

Engaging Particularities XVIII **“Living Rituals: Through Memory, Language, and Identity”**

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Guest Editor

The 18th Annual Engaging Particularities conference at Boston College explored the topic of ritual and the various ways in which ritual can be experienced and studied. In ritual, histories are made present, identity is conferred, and community is constituted. Rituals mark life-births, deaths, and milestones in between. They can connect some to the gods, send others to the Pure Land, and cast out devils and demons. Ritual remains one of the more enigmatic categories in the study of religion. Choices abound in defining, categorizing, and describing ritual and ritual spaces. This conference interrogated the place of ritual in our world today, paying particular attention to the role rituals play in the formation of our identities, both personally and communally.

This special issue marks the third cooperation between the Engaging Particularities (EP) committee and the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)*. EP, dedicated to comparative theology and interreligious dialogue, is one of the longest-running graduate student conferences in North America and continues to bring scholars-in-formation together from institutions across the world to convene around a particular topic or theme every year. The pandemic disrupted our 2020 conference weeks before it was set to take place. As organizer, I postponed it to 2021 and held it virtually. I am grateful for the opportunity to present these papers from the 2021 conference in this special issue of the *JIRS*, and I look forward to the collaborative special issue for the 2022 conference, whose theme was “Liberation Theologies in Comparative Perspective.”

The EP committee includes graduate students from the Boston College Theology Department who specialize in Comparative Theology. Every year, the conference gathers a rich and diverse set of perspectives on a specific topic and convenes a dialogical exploration of this theme. The call for papers of the 2021 EP asked various questions: Where do rituals happen, or not? What are the defining characteristics of “ritual”? Must religious traditions be inherently ritualistic? Do rituals abound outside of religious conceptions? What are the results of removing rituals from their traditional contexts? How are rituals operative for religious communities today? What questions are raised, refocused, or answered in ritual encounters across religious boundaries? How do rituals mark—or subvert—insiders and outsiders, participants and observers? In what ways are memories handed down through ritual to communities of religious traditions? The four articles in this special issue highlight some of the wisdom these questions generated throughout the conference. Each author is working with various traditions, presented comparatively with a second religious tradition, while delving into the category of ritual.

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The first article in this special issue is written by Lukas Wiesenhütter, who takes up the question of theodicy and rephrases it as: Where is God’s justice present here and now? Wiesenhütter examines Johann Baptist Metz’s critique of the theoretical theodicy discourse and turns to the Islamic tradition, specifically the writings of Murtaza Mutahhari and Khaled Abou El Fadl, to introduce practical approaches to the problem of evil. Wiesenhütter contends that the divide between theory and practice of theodicy needs to be overcome and that *Shari‘a* (God’s divine law) offers fertile ground to Christian theology both for dialogue and to comprehend Divine Justice. By understanding *Shari‘a* as “God’s Justice among his servants” in the famous words of Ibn Qayyim, as a practical response to evil, it is clear that God’s Justice can be experienced in the here and now. In his conclusion, Wiesenhütter asserts that the distinction between *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *Shari‘a* can help Christian theologians navigate the gap between Divine justice and how it remains to be fulfilled, while also resolving the tension Metz articulated between theoretical and practical approaches to the problem of evil. Finally, to inspire a rediscovery of Christian ritual practices, which are often separate from daily routines, he suggests a Christian understanding of *Shari‘a*, which includes rituals, liturgical elements, and actions pertaining to worship—all integrated into daily Muslim practices.

In the second article, Domenik Ackermann focuses on the Passover holiday, the Last Supper, and the data that connect the two. Ackermann complexifies existing research by expanding the understanding of liturgical memory through examining the meaning of memory both in Jesus’s time and in rabbinic Judaism. He delves into biblical passages of the Passover Seder (Exodus 12 and Deuteronomy 26) as well as their treatment in rabbinic discourse to determine memory’s function in the Haggadah. Then, he turns to the daily prayers of the Dead Sea Scrolls (*Words of the Luminaries*) to open space for interrogating the wider use of memory within prayer and liturgy. Ackermann highlights two functions of memory that he argues offers Christians a more profound understanding of memory. In the Jewish tradition, remembering made the past become present during the Passover Seder and the use of first-person plural language allowed for individual and communal identification with the past. Finally, Ackermann’s use of Martin Luther’s psychological approach to ritual while examining passages highlights the importance of symbolism and our senses, in addition to representational language, in making the memory present. Memory as performance makes the past present, and this is not limited to the Passover Seder, so it can broaden Christian discourse and be applied throughout Christian liturgy.

Xingyi Wang also compares rituals, engaging a Japanese Buddhist rainmaking ritual and Christian rain miracles as she investigates the location of ritual’s efficacy, and potential relationships between ritual efficacy and the status of the ritualist within monastic orders. Within the Buddhist tradition, Wang focuses on Buddhist master Eison who commissioned and commented on a 13th century rainmaking ritual map, *Shinsen Shōukyō Hōdōjōzu*. It has long been understood that esoteric masters embodied particular supernatural abilities, seen as they conducted successful rituals. The origin of these powers, either in the ritualist or in the ritual, is ambiguous, however. Through her focus on Eison, and examination on the ritual map, Wang determines that power of ritual may be outside of the procedure itself, as the virtuous body of the

Vinaya master serving as ritual expert is a crucial variant in comparing a successful and a failed ritual. She then focuses on human behavior during ritual in her comparison with rain miracles of Christian narratives. After tracing and comparing multiple rituals, Wang concludes that there is a common thread of vulnerability in the face of natural disasters, where people turn to non-human intervention. Here she highlights the diversity of interpretations and interactions that follow, where humans attempt to communicate with the non-human in a way most suitable to their tradition, exemplifying relationality between the two categories of being across traditions and time.

In the final article of this special edition, Amirah Orozco considers devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe through a pilgrimage to the Hill of Tepeyac in Mexico City, often while pilgrims carry images and icons of *La Virgen* on their backs from their hometown. Orozco argues that an examination of this ritual offers an opportunity of decolonization. She provides an attempt to listen to those who do not fit in academic theology, and compares the ritual of the Guadalupanos to ritual of the “so-called Aztec God-bearers” through examining the role of the body, in addition to words and text, as valid expressions of theology that exhibit the human-Divine relationship. Orozco draws on Jennifer Schepher Hughes and her description of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a co-pilgrim and co-participant with her pilgrims, the walking altars. This “fluid duality,” coined by Sylvia Marcos, dismantles dichotomies of abstract and real, transcendent and immanent. Orozco situates her theology as secondary, where Guadalupan pilgrims are doing the primary theology, and it is the role of decolonization, particularly in the Church, to critically engage pre-Hispanic people and resist de-valuing bodies and indigenous theologies. She concludes with hope for comparative dialogue within acknowledged power structures in the continual creation process of the Church.

Each author in this issue addresses the role of ritual through varying facets of its endless dimensions through a comparative perspective, with hope for dialogue among and across communities of humans and beyond. As they pursue theological insights, these authors engage interlocutors across liturgical space and time, and incorporate ethnography, ritual cartography, critiques of Western understandings of the ‘other,’ and more. It is striking that each author seeks to increase understanding of the interconnectedness of our human condition, and to learn from those who are theologically different from their traditions. These four authors build arguments that construct a hopeful, rich, and diverse ritual worldview.

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