sydnor is Associate Professor of World Religions at Emmanuel College in Boston. He publishes in the area of interreligious thought and is the author of* Rāmānuja and Schleiermacher: Toward a Constructive Comparative Theology. *When not teaching and writing, Jon Paul serves as theologian-in-residence at Grace Community Boston where his wife, Rev. Abigail A. Henrich, is pastor.*