

## Commemorating the Shoah: Perspectives on the Possibility of a Jewish-Christian Memorial Service

Domenik Ackermann

*In contemplating ways to address the Holocaust existentially, John Pawlikowski emphasizes the necessity of a religious liturgical experience by stating that “[m]ere appeals to reason, authority, and/or natural law will prove ineffective by themselves. Such sensitivity will reemerge through a new awareness of God’s intimate link with humankind, in suffering and joy, through symbolic experience. Nothing short of this awareness will suffice in light of the Holocaust.” Symbols are the essence of liturgical experiences. Indeed, they connect to our emotions and provide a tangible liturgical experience. This article takes Pawlikowski’s thought one step further to the question of how such a liturgical experience can be possible for a memorial service where Jews and Christians can commemorate the Holocaust together in an interfaith worship experience in which Christians become familiar with Jewish liturgical and religious lives. Interfaith rituals increase familiarity among different traditions and decrease the perception of the religious other as a stranger. Successively, they may also lower biases against the other. Recently, interfaith Holocaust commemorations have become increasingly popular while also unveiling theological challenges for such an endeavor in respect to time, symbols, and liturgical elements. It addresses these challenges by way of presenting examples interfaith liturgies and their use of different liturgies. After these considerations, this paper proposes that the Megillat HaShoah (also called “Shoah Scroll”) stands out as a liturgical response to the Holocaust that can serve as an example for such an interfaith service. While not free of theological challenges for an interfaith service, it represents a Jewish response to remembering the six million Jewish people who died during the Second World War and familiarizes some Jewish liturgical environment to Christians in a unique way that can alleviate otherwise anti-Jewish sentiments.*

*Keywords: Shoah, Holocaust, Liturgy, Commemoration, Memory, Shoah Scroll, Judaism, Christianity, Jewish-Christian relations*

The Holocaust is an event in our history that shapes the identity of Jews and Christians alike. During the Third Reich, Jews were the main target of the German Nazi regime to be killed, while many Christians contributed to the Nazi ideology and their pursuit to kill the Jewish people. In the aftermath of World War II, a variety of attempts and approaches have been made to address healing and reconciliation, but also to make sure such an event will never happen again. While contemplating ways to address the Holocaust existentially through liturgy, scholar of Jewish-Christian relations John Pawlikowski wrote that “[m]ere appeals to reason, authority, and/or natural law will prove ineffective by themselves. Such sensitivity will reemerge through a new awareness of God’s intimate link with humankind, in suffering and joy, through symbolic experience. Nothing short of this awareness will suffice in light of the Holocaust.”<sup>1</sup> Pawlikowski’s remarks show his conviction that mere arguments and intellectual discussions around the tragic events of the Holocaust are insufficient responses. They lack the tangible symbolic experience, the visible human-divine connection that is needed to remember the Holocaust and to ensure that such a tragedy cannot happen again. Pawlikowski then claims that only a setting with symbolic experiences offers a meaningful way to mourn and remember. As a Christian scholar

---

<sup>1</sup> John T. Pawlikowski, “Liturgy and the Holocaust: How Do We Worship in an Age of Genocide?,” in *Christian Responses to the Holocaust: Moral and Ethical Issues*, ed. Donald J. Dietrich (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 168–76.

who works in the field of Christian and Jewish liturgies, I read Pawlikowski’s remarks as a call for such a fundamental religious liturgical experience. A liturgical setting, such as a memorial service can provide the unique symbolic framework Pawlikowski deems necessary and creates a setting for human-divine encounter because liturgy is a communal, symbolic ritual that establishes and maintains a relationship with the divine and with the other participants. It is not just an intellectual discourse but rather a performative act.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, the question around a meaningful Holocaust liturgy has been of debate in both Jewish and Christian cycles, more recently even discussing the possibility of an interfaith Holocaust liturgy. Specifically, Ruth Langer suggests an interfaith Holocaust liturgy as a means to prevent participation in events even remotely compared to the Holocaust from happening again.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Langer’s thought is not a mere repetition of Pawlikowski’s call but can be read as a condition for the meaningful experience he sought. Such a liturgy would address his concern about a liturgy that highlights what he calls “God’s intimate link” to humans. Indeed, interfaith rituals increase familiarity among different traditions and decrease the perception of the religious other as a stranger. Successively, they may also lower biases against the other. Recently, such interfaith Holocaust commemorations have become increasingly popular, while also unveiling theological challenges for such an endeavor in respect to time, symbols, and liturgical elements.

As we shall see, multiple attempts have been made to facilitate interfaith commemorations. However, the liturgical resources for interfaith memorial services that are accessible either maintained a distinctly Christian liturgical framework with prayer of confessions, benedictions, etc. or were offered by non-profit organizations or governmental institutions. Also, Jewish liturgical material on this memorial service is inaccessible. However, the liturgical material at hand renders the question of how one can accomplish such a fundamental interreligious experience, and to what merit. From a Christian perspective, it is a struggle to find good resources for an interfaith service that speaks to the Jewish communities, avoiding accidental anti-Jewish sentiments or supersessionism. The following remarks, then, embark on these questions by outlining some perspectives ahead of an interfaith memorial service for the Shoah, offering an example and a resource for such an endeavor. The first section examines three challenges for its interfaith possibility. Within this exploration, the first challenge is how an interfaith memorial service fits into ritual categories by bringing the possibility of an interfaith memorial service in conversation with research on rituals. This article addresses this challenge in an engagement with Catherine Bell’s ritual categories. The second challenge addresses the date of such a memorial service in the Christian and Jewish calendars. The third challenge mentioned here considers the liturgical texts for such a memorial service.

The second section provides perspectives that may alleviate the difficulties outlined in the first section by suggesting (1) that there is room for a new ritual category, that is, an interfaith ritual which is an expression of a deep conviction shared by the participating religious traditions; Evidence shows that these interfaith rituals already exist; (2) that a date needs to be found that does not interfere with Jewish memorial days to protect the distinctly Jewish identity; and (3) the

---

<sup>2</sup> Frank C. Senn, *Introduction to Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 5, 10. See also: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11. Wolterstorff’s definition of liturgy as a performative act highlights how liturgy is a ritual act.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Langer, “Jewish Liturgical Memory and the Non-Jew,” in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, ed. Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2014), 185.

use of texts written by victims and survivors of the Shoah, to let the time of the Holocaust speak for itself. These texts should be unified as part of a liturgy.

The third and final section considers the theological value of such an interfaith memorial service from a Christian perspective on the theological level and the liturgical level. As we shall see, an interfaith memorial service provides the possibility of interreligious learning. This article proposes the use of a Jewish liturgical framework provides a learning experience for us Christians. Christians can learn theologically from the Jewish concept of memory, while liturgically, Christians will get to know the Jewish “stranger” through the liturgy familiar to religious Jews. This section, then, concludes with the proposal to consider the Shoah Scroll as a natural interfaith liturgy as it combines and captures the preceding considerations.

### **The Question of Interfaith Possibility**

A Jewish-Christian commemoration of the Shoah invites people from the two different religious traditions to participate in the memory of a historical event and learn from one another through ritual participation. However, the question that needs attention on this matter is in what framework this commemoration can take place. Particularly, there are three specific challenges regarding the nature of ritual, the time and space, and the liturgical text.

The first challenge lies within the nature of the category ritual itself. Generally, a ritual is the public expression of the faith of one’s religious community. In a communal ritual setting, it is then a collective expression of a distinct faith in one or many distinct deities.<sup>4</sup> The rituals are what is most visible of religious institutions. These usually include a selection of texts particular to the religion, which makes the ritual exclusive to those who practice that particular faith. Most or all of these texts do not share the deity, theological views or the particular religious language of others. In this particular case, there have been debates about whether Jews and Christians worship the same God because we share much of the Bible as a religious document. There is plethora of answers to this particular question. The goal of an interfaith liturgy on the Holocaust (thus also this article) assumes a view that both religions believe in the same deity. Phil Cunningham and Jan Katzew make a good point that, ultimately, everyone—even within one’s own community—worships to some degree a different God. Ultimately, however, the shared foundations and beliefs and ideas about God give a foundation to assume we do worship the same God.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Bell has made herself known for her distinguished research on categorizing rituals. She distinguishes between six genres of ritual activities: rites of passage; calendrical rites; rites of exchange and communion; rites of affliction; feasting, fasting and festivals; and political rites. When reviewing these different genres, one may think a ritual like a commemoration on the Shoah does not seem to have a place. When considering the nature of this particular commemoration, the mere idea of an interreligious rite seems incompatible with the traditional understanding of ritual since it could not serve as a collective expression of faith. Ultimately, Bell stresses that it is ultimately impossible to clearly define ritual and categorize it. She never worked on interreligious ritual but it seems that such a commemoration, where different religious groups come together, would be an addition that fits within her openness toward ritual categorization. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 2009). Also, Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Philip A. Cunningham and Jan Katzew, “Do Christians and Jews Worship the Same God?,” in *Irreconcilable Differences? A Learning Resource for Jews and Christians* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 48. See also, in dialogue with Muslim views, the four different essays in Ronnie P. Campbell, Jr. and Christopher Gnanakan, eds., *Do Christians, Muslims, and Jews Worship the Same God? Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019); Also, Miroslav

Subsequently, an interreligious commemoration merits the question of its locus in ritual studies. I have already pointed out that a liturgy is a ritual act of one religious tradition. Based on this basic definition, how, then, can a liturgy become an interfaith endeavor? In their introduction to interreligious prayer, Ruth Langer and Stephanie Slykes-Perdew argue that, while worship remains the locus for the celebration of one’s particular tradition, interreligious worship is a common American experience. Among other schemas, they outline the interreligious worship in times of tragedy. Based on the memorial service after September 11, 2001, they argue that interreligious worship can “break down walls of suspicion and mistrust, and perhaps quell the fundamentalism or extremist fringes present in all three [Abrahamic] religions.”<sup>6</sup>

As noted, another challenge that needs consideration is the date on which such a commemoration can take place. This question may appear to be arbitrary at first. However, Jews and Christians developed different liturgical calendars with different customs regarding the remembrance of the Shoah thereof. An investigation into a fixed date for the interreligious ceremony presumes that both Christians and Jews seek to incorporate a liturgical, religious commemoration into their liturgical calendar that is defined by their own theological narratives. Whereas the United Nations recognize January 27 as the “Day of the Remembrance of the Holocaust,” in Jewish circles, especially in Israel, people remember the Shoah on *Yom ha-Zikkaron le-Shoah* less than a week after Passover ends. Thus, that day is usually sometime in April. The Knesset officially recognized this day in 1959 as a day of observance. *Yom ha-Shoah* further contrasts the practice of some observant Jews. *This* is not a prescribed Jewish day of observation in the religious calendar because many religious Jewish communities remember all Jewish tragedies collectively on *Tisha B’av* (“the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av”)—including the Holocaust, even if they remember it on *Yom ha-Shoah*. This fact about the different days created a discourse on the separate liturgical memory in Jewish scholarship as many Jewish scholars argue that *Tisha B’av* is sufficient for the observance of the Shoah.<sup>7</sup> Most famous for the reluctance of separate observance of the Shoah is Joseph Soloveitchik. Following his father, he refers to one of the elegies (*kinot*) that highlights *Tisha B’Av’s* commemoration of *all* Jewish tragedies, which makes any other commemoration obsolete.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the Jewish liturgist Dalia Marx points out that it is prevalent for Jewish people to respond to historical events in a liturgical way.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, she argues for a separate liturgical service to remember the Shoah. These voices are evidence for the context of a discussion in the Jewish world about whether a separate commemoration of the

---

Volf, *Do We Worship the Same God? Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Langer and Stephanie Van Slyke Perdue, “Interreligious Prayer: Introduction,” *Liturgy (Washington)* 26, no. 3 (2011): 1–10.

<sup>7</sup> Generally, the debate about *Yom HaShoah* had lots of factors. Here is a discussion of the orthodox end: Jacob Joseph Schacter, “Holocaust Commemoration and Tish’a Be-Av: The Debate Over ‘Yom ha-Sho’a,’” in *Tradition* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 164–97; Arye Edrei, “Holocaust Memorial: A Paradigm of Competing Memories in the Religious and Secular Societies in Israel,” in Doron Mendels, ed., *On Memory: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 37–100; Ismar Schorsch and Jackie Feldman, “Memory and the Holocaust: Two Perspectives,” in Harvey Goldberg, ed., *The Life of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 149–71.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish’ah be-Av Kinot*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Jersey City: Ktav Publishing House, 2006), 289–301.

<sup>9</sup> Dalia Marx, “Memorializing the Shoah,” in Laurence A. Hoffman, ed., *May God Remember. Memory and Memorializing in Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), 39–62 at 40.

Shoah is necessary or appropriate when *Tisha B'Av* is the fast day on which all Jewish tragedies are remembered.<sup>10</sup> It seems, then, that, if one attempts a common celebration, there is a discussion to be had as to which of these days may be appropriate for a common memorial service.

Finally, the nature of ritual points to the third challenge to be discussed, that is the challenge of what text can be used. If the liturgical settings of both the Christian and Jewish traditions rely on liturgical texts for recitation or reading (usually, these are biblical sources or other authoritative sources within the tradition like the Apostle's Creed in the Christian tradition or the Talmud in the Jewish tradition), the question becomes what text beyond the Hebrew Bible adheres to the theme of commemorating the Shoah. Christians and Jews have a kaleidoscope of different religious texts. One may argue that the Hebrew Bible would suit the need for this inter-ritual commemoration. However, this could also lead to one tradition superimposing its interpretation over the other. Additionally, scholars in comparative theology, such as Catherine Cornille, point out the challenge to empathize with texts that do not belong to one's own particular traditions.<sup>11</sup>

### **Liturgical Perspectives**

The following perspectives seek to address the challenges highlighted above to provide a pathway for a Christian-Jewish commemoration of the Shoah. To clarify, the following suggestions are by no means prescriptions for a successful inter-religious commemoration. Instead, they mean to lay the groundwork for further discussion and consider options for a meaningful commemoration.

The ritual remembering of the Shoah provides a liturgical space to remember the horrific killing of the Jewish people while connecting with God in the remembering of the tragic events. Many religious communities have similar rituals in which they celebrate or remember historical events because of their identity-shaping nature. Instances may be Passover, Easter, or Ashura. As a day of remembrance of a similar event, remembering the Shoah represents a unique case in ritual theory because it reflects an event that informs not only religious communities but also involves non-religious people and countries. As such, it naturally invites people from different religious traditions to participate. Additionally a Jewish-Christian remembrance of the Shoah can serve as an interreligious expression of the deep shared conviction that such an event shall never happen again and that every single human life is precious, and invites a shared space to maintain a human-divine relationship in the remembering of the suffering during World War II. The shared conviction, combined with the shared historical memory and the shared faith in a God who saves and redeems, invites for such an inter-ritual encounter. What needs to be addressed, then, is the shape and form of the shared narrative of this commemoration.

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Jacob Schacter, "Holocaust Commemoration and 'Tisha'a be-Av': The Debate over 'Yom ha-Shoah,'" in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 41/2 (2008): 164–97. Schacter provides an outline for the discussion in Jewish communities. Indeed, Yom ha-Shoah is not necessarily recognized or observed. The usual setting for remembering Jewish tragedies is the fast day Tisha B'Av.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Cornille, *Empathy and Inter-Religious Dialogue* (2008), 109. Cornille shows that the question of empathy does not only touch issues on a textual basis. Instead, she points out, people of different traditions can only empathize with analogy due to the limited exposure to the other tradition.

When considering the date for this memorial service, one could say that, in most general terms, a commemoration service could happen at any time during the year. The discussion around a possible date in the year depends on the desire for an established day in the liturgical calendar that carries symbolic meaning. Other religious commemorations have their fixed dates within the liturgical years. Prominently, All Saints Day is fixed in the Christian calendar near the end of the liturgical year, on November 1<sup>st</sup>. As highlighted before, the Jewish calendar commemorates Jewish tragedies on *Tisha’ B’Av*. When Jewish scholarship, then, debates about the possibility of a memorial service for the Shoah that is separate from *Tisha B’Av*, their focus relies on a distinct, separate Jewish holiday. An interreligious commemoration, however, has not been part of the discussion. To be sure, this debate would shift its focus entirely when considering a Jewish-Christian memorial day. Soloveitchik makes a good point when saying that all Jewish tragedies are celebrated on *Tisha B’Av*, that same day becomes a holiday that distinctly commemorates part of Jewish identity.<sup>12</sup> Thus, commemorating during a specific Shoah service with Christians on Tisha B’Av, for instance, would be inappropriate because it would take up the space dedicated to remembering other events that shape Jewish identity. However, the interreligious memorial service for the Shoah aims to remember events that also shape Christian identity. The discussion shows that the establishment of one particular day for a Jewish-Christian memorial service depends on its overall goal. While my proposal to commemorate together shares the idea of commemorating the killing of the six million Jews, it also attempts to provide a shared space for Jews and Christians to remember in the presence of God. As such, the remembrance can happen at any time that suits the individual religious communities involved. In that light, a historical event that does not have a fostered liturgical tradition offers an opening for a meaningful liturgical experience that creates a shared memory and shared texts at its core. The careful selection of texts can provide an opening for ritual remembering of the Holocaust. However, in this inter-ritual setting, sacred texts—even shared ones—become objects of different interpretations.

As Lawrence Hoffman points out, Christian texts would be an inappropriate superimposition on the Jewish participants. Hoffman asserts that one should not “hurt Jews by praying in words that cannot be theirs.”<sup>13</sup> Christians need to be careful not to superimpose their own liturgical and theological tradition and allow space for Jewish traditions.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the use of the Hebrew Bible would create tensions for both traditions as Jews and Christians interpret shared texts in different ways. Marianne Moyaert distinctively elaborates on the question of the use of sacred texts in rituals in the context of inter-religious ritual participation and questions their prominent roles in these services. Moyaert proposes to move away from the texts using non-textual sources to find common ground.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the focus symbols instead of texts can alleviate the challenges of finding textual commonalities within the traditions. Although Christianity and Judaism have a large textual basis in common, the use of non-textual sources needs further attention. Her remarks, however, lead to another thought on the use of texts outside a specific

---

<sup>12</sup> There were local commemorations of local tragedies as well. Some of these, when the community was expelled, were lost; others were transferred to Tisha B’Av. There are other minor national fast days on the Jewish calendar that recall other events tied to the fall of Jerusalem.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Hoffman, “Jewish-Christian Services. Babel or Mixed Multitude?,” in *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Spring 1990): 13.

<sup>14</sup> Hoffman, “Jewish-Christian Services,” 13.

<sup>15</sup> Marianne Moyaert, “Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 1 (2018): 1–23 at 11.

religious tradition: In the case of an inter-religious commemoration of a historical event that crosses the boundaries of one faith tradition, texts from witnesses or survivors from the Holocaust would let history become present in the moment of liturgical commemoration. These texts offer a unique way to build a commemoration based on historical witnesses.

There seems to be a liturgical trend for remembering the Holocaust to include texts written by survivors or victims. For instance, the memorial service “Harvest of Hate/Seeds of Love” included several statements of victims and survivors using texts from Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel.<sup>16</sup> Christian religious services also moved toward the use of survivor texts. The Bloor Street United Church in Toronto, for instance, structured their whole liturgy around different texts from survivors like Elie Wiesel or Leo Baeck.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the sharing of texts from the time of the Shoah avoids the tensions of finding the right text for the purpose of memory. Instead, they can become text and subject of liturgical memory as they carry memory into the present during the ritual.

Nonetheless, when comparing different liturgical approaches, they all share commonalities that reveal two challenges. On the one hand, many of the services that invite both Christian and Jews were offered by non-religious institutions. This includes the services of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum or the interfaith service of the Houston Holocaust center.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the liturgies that are accessible seem to remain simply Christian in Christian services or distinctly Jewish in Jewish services. Only few religious liturgies embark on a distinct move away from this tendency. One example is the service from the United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, CA, that uses some features of the Jewish prayer like *Ani Ma’amin* (“I believe”).<sup>19</sup> However, these Christian attempts to use Jewish liturgy seem to not have a liturgical connection to the remainder of the Christian service. Their use further renders the question of the Jewish perception. In this case, one may ask why *Ani Ma’amin* is at the beginning of the liturgy in this Christian, calling it a “song” that was sung in the concentration camps. However, this prayer is prayed by many Jews to this day when concluding their morning prayer or their Shabbat evening prayer. The same liturgy incorporates the *Shema*, also seemingly without any intentionality in respect to the structure of the service. While the *Shema* is the closest of what Christians call a creed, Christians also reinterpreted it in ways that are far from the Jewish understanding.<sup>20</sup>

More recently, there have been attempts to provide interfaith services in particular communities. There is little liturgical material at hand. However, one instance that needs mentioning is the memorial service “From Desolation to Hope” (1983) which was edited by Eugene Fisher and Leon Klenicki. This service recognizes the growing interest in a joint

---

<sup>16</sup> “Harvest of Hate/Seeds of Love: Remembering the Voices That Were Silenced,” in Marcia S. Littell and Sharon W. Gutman, eds., *Liturgies on the Holocaust. An Interfaith Anthology. New and Revised Edition* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1996), 17. Frank is remembered in other services as well, though only mentioned indirectly. See, for example, *Liturgies on the Holocaust*, 85.

<sup>17</sup> “A Christian Service in memory of the Holocaust,” in Marcia S. Littell and Sharon W. Gutman, eds., *Liturgies on the Holocaust*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Marcia S. Littell and Sharon W. Gutman, eds., *Liturgies on the Holocaust*.

<sup>19</sup> “Yom HaShoah: Holocaust Remembrance Day,” in Marcia S. Littell and Sharon W. Gutman, eds., *Liturgies on the Holocaust*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance Roberta Sabbath’s contribution to a symposium on the Shema. See Peter Zaas, “Symposium on the Shema,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48, no. 3 (2018): 133–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107918781280>.

commemoration and uses Genesis 1-2 as their scriptural basis. Here, narrator and reader interact in narrating from the silence of creation in Genesis to the silence in Europe about the killing of the Jews.<sup>21</sup> The service also includes the lighting of six candles, one each representing one million killed Jews, and the recitation of a short version of the Shema. It also includes the Kaddish. Thus, it does incorporate familiar Jewish liturgical elements. Yet, it seems there is more weight on the Christian response to the Holocaust, when reading Niemoeller (p. 10) and John Paul II, and the Kaddish is randomly placed at the end of the liturgy. It lacks a platform for learning theologically about Jewish religious customs.

The intention to use features of distinctly Jewish liturgies may be grounds for liturgical learning for Christians. The participation in a commemoration that is shaped by Jewish customs alleviates the perception of some Christians towards Jewish people as “strangers.” History has shown us how the lack of knowledge about the other can lead to misinterpretations.<sup>22</sup> The encounter with Jewish traditions and texts can ease the perception of the other as strange and create the opportunity for Christians to experience this otherness in order for them to become more familiar with the Jewish other. In the words of Aidan Kavanagh, one needs to instead learn the language, vocabulary, and the different syntax of the Jewish tradition.<sup>23</sup>

On an interreligious level, Christians may be able to participate in parts of a ritual that is unknown to them. Looking back at some of the Christian liturgies mentioned before, it is striking that the exposure to distinct Jewish texts has thus far been limited. Scholars in the field of interreligious studies and comparative theology highlight that interreligious dialogue creates a learning opportunity for all parties involved. It involves more than a mere exchange of information about one another.<sup>24</sup> Moyaert, for example, adapts Ricœur’s cultural-linguistic philosophy to argue for a Christian openness toward the other religious language. She rightly points out that opening up toward the other can facilitate the identification of what she calls “the strange in [one’s] own tradition.”<sup>25</sup>

## Theological Learning

Thus far, I have tried to make a case for the possibility of an interreligious commemoration of the Shoah, highlighting some of the key challenges and perspectives related to this endeavor. The previous remarks leave us with another thought that needs attention, that is, the liturgical framework. To be sure, the use of a distinct liturgy that is not one’s own can create a unique experience that exposes one tradition to another. Coming from a Christian perspective, I see the possibility of inter-religious learning for Christians on a theological and a liturgical level when considering a Jewish liturgy as a basis.

---

<sup>21</sup> Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki, eds., *From Desolation to Hope. An Interreligious Holocaust Memorial Service* (New York, Chicago: Stimulus Foundation, 1990), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Among many works, Mary Boys’ compilation *Seeing Judaism Anew* highlights the many distorted views toward Judaism in history. Mary C. Boys, ed., *Seeing Judaism Anew* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: the Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary*, 1981 (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Cornille argues that under the pre-condition to see the religious other as equal, inter-religious encounter may become part of the endeavor to seek ultimate truth. Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2008), 3; also 177 and following.

<sup>25</sup> Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities Toward a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 219.

On a theological level, the Jewish liturgical use of memory as a re-presentation of identity can enrich the Christian understanding of memory. The Jewish High Holidays represent identity-shaping and historical events, however selectively,<sup>26</sup> that are remembered through liturgy. Focusing on the biblical narratives, which are largely shaped by a historical understanding, Judaism relates to these narratives with a focus on memory. Emma O'Donnell-Polyakov highlights this focus on memory in Judaism by pointing out Judaism's connectedness with these narratives.<sup>27</sup> Most prominent among the narratives that shape Judaism's focus on history is the festival of Passover, which remembers Israel's exodus from Egypt through the deliverance from God and his prophet Moses. Strikingly, the Passover Seder, by delivering a fixed structure, becomes an act of remembering the deliverance from Egypt. Although there are different *Haggadot* with different emphases, the structure of the Seder is fixed and repeated every year in the way it is prescribed in the *Haggadah*: The fixedness of the Seder, the repetition of the ritual every year, and the use of senses through food, then symbolically realize this commandment and make this historic event present in the here and now. Moreover, it shows the Jewish emphasis on "the continuity between the past and the present, particularly as it impacts the community."<sup>28</sup>

Alice Eckhardt pleads that the Shoah should be remembered similarly, i.e., that remembering "the past live[s] in the present in a meaningful way so that each generation experiences those events that help to give meaning to its existence."<sup>29</sup> In her remarks, she outlines the necessity for a Christian engagement in liturgical memory. Her view is distinctively focused on Christian liturgy. However, it lacks liturgical novelty or any essential explanation as to what is needed to create such a liturgy. She sees the necessity of engaging worshippers in a way that they can relate to the threat and danger of Jewish families faced by the Nazis. However, her whole intention lacks the distinctiveness of a Shoah memorial service that such a memorial service needs. In this case, commemorating the Shoah needs the observer to be immersed in the Jewish context so that one becomes familiar with otherwise strange Jewish other.<sup>30</sup> Although, as noted, some liturgies include parts from the *Ma'ariv* (Shabbat evening service) or from the High Holidays like the *Ani Ma'anim* ("I am faithful") or *piyyutim*<sup>31</sup>, many liturgies found have a Christian format in the sense that they reflect the standard Christian structure of worship, including Christian hymns.<sup>32</sup> On an interreligious level, they resemble a rather patronizing Christianity.

---

<sup>26</sup> With the term "historical events" I refer to putative historical events in Judaism that shape the distinct Jewish identity. Yosef Yerushalmi outlines that history is not necessarily historiographic. He emphasizes that, like any memory, Jewish memory is selective memory. See, for example, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor. Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 5–10.

<sup>27</sup> Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future: The Experience of Time in Jewish and Christian Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 179.

<sup>28</sup> Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future*, 180.

<sup>29</sup> Alice Eckhardt, "Creating Christian Yom HaShoah Liturgies," in Marcia S. Littell and Sharon W. Gutman, eds., *Liturgies on the Holocaust*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Alice Eckhardt, *Creating Christian Yom HaShoah Liturgies*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> One example is the memorial service from the United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, CA. This service also includes the Mourner's Kaddish, which some people pray during the *Ma'ariv* when they experience loss.

<sup>32</sup> The Interfaith Holocaust Service in Houston, TX, used the hymn "O God help our ages past," which is a Christian hymn. See, Littell, *Liturgies*, 25.

Scholars like O’Donnell-Polyakov point out the Christian directedness of time toward the future instead of the past.<sup>33</sup> However, Meyer argues that memory is a culturally stabilizing factor that helps Christianity reflect on its theology and behavior. Indeed, memory shapes one’s own identity, as seen earlier with the Passover Seder. When applied to an interfaith Shoah memorial service, memory fosters our identity in relation to the Jewish community and the Jewish tradition and sees in an engagement with this tradition of memory a way for Christians to reflect on their own identity theologically.<sup>34</sup>

### **Liturgical Considerations: The Shoah Scroll**

These remarks leave us with liturgical considerations on an interfaith liturgy. I propose that the *Megillat ha-Shoah* (Engl. “Shoah Scroll”) may be a proper liturgy for an interfaith memorial service. The Shoah Scroll was created by Avigdor Shinan and later recognized by the Rabbinic Assembly, i.e., the body of Conservative Rabbis, in Jerusalem in 2003 and has not gained attention widely outside Israel. Similar to some other liturgies highlighted before, this scroll uses Jewish liturgical elements and memories from victims combined with the symbol of lighting six candles, one for each million Jews that were killed.<sup>35</sup> Embedded in the daily *Ma’ariv* prayer, the scroll is composed in six stages, each of which resembles the creation story and the chaotic elements of the first day of creation. Stage 1, for instance, starts with us all too familiar word “In the beginning.”<sup>36</sup> The headlines of each of these stages resemble a different aspect of the creation story, connected with the memories. During each of these six stages, the Megillah suggests the playing of the melody or singing of the prayer *Ani Ma’amin*. Additionally, the *Megillat ha-Shoah* includes an altered version of the *Yizkor*, which is prayed on some holidays including Yom Kippur and Passover, the Mourner’s Kaddish, and Yiddish songs. The scroll concludes with the Hatikvah, which is the National Anthem of Israel.<sup>37</sup> Embedding common Jewish liturgical elements in the scroll provides an accessible framework for Jewish communities and can serve as an interreligious liturgy that exposes Christians to the Jewish liturgical structure. At the same time, elements like the Yizkor are appropriated for the particular occasion.

For three reasons, then, I think the Shoah Scroll should be considered an appropriate liturgy for interreligious commemoration. Firstly, it combines different aspects of Jewish liturgies and appropriates them to the specific service. For instance, in chapter four, the scroll uses the memory from Yaakov-David Ben Yoel-Tzvi Halevi, which scholars consider to be his last words.<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, the scroll is Jewish in its outline and its performance, making a commemoration possible without superimposing a Christian worship style onto Jews. But more

---

<sup>33</sup> Emma O’Donnell, *Remembering the Future*, 176. O’Donnell points out Christian theological thinkers like Hans Urs von Balthasar, who see in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ a turning point toward an eschatological orientation of time.

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Meyer, *Anamnese*, 102.

<sup>35</sup> *Megillat ha-Shoah*, 26. The Shoah Scroll suggests either lighting all six candles at the beginning of the recitation of the Ma’ariv service or at the beginning of each chapter of the reading.

<sup>36</sup> *Megillat ha-Shoah*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Although made official more recently, it has functioned this way all along, including for the pre-state Zionist movements.

<sup>38</sup> *Megillat ha-Shoah*, 45.

pressingly, it provides a framework for an experience of learning for Christians. Christians are able to submerge into a liturgical experience other than their own and become more familiar with some Jewish religious customs and liturgical experiences. Thirdly, using the liturgical symbol of lighting candles, a practice used by both Christian and Jews, the memory becomes a tangible experience.

Finally, there is some merit to the fact that the Shoah-Scroll is a fixed text. Using the scroll in its fixed nature produces a repetition that creates a memory. Indeed, the reading and re-reading the same texts every year shapes an otherwise empty void of memory. Real people wrote these texts in the past. For Christians, this is an important liturgical shift, as the Christian liturgical focus is so much focused on the presence and the future. Christians remember and to know a past they have never personally experienced. Listening time and again to the same stories can create empathy and maybe even a sense of identity.

Having considered all the above, one should mention caveats that need further discussion. No text comes without challenges in interreligious worship. One caveat is the use of Hatikvah. The poem, which in itself is more a religious statement than a political one, became the national anthem of Israel in 2004. This was around the same time the Shoah-Scroll was published. Singing Hatikvah can leave the impression of a national commemoration instead of a religious one. As with other liturgies, especially in the United States, one must ask, what does it mean to sing a national anthem in a liturgy?

Furthermore, one may ask as to whether this commemoration should include a Christian penitential rite. We have discussed the challenge that past liturgies have been distinctly Christian in their outlines and have pointed out that commemorating the Shoah would create a space where inter-ritual participation can happen with an emphasis on the Jewish liturgical tradition. At the same time, a commemoration with Christians merits the inclusion of confessional prayers. The known collaboration of Christians in the Nazi regime to kill Jews even necessitate it. And yet, the *Megillat ha-Shoah* does not offer a separate penitential prayer from the regular Ma'arive service. However, the prayer of confession was a crucial aspect in many of the Christian liturgies. How can a commemoration among Christians and Jews with the Megillah, from the perspective of both victim and perpetrator, include such a penitential rite?

Finally, the liturgy of the *Megillat ha-Shoah* includes specific theological language at two points. At one point, it explicitly alludes to the *Shema*, which some people consider the Jewish creed.<sup>39</sup> The theological implications of “God is One” for Christians can be problematic for Jews, when praying alongside Christians, as Christians believe in one God as a triune God. Another theological challenge is the praying of the *Ani Ma'anim*, which is an explicitly messianic prayer that expresses the belief in the coming of the Messiah, and is in its origin an anti-Christian text. For Christians, this text becomes difficult as they believe Jesus Christ was the Messiah, who already came.<sup>40</sup> For Jews, the praying of this prayer alongside Christians may suggest a reading of the “second coming” of the Messiah, which is a Christian messianic hope. How do we deal with these theological texts? One way would be to leave them out and manipulate the Megillah in a way that is free of difficult theological statements. Another way to deal with these texts is to

---

<sup>39</sup> *Megillat ha-Shoah*, 24–25.

<sup>40</sup> *Megillat ha-Shoah*, 26.

keep them and explain both Jewish and Christian interpretations of these texts, acknowledging both understandings.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Memory welds the individual to the community and the religious sphere to the historical. A ritual commemoration of the Shoah has the potential to be a day of commemoration in an inter-religious setting. When considering such a commemoration with texts from victims or survivors of the Shoah and a Jewish liturgical framework, the participants remember the historical events by witnessing to their words. Also, the Shoah Scroll itself needs further examination. However, the Shoah Scroll brings to present memories mostly through symbols and words and provides a way for Christians to befriend the Jewish liturgy and the Hebrew language, which can alleviate the feeling of Jews being a “stranger.”

While the perspectives on the text and the liturgy for such an endeavor provide a setting for interreligious learning from a Christian point of view, the foregoing remarks are by no means meant to be complete. In respect to the date, such a commemoration needs the collaboration of religious officials to come to terms that respect the memorial services distinct to the Jewish tradition and fit into the respective liturgical calendars. While the general perspective is to use a date that does not interfere with Jewish memorial services, can an interreligious commemoration circumvent the ongoing debate about a separate memorial day for the Shoah in Jewish scholarship? Another topic that needs further attention is the space for such a memorial service. Are Christian-Jewish relations at a place in history that allows the sharing of one’s religious space? I also highlighted some theological considerations that need further attention when it comes to the text of the Megillah. The use of *Shema* and *Ani Ma’anim* raises further thought on the theological implications of these texts for Jews and Christians. There is no simple solution for dealing with them.

Furthermore, the *Megillat ha-Shoah* does not alleviate an interreligious engagement beyond the text. The discussion on the texts of interreligious ritual participation left us with the impression that there is room for engagement with useful non-textual symbols that can be employed. Lighting candles for the people who died may only be one among many other options. But there is a richer treasure of symbols for non-textual engagement that needs further consideration. Finally, the preceding thoughts consider the theological value of such a memorial service for Christians. How, then, can such an interfaith memorial service with Christians be of additional value to the Jewish community?



*Domenik Ackermann is a Ph. D. Candidate in Comparative Theology at Boston College. He studied Theology in Göttingen (Germany), Heidelberg (Germany), and Beirut (Lebanon). His research focuses on concepts of liturgical prayer and prayerfulness. In his current research project, Domenik focuses on how Jewish liturgy can inform a Christian idea of prayerfulness by bringing discussions on prayer in rabbinic literature in conversation with phenomenological discourses in the works of Jean-Louis Chrétien and Johann Baptist Metz. Beyond his project, Domenik is also engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue generally, discussing relevant topics of dialogue. Domenik is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ.*

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (*JIRS*) are the authors' own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, or *JIRS* publishing partners.