

Liturgical Letters: Jewish and Christian Calligraphic Art and Comparative Theology



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Abstract

Although comparative theology typically focuses on texts, calligraphic art from many religious traditions shows that text can also be art, artifact, and liturgy. This paper pairs works by contemporary calligraphers Izzy Pludwinski and Ewan Clayton to create a Jewish-Christian conversation around sacred text in its visual, aesthetic, and artifactual dimensions. On the one hand, Pludwinski and Clayton both shape sacred texts into letters and words which communicate beyond mere signification. Their works express the bodily gesture and character of the scribe. Such verbal-visual art both reveals the presence of God and points to the limits of language to describe God. Yet Clayton's insights into the liturgical and artifactual dimensions of calligraphic art also illuminate Pludwinski's works in their Jewish contexts. Clayton shows how writing is not merely letters, but letters on objects which exist and function in social and liturgical spaces. Such objects spark dialogues between people, and between people and God.

Keywords

calligraphy, lettering arts, liturgical objects, Jewish-Christian dialogue, religion and arts, visual theology, AIDS, synagogal art

As formulated by Francis Clooney, comparative theology focuses mainly on interreligious reading of sacred texts.¹ However, recent voices have turned to other forms of religious culture, such as visual art, music, and ritual.² As Ruth Illman writes: "Human beings possess not only a head but also hands, eyes, ears, and a heart—all of which are engaged during an interreligious

¹ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 57–68.

² S. Brent Plate, "Interreligious Aesthetics: From Dialogue to the Senses," *CrossCurrents* 68 (2018): 329–35; Marianne Moyaert, "Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems," *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018): 1–23.

encounter, hence should be acknowledged in our efforts to develop interreligious studies.”³ When it comes to calligraphy and music, linguistic knowledge is mediated through the senses: the color and line of inked letters on paper, the melody and rhythm of sung words.⁴ Mosher proposes that interreligious readers take calligraphic traditions into account:

I suspect that most interreligious projects of comparative-theological “slow reading” that proceed according to Clooney’s method make use of modern, fixed font editions (that is, the 21st-century equivalent of typesetting in the original language or in translation) of the works chosen for study. What if, instead, all of the items under study were scribed? How might we apply the principles of close, slow reading to the study of letter arts?⁵

Mosher appeals to the traditional aesthetic forms in which religious communities present their sacred texts. An observant Jew, for example, likely owns a printed Bible in codex form. Yet to understand the Torah’s role in Judaism, one must see a Torah scroll in synagogue liturgy: its iconic form, its hand-scribed letters, its function for the cantor as she reads the weekly Torah portion.⁶ If comparative theology engages these words only as signifiers, it ignores the ways that many religious traditions ascribe meaning to the format, the visual look, the material form of letters and words, even the ritualized processes of copying them.⁷ This does not even foray into the importance of oral performance of written scriptures found in many religious traditions. Whether aural, visual, or tactile, all these engagements with sacred texts still involve text. Plate’s distinction between *aisthesis* (knowledge through sense perception) and *noesis* (knowledge through the intellect) breaks down in these sensory practices.⁸

Following Mosher’s proposal, in this paper I craft a comparative theological reading of calligraphic works by Izzy Pludwinski and Ewan Clayton. Pludwinski is Jewish, while Clayton comes from a Catholic background.⁹ My own background: I am Jewish, a (not acrimonious) convert from Christianity, who still appreciates Christian art and liturgy.

Aesthetically and theologically, these works parallel one another—yet with enough “similarity-in-difference” to generate a rich conversation between them and their respective

³ Ruth Illman, “The Arts as Arena for—and Approach to—Interreligious Studies: Reflections on Dialogical Methodology,” in *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, ed. Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 140.

⁴ Mosher has explored musical settings of Christian texts in “Christian Liturgy and the Music of the Page,” *Visual Music: Calligraphy & Sacred Texts*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.luceartsandreligion.org/christian-liturgy-and-the-music-of-the-page>; “‘My Musick Shall Finde Thee’: The Composer as Theologian When Setting George Herbert’s Poetry,” *Postscripts* 13 (2022): 187–196.

⁵ Lucinda Allen Mosher, “Slow Reading of Beautiful Writing: Calligraphy as Vehicle for Comparative Theology,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ*, ed. Axel Takacs and Joseph Kimmel (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2024), 302.

⁶ While my focus is not oral performance of sacred texts, on this see William Albert Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁷ For explorations of this dynamic across religious traditions which employ written scriptures, see James W. Watts, ed., *Iconic Books and Texts*, Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts (Bristol: Equinox, 2013).

⁸ Plate, “Interreligious Aesthetics,” 330–31.

⁹ I would especially like to thank Ewan Clayton, Izzy Pludwinski, and the Rev. Robert Cooper for sending me images and comments on the works, and for granting permission to publish images of them.

religious traditions.¹⁰ Both works inscribe the scribe's body and bodily gestures in ink, employing techniques inspired by Zen practice and calligraphy. Both employ visual strategies at once to envision God and conceal the possibility of envisioning God. However, looking at Clayton's work and reading his reflections on the lettering arts, I also discern an artifactual and liturgical dimension to Pludwinski's works which was not immediately apparent to me.

Pludwinski's *Shivity* Columns: Orienting to God

Pludwinski created three *Shivity* columns (Image 1) between 2002 and 2005.



Image 1.1: *Shivity* Column, by Izzy Pludwinski (2002–5)
Photo: Izzy Pludwinski



Image 1.2: *Shivity* Column, by Izzy Pludwinski (2002–5) Photo: Izzy Pludwinski



Image 1.3: *Shivity* Column, by Izzy Pludwinski (2002–5)
Photo: Izzy Pludwinski

These columns are 28 cm (Image 1.1), 28cm (Image 1.2), and 47 cm tall (Image 1.3). Each feature highly gestural Hebrew letters written on paper wrapped around a column to create three-dimensional letters. The text is from Psalms:

שויתי יהוה לנגדי תמיד
כי מימיני בל אמוט

¹⁰ This phrase comes from Rachele Elizabeth's interreligious study of sacred geometry among contemporary Hindu and Muslim artists: "Drawing the Soul Towards Truth': On Exploring Hindu and Muslim Sacred Geometry Dialogically," in *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, ed. Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 243–54.

I set the Lord before me always;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. (Psalm 16:7)

The shorter columns have only the first three words: “I set the Lord before me.” The text flows from top to bottom:

שׁוֹי
ת
י
ה
ל
נ

The final word, “before me” (לִּנְגִדִי), is abbreviated (לִּנְ). The *heh* in the center, represented as a swirl, is a traditional abbreviation for “the Name” (הַשֵּׁם), a euphemism to avoid writing the Tetragrammaton. The taller column has the first four words in full: “I set the Lord before me always.”

To the novice eye, this script seems untutored in formal Hebrew letterforms. Not so. A New Yorker who later made *aliyah* to Israel, Pludwinski trained in the 1980s as a *sofer*, a Jewish scribe who creates ritual objects: Torah scrolls, *mezuzot*, and tefillin. The *sofer*'s work is precise and demanding. He must train his eye and hand to create precise letterforms, and master textual and legal knowledge, including both the Hebrew of the Torah and the large body of norms regulating the holy craft. In the late 1980s, Pludwinski attended the Roman-alphabet lettering course at the Roehampton Institute in London. Since then, Pludwinski's career has included both Jewish scribal craft and more expressive lettering arts in both Hebrew and English.¹¹ He wrote Hebrew letters for *The Saint John's Bible*, and has collaborated on illustrated manuscripts with both Avner Moriah and Barbara Wolff.¹² Since the 1990s, he has created what he calls “Hebrew Zen calligraphy” based on his practice of Tai Chi, his travels in Japan, and his studies of East Asian lettering. These *Shiviti* columns flow from that body of work.

The psalmic line, “I set the Lord before me always,” draws on a network of biblical metaphors. The Psalms often describe God's guidance as a physical path on which one travels:¹³

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path (*derekh*) that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers; [...]
for the Lord watches over the way (*derekh*) of the righteous,
but the way (*derekh*) of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:1, 6, NRSV)

¹¹ Mordechai Beck, “The Art of Calligraphy,” *The Jerusalem Report* (February 25, 2013). For a broader context of Hebrew lettering and calligraphy in the past century, see Leila Avrin, “Modern Hebrew Calligraphy,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2008) at www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org.

¹² J. Homrighausen, *Illuminating Justice: The Ethical Imagination of The Saint John's Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 38–39.

¹³ William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 31–53.

The Hebrew *derekh* refers to a road or walkway. This path of God's guidance is Torah. Elsewhere, the psalmist declares: "You show me the path of life (*orach chayim*)" (16:11). Another image in Psalm 16:7, the right hand, denotes power and action: God leads Israel out of Egypt with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand (Deut 26:8), and creation is described as the work of God's fingers (Ps 8:4).¹⁴ *By keeping God before me on life's path*, the psalmist says, *I am strong*. Later Jewish traditions amplify this metaphor of divine guidance as path. The genre of Jewish texts which clarifies how to observe Torah in everyday life are known as *halakhah*, from the verb *halakh*, "to walk."

Jewish tradition relates this verse to attitudes toward prayer and rituals. The rabbinic sage Rav holds that the injunction to "set the Lord (יהוה) always before me" explains why rabbinic blessings always begin "Blessed are you, Lord (יהוה)" (Midrash Psalms 16:7). Another source relates this verse to the (perhaps more imagined than real) practice of a king wearing a small Torah scroll around his arm to keep God always before him (b. Sanh. 21b–22a). One Talmudic sage finds in 16:7 a lesson about the correct intention and focus (*kavanah*) during prayer:

Rabbi Shimon Hasida says: "One who prays must see himself as if the Divine Presence is before him, as it is written: 'I keep the Lord always before me'." (b. Sanh. 22a)

Rabbi Moses Isserles' (1530–72) commentary to the *Shulkhan Arukh*, one of the major guidebooks to halakhic observance, comments on the very first line of the section *Orach Hayim* (lit. "path of life," the same phrase as in Psalm 16:11):

One should strengthen himself like a lion to get up in the morning to serve his Creator, so that it is he who awakens the dawn. ... [Isserles:] "I have set the Lord before me constantly" (Psalms 16:8); this is a major principle in the Torah and amongst the virtues of the righteous who walk before God. For a person's way of sitting, his movements and his dealings while he is alone in his house are not like his way of sitting, his movements and his dealings when he is before a great king; nor are his speech and free expression as much as he wants when he is with his household members and his relatives like his speech when in a royal audience.¹⁵

Such Torah-observance is not "the Law" as oppressive presence, the way many Christians caricature it. This *halakhah* is the pathway to greater consciousness of God as expressed in everyday *mitzvot*. Psalm 16:7's "I set the Lord before me always" invites the Jew to remember God in daily life.

Pludwinski wrote this verse multiple times. Perhaps he drew inspiration from one of his favorite rabbinic proverbs: "Man must continuously renew himself," spoken by Hasidic rabbi Nahman of Bratslav.¹⁶ He returns to the same quote again and again to "renew himself" by

¹⁴ Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli, *Body Symbolism in the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2001), 150–80.

¹⁵ Translation from www.sefaria.org (accessed February 22, 2024).

¹⁶ J. Homrighausen, "Izzy Pludwinski, *Cursive Aleph-Bet*," Visual Music: Calligraphy & Sacred Texts (September 1, 2021), at www.luceartsandreligion.org (accessed February 22, 2024).

pondering the psalmist's meditation afresh. Pludwinski also renews himself through his experimental calligraphic style, with its "kinesthetic joy."¹⁷

Clayton's *AIDS Icon*: Writing, Memory, and Moral Vision

Ewan Clayton created his triptych *AIDS Icon* (80 x 180 cm) in 2005 (Image 2) for the Diocese of Durham, UK.¹⁸ The icon incorporates a prayer for AIDS as well as an image of Christ on the cross.



Image 2: *AIDS Icon* (80 x 180 cm), by Ewan Clayton (2005) Photo: Robert Cooper

At the time, the bishop had commissioned a working group to foster conversations around AIDS and outreach to those affected by it. The piece was dedicated at Durham Cathedral for World AIDS Day (December 1) in 2005.

¹⁷ Christopher Calderhead and Izzy Pludwinski, "Writing, Argument and Contemplation: A Conversation with Izzy Pludwinski Mostly by e-Mail," *Letter Arts Review* 17, no. 2 (April 2002): 44.

¹⁸ This work was reproduced in Edward Wates, "Ewan Clayton in Conversation," *Letter Arts Review* 21, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 15. I obtained most of my information about it from a pamphlet about the work created in 2005 by the Diocese, and from correspondence with Clayton and the Rev. Robert Cooper in 2022. Cooper, who still serves the Diocese of Durham, was at the time involved in an AIDS working group as Assistant Chaplain to the Arts and Recreation in northeast England. Cooper, a photographer, supplied most of the images here.



Image 3: Photo of *AIDS Icon* (by Ewan Clayton, 2005) displayed in front of the altar of Durham Cathedral. The photo is taken from a distance, within the nave, pews on either side. Photo: Robert Cooper



Image 4: Photo of *AIDS Icon* (by Ewan Clayton, 2005) displayed in front of the altar of Durham Cathedral. The photo is a close-up of the image above, with a clearer view of the chancel. Photo: Robert Cooper

The text of the icon (see Images 5.1 and 5.2) speaks of the stigma felt by those living with HIV/AIDS. Clayton recalls this prayer originating from South African churches.

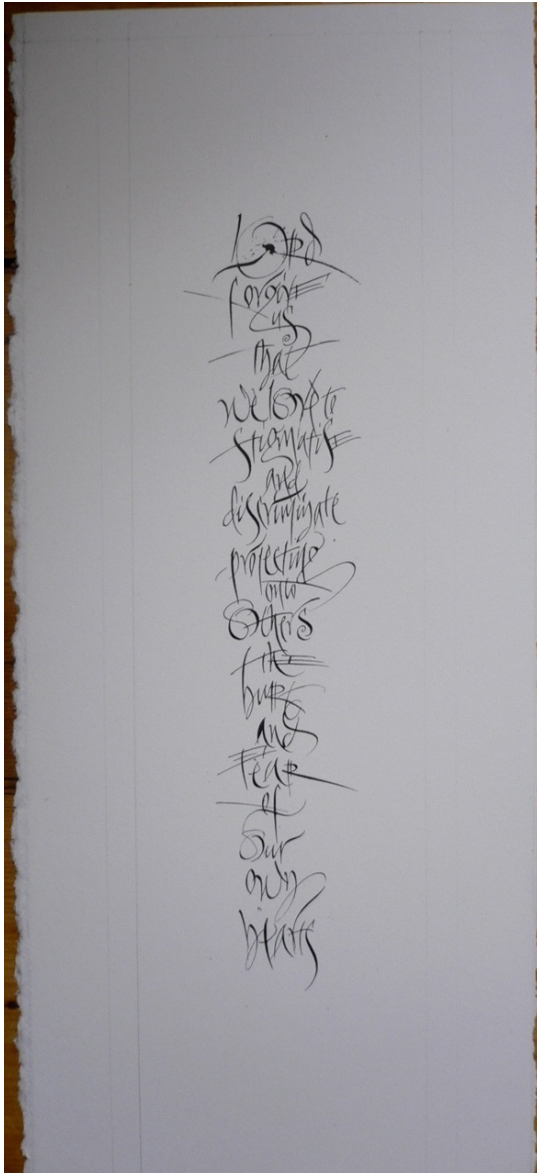


Image 5.1: Photo of the left panel of the *AIDS Icon* (by Ewan Clayton, 2005). Photo: Ewan Clayton

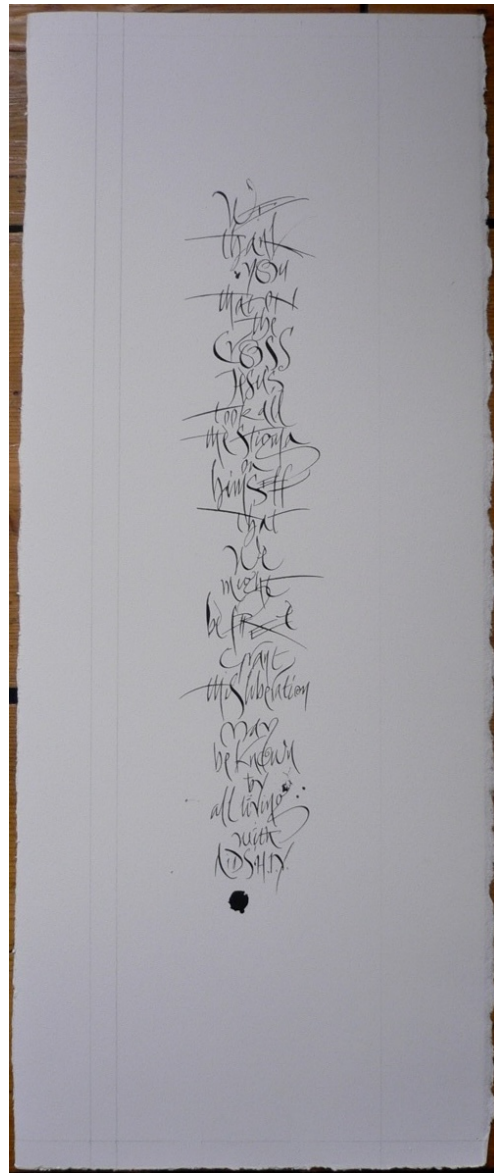


Image 5.2: Photo of the right panel of the *AIDS Icon* (by Ewan Clayton, 2005). Photo: Ewan Clayton

The left panel reads:

Lord forgive us that we love to stigmatize and discriminate, projecting onto others the hurt and fear of our own hearts

The right:

We thank you that on the cross Jesus took all stigma onto himself that we might be free. Grant this liberation may be known by all living with AIDS/HIV

The call for “liberation” for “all living with AIDS/HIV” may obliquely hint at physical healing. But it is mainly a prayer for society to end the stigma and bigotry around HIV and AIDS, a major issue in any Christian theological response to the disease.¹⁹ A prayer for physical healing asks for God to act; but a prayer to end stigma lays a call to every Christian. Against HIV/AIDS stigma rooted in homophobic theology, the prayer names that stigma as rooted in “hurt and fear.”

The prayer parallels the suffering of Christ with the suffering of those living with HIV/AIDS. In Christian theology, Christ took the world’s sins upon himself on the cross, enacting the ultimate paradox: God, the Almighty, humbly became man to fully experience human suffering (Phil 2:6–8). Clayton underscores this comparison in the sumi ink sketch of Christ, whose arms spell “HIV AIDS.” Clayton echoes Christian theologians such as Musa Dube, who writes: “In the HIV&AIDS era, the compassionate Christ bids us to see him crucified with all who are suffering from this disease, and also to seek to experience his resurrection in this context.”²⁰ He also echoes other artworks paralleling AIDS suffering with Christ’s suffering, such as Keith Haring’s *Altarpiece* in the AIDS Interfaith Memorial Chapel at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.²¹ Clayton shapes words into the body of Christ, visually affirming the theology of Word made Flesh.²² Here, however, the Words made Flesh are “HIV” and “AIDS.”

Clayton has deep familiarity with Christian liturgy and iconography—but like Pludwinski, his art and religion draw from multiple wells. Clayton grew up at Ditchling, in a family who belonged to the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic, a Catholic community of artists and craftspeople founded in 1921. Clayton was its last new member before it closed in 1989.²³ In the 1980s Clayton lived for several years as a Benedictine monk at Worth Abbey (UK); he has penned a book on the spirituality of the Lindisfarne Gospels; and in 2015 he named Benedict and Cuthbert as his predecessors.²⁴ Yet he also describes engagement with other religious traditions ranging from stays at Japanese Buddhist monasteries to “a powerful sense of presence in the square of the central Mosque in Lahore by moonlight.”²⁵ Like many artists, Clayton’s religious identity is more complex than a simple label.

¹⁹ See, e.g., UNAIDS, “The Windhoek Report: HIV- and AIDS-Related Stigma: A Framework for Theological Reflection,” in *Reflecting Theologically on AIDS: A Global Challenge*, ed. Robin Gill (London: SCM Press, 2007), 19–30.

²⁰ Musa W. Dube, *The HIV and AIDS Bible: Selected Essays* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 158. On the history and use of Christ, or the Body of Christ, having HIV/AIDS, see Adriaan S. van Klinken, “When the Body of Christ Has AIDS: A Theological Metaphor for Global Solidarity in Light of HIV and AIDS,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 4 (2010): 446–65, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156973210X526418>.

²¹ Laura Almeida, “Keith Haring’s *Altarpiece*,” *Denver Art Museum* (blog), April 29, 2020, <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/blog/keith-haring-altarpiece>; “AIDS Interfaith Memorial Chapel,” Grace Cathedral, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://gracecath.wpengine.com/aids-interfaith-memorial-chapel/>.

²² Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Script as Image* (Paris: Leuven, 2014); Michelle Brown, “Images to Be Read and Words to Be Seen: The Iconic Role of the Early Medieval Book,” in *Iconic Books and Texts*, ed. James W. Watts (Bristol: Equinox, 2013), 93–118.

²³ See <http://www.guildjosephdominic.org.uk/index.php/ewan-clayton/> (accessed February 23, 2024).

²⁴ Ewan Clayton, *Embracing Change: Spirituality and the Lindisfarne Gospels* (Brighton, England: Ewan Clayton, 2003); Europa Scriptorium et al., *Sacred Letters, Sacred Words: Europa Scriptorium 2015* (Frankfurt: n.p., 2016).

²⁵ Ewan Clayton, personal correspondence, October 24, 2022.

When he was a monk, Clayton made liturgical banners with lettering designs (see Image 6), employing “words that had a contemplative space within them... a kind of visual chant.” One simply reads “There coming to meet them was Jesus” (Matt 28:9).²⁶

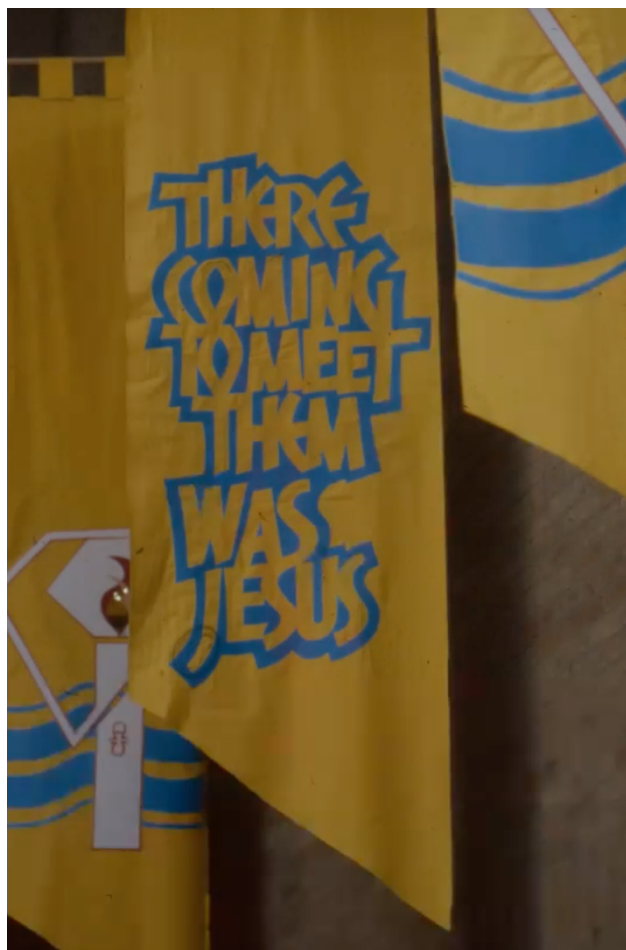


Image 6: Photo of liturgical banner, by Ewan Clayton (1980s). Photo: Ewan Clayton

Clayton’s preference for words with a “contemplative space” shows in the *AIDS Icon*. “The hurt and fear of our own hearts” is open-ended enough to become a personal meditation. Viewers can ponder and interrogate their own hurt and fear. Overly didactic words would not invite that contemplation.

Gestures, Movement, and Zen

Laypeople often associate calligraphy with formal letters, the kind of skillful perfection found in certificates or Torah scrolls. Such lettering intends to be legible first and foremost; its scribes are servants to the text. Clayton and Pludwinski both trained in formal lettering. In these works, however, they take a different route. They emphasize bodily gestures and expressive lines which reveal their embodied process and the presence of the scribe’s gestural sequence. Both find inspiration in East Asian calligraphies and bodily disciplines, especially Zen and Tai Chi. For Clayton and Pludwinski, the soul of the scribe is manifest in the ink, and writing is a contemplative act.

Pludwinski’s “Hebrew Zen columns” draw heavily from the techniques and aesthetics of East Asian calligraphy. He writes in a vertical line, from top to bottom, with a pointed brush. His tool enables him to achieve dramatic contrasts between thicks and thins in his letters—as in the thick, bold horizontal of the cursive *tav* (ת) in תמיד (“always”) versus the thin line of the next letter *mem* (מ), where he seems to be running low on ink (see Image 7).

Pludwinski writes in stylized cursive script, everyday Israeli handwriting—not the formal square script typical of Hebrew calligraphy. He echoes cursive scripts of Chinese calligraphy, about which Kazuaki Tanahashi notes: “Viewers may see the calligraphy only as a two-dimensional work of art. However, there is another vital element—time. Viewers follow the

²⁶ Ewan Clayton, “Spirituality and Lettering,” in *Advanced Calligraphy Techniques: Ideas in Action*, ed. Diana Hoare (Secaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1989), 132–33.



Image 7: Close-up photo of the bottom of *Shivity* Column, by Izzy Pludwinski (2002–5). Photo: Izzy Pludwinski

brush movement just as they would when watching a motion picture.”²⁷ Pludwinski calls these works “Zen” because “in the making of these pieces the preparation of self was as important, if not more important than the final result, hopefully reducing, if not dissolving, the dichotomy of product and process.”²⁸ The eye follows his movement. It senses his intention, his attention, his feelings expressed in the qualities of lines.

When making his Zen-style Hebrew lettering, Pludwinski avoids creating “Japanesey” Hebrew letters which would caricature either language’s visual forms.²⁹ In this way, he is like a comparative theologian, who seeks to learn from another tradition even as he is careful to respect differences between religions. Pludwinski’s study of East Asian forms stemmed from a shift in his own Judaism: “I was awakened to a much more

rational, humanist way of looking at Judaism. Less authoritative, more espousing human creativity and initiation.”³⁰ In studying Zen calligraphy, he discovered elements of his own tradition: “The elements I seek to ‘use’ from the Zen calligraphic tradition probably exist in my own tradition—Judaism—but are probably less clearly articulated in Jewish sources. I do feel there is an overlap between Zen ‘aims’ and ‘aims’ mentioned in certain Chassidic writings—at the very least involving the ego.”³¹

Pludwinski also discerns a Hasidic insight in Tai Chi: “In hasidic terms, this vertical connection to the above [in Tai Chi] frees one to become a vessel to allow something higher to enter.”³² Without departing from his years of disciplined training in letterforms, Pludwinski seeks to add a level of spontaneity and openness to his creative process. That openness to experience comes from the dissolution of ego which Pludwinski finds both in Zen and in Hasidic teachings.

Jewish texts also speak of the tension between discipline and spontaneity in the scribe’s work. Pludwinski recalls how he first became a calligrapher:

²⁷ Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Heart of the Brush: The Splendor of East Asian Calligraphy* (Boston: Shambhala, 2016), 345.

Pludwinski describes his inspiration in “grass style” script (*tsao-shu*) in Calderhead and Pludwinski, “Writing, Argument and Contemplation,” 45. On this style, see Chiang Yee, *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 93–105.

²⁸ http://www.impwriter.com/Hebrew_Zen_Calligraphy.html (accessed February 23, 2024).

²⁹ Calderhead and Pludwinski, “Writing, Argument and Contemplation,” 45.

³⁰ Calderhead and Pludwinski, 41.

³¹ http://www.impwriter.com/Hebrew_Zen_Intro.html (accessed February 23, 2024).

³² Calderhead and Pludwinski, “Writing, Argument and Contemplation,” 42.

My first contact with formal Hebrew letters was a warning poster—that in a sefer Torah, if one letter, or even the serif (an *oketz*) of a letter, was missing, or badly drawn, it made the whole scroll unfit. What secrets were in that little *oketz*? That fascinated me. That people could be so concerned with letters as to ban a whole, huge scroll because one letter was damaged!³³

We can hear the young Pludwinski's sense of awe: the scribe must aim for total perfection. Every detail of each letter matters, just as in traditional Jewish observance every detail of halakhah matters. Yet Pludwinski also recounts a Talmudic proverb: "Be as flexible as a reed and not as a hard as a cedar tree."³⁴ The reed may look thin and unimpressive, but it has many roots. The cedar stands tall and powerful, but its roots are few. When strong winds come, the cedar blows over, while the flexible reed sways and survives. A person should thus be like a reed—not a cedar. Certainly, a scribe should aim to make every serif (*oketz*) perfect. Yet the scribe should also remain open, flexible. Novice calligraphers grip the pen with force, tighten the arm and shoulder muscles, overexert control. Master calligraphers hold the pen loosely and write with a relaxed posture. In Zen terms: If your ego grasps too tightly, if you focus too much on being perfect and right, then you cannot attain the openness needed to progress. A reed-like body and mind write better letters.

As Tanahashi explains, the viewer of Japanese calligraphy can discern whether the scribe wrote like a reed or a cedar. Pludwinski finds this ethos in his *sofer* training. He explains that the work of the *sofer* "demands the connection between purity of mind, intention and the aesthetic of the written word," that "the inner state of the scribe in both body and soul" is a part of the *sofer's* work.³⁵ One nineteenth-century primer for Jewish scribes begins:

It is taught in a *baraita* (Eruvin 13a): Rabbi Meir said, when I came to Rabbi Ishmael, he said to me "My son, what is your trade?" I said to him "I am a scribe." He said to me "My son, be meticulous in your work, for it is the work of heaven, and if you should omit a single letter or add a single letter, you destroy the entire world." From this we may see that a scribe must be in extreme awe of God, for if he makes one error or fails to make one necessary correction, his soul will perish, because he steals from the masses and causes them to sin—they remain in a state of not performing commandments, and every day make blessings in vain. Of him it is written "One sinner destroys much good" (Kohelet 9:18), and "Cursed is he who does God's work deceitfully" (Jeremiah 48:10). Therefore, those who have the power to appoint scribes should appoint worthy scribes, men of truth who hate bribes and know Torah, fear God and tremble at his words, just as we appoint kosher butchers.³⁶

This emphasis on the scribe's Torah-observance and moral uprightness partly stems from the trust invested in a Torah scribe. Commissioning a new Torah scroll is a great expense. It may be used for a century. A scribe can cut corners halakhically in ways which render the scroll unfit for ritual use, yet are not visible to the reader. Beyond this, there is also a sense in which the holiness

³³ Beck, "The Art of Calligraphy."

³⁴ Beck. The proverb is from b. Taanit 20a.

³⁵ Calderhead and Pludwinski, "Writing, Argument and Contemplation," 42; Europa Scriptorium et al., *Sacred Letters, Sacred Words*.

³⁶ Shlomo Ganzfried, *Keset ha-Sofer*, 1.1, trans. Jen Taylor Friedman, https://www.sefaria.org/Keset_HaSofer.1.

of the *sofer* appears in his attention to detail, to perfecting every *oketz*, though the Torah scroll's scripts used for Torah scrolls are not the expressive "Hebrew Zen." Pludwinski explains:

Hand-created letters are alive. They are the tangible result of a process that involves the human mind, body and spirit. The energy of this involvement, this excitement, is transferred to and embodied in the letters through the creative act, enlivening them. It is the encounter with the life-force of the letters that allows a beautiful piece of calligraphy to touch and move the viewer on a deep, human level in a way that fixed-font letters can never hope to attain.³⁷

The letters communicate emotions in their forms, their lines, their traces of bodily movements—as well as the meanings of the words themselves.

Clayton too is inspired by East Asian calligraphic traditions which focus on gesture and line. He was trained in the same tradition of formal lettering as Pludwinski: the Roman-alphabet calligraphy revival which emerged from Edward Johnston in the early twentieth century. Johnston's early work, embodied in his *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering* (1906), proved to be most influential on his followers. Here, scribes were to be servants to the text, craftspeople rather than artists. Clayton finds spontaneity and play in Johnston's lesser-known later works.³⁸ For Clayton, these works parallel Chinese insights on calligraphy:

Letters are the visible traces of invisible movement. The Chinese have a useful metaphor to describe the importance of these invisible movements. The marks on the surface of the page, they say, are like the ripples left on the surface of a pond by the dipping wing of a passing swallow—mere traces of a much larger movement.³⁹

Clayton discerns a temporal dimension to calligraphy: we follow the scribe's body, their motions, their dance with the brush. Clayton describes the process of inking the Jesus in the center:

I knew instinctively the tool I would use, a Japanese tree root brush. It had the bark peeled off and then the interior wood was hammered to turn it into fibres. What I loved about it was that it was impossible to completely control the outcome as the fibres were stiff, I had to work very slowly keeping absolutely alert to how the ink was flowing and what negative spaces I was creating, it took really intense focus and concentration, but slowly not at speed. You moved and looked to see what opportunities presented themselves like the wiry hair, the arm pit.

We can also discern this dance in the *AIDS Icon*. Take Clayton's "Others" (see Image 8). Trace in your mind's eye, or with your hand in the air, the motions of Clayton's arm. (If your mind is distracted by the word's meaning, try turning the image upside-down so you can focus on its lines and shapes.) I imagine the right side of the "O" being written slowly and carefully, as with the

³⁷ Izzy Pludwinski, *Mastering Hebrew Calligraphy* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2012), 3.

³⁸ Wates, "Ewan Clayton in Conversation," 10–11; Ewan Clayton, *Edward Johnston: Lettering and Life* (Ditchling: Ditchling Museum, 2007), 18, 67.

³⁹ Ewan Clayton, *The Calligraphy of the Heart* (Brighton, England: Ewan Clayton, 1996), 6. See also Ewan Clayton and Timothy Wilcox, "Introduction," in *Spring Lines: Contemporary Calligraphy from East and West*, ed. Timothy Wilcox (Ditchling: Ditchling Museum and Edward Johnston Foundation, 2001), 7–10.

vertical of the “t.” But the horizontal of the “t” looks rapid, energetic, though still intentional. The final stroke of the “h” swoops down dramatically, like the horizontal of the “r.” We end with the swirl of the “s” which looks, to me, quite deliberate. Clayton dances and moves. So do his letters, as in “Fear” (see Image 9).



Image 8: A close-up of “Others” from *AIDS Icon*, by Ewan Clayton (2005) Photo: Ewan Clayton



Image 9: A close-up of “Fear” from *AIDS Icon*, by Ewan Clayton (2005) Photo: Ewan Clayton

For Clayton, calligraphic movements relate to all bodily motions, not just those at the writing table.⁴⁰ Here the rapid, thin horizontals of the “F” evoke one scratching off or crossing out an unwanted thought. It is as if Clayton chides: because of our fear, we cross out victims of HIV/AIDS. We scratch out their names to avoid gazing upon their suffering.

Like Pludwinski, Clayton finds that a scribe’s energy, emotion, and holiness can be seen in their writing. Looking at Eadfrith’s lettering in the Lindisfarne Gospels, Clayton discerns a powerful “spirituality of change.” Eadfrith blends different languages—runic, Greek, Latin—not in a disparate hodgepodge, but in a synthesis which reconciled competing cultures and Christian theologies.⁴¹ Eadfrith artistically creates harmony and builds community. Clayton echoes the words of fourth-century ascetic theologian Evagrius Ponticus, who writes that “someone who reads letters, by their beauty senses the power and ability of the hand and the finger which wrote them together with the intention of the writer.”⁴²

Pludwinski and Clayton are quite similar on gesture and line. Both find inspiration in East Asian calligraphies and bodily practices. Within this Jewish-Christian dialogue, we find another interreligious conversation: Christians and Jews encountering Buddhism and other Asian religions. Yet as we go beyond these initial parallels, we find that their works differ in theologically generative ways.

⁴⁰ Ewan Clayton, *The Golden Thread: A History of Writing* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2014), 248–55.

⁴¹ Clayton, *Embracing Change*, 44–47.

⁴² Quoted in Claudia Rapp, “Holy Texts, Holy Men and Holy Scribes: Aspects of Scriptural Holiness in Late Antiquity,” in *The Early Christian Book*, ed. William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran, CUA Studies in Early Christianity (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 215. More broadly, see J. Homrighausen, *Planting Letters and Weaving Lines: Calligraphy, The Song of Songs, and The Saint John’s Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022).

Revealing and Concealing the Divine

In Judaism and Christianity, language about God is always limited. Philosophers, like Aquinas and Maimonides, carefully delineate that metaphors such as “Rock” describe God, but only in part and by analogy. Mystics report that the direct experience of God is beyond description. Likewise, the history of visual art in synagogue and church evinces the awareness that images of God are fraught at best. The second commandment has ensured that Jewish artists avoid visualizing God. Christians are less reticent to depict God, largely due to the Incarnation—yet recall the iconoclasm of medieval Byzantium and Reformation Europe. In short, both traditions affirm that images of God, whether verbal or visual, both reveal and conceal God. Humans need images. But we also need to respect the divine’s mystery. Interfaith encounters make us even more aware of this fact, as we see and hear unfamiliar metaphors in foreign languages, statues of deities with complex and subtle iconographic meanings, and other ways to grasp God or gods.⁴³

Pludwinski and Clayton obscure their letters’ legibility. In doing so, they both underscore the importance of and inability of all words and images to encompass the divine. On the one hand, the viewer must read more slowly to make out what the words are. She must slow down and spend more time on the words. In doing so, the viewer might discern new shades of meaning. She might also discern ways in which the letters communicate by their very shapes and gestures.⁴⁴ For example, Clayton’s letters express heartfelt prayer, but stylize the writing to make it harder to read, as in the “Lord” (see Image 10). A pamphlet accompanying the icon explains Clayton’s intent:



Image 10: Close-up of “Lord” from *AIDS Icon*, by Ewan Clayton (2005) Photo: Ewan Clayton

The calligraphy itself, however, is not immediately legible, just like the writing on the central panel. This was entirely deliberate. The idea is that the thoughts behind the work will gradually reveal themselves to those who are willing to open their eyes and their minds.⁴⁵

⁴³ Indeed, Mosher’s *Praying* spends a great deal of time pondering the limits of our language for God even as it explores the many different terms used in religions for God or gods. Lucinda Mosher, *Praying: The Rituals of Faith, Faith in the Neighborhood* (New York: Seabury, 2005), 1–30.

⁴⁴ Pludwinski, *Mastering Hebrew Calligraphy*, 177.

⁴⁵ The text of the pamphlet was supplied to me by Robert Cooper.

This script invites the viewer to “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find” (Luke 11:9, NRSV). Similarly, see Pludwinski’s highly stylized *taw* (ת) in Image 11. Like Islamic calligraphic designs of the *bismillah*, the phrase on these columns would be hard to decode unless the viewer already knew what it was supposed to say. Pludwinski makes one column easier to decode by writing the phrase in formal script as a lighter backdrop.⁴⁶



Image 11: Close-up of the letter *taw* (ת) in *Shivity* Column, by Izzy Pludwinski (2002–5). Photo: Izzy Pludwinski

Further, Pludwinski and Clayton each image the divine presence according to their respective traditions. In place of the Tetragrammaton (יהוה), the Hebrew name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:13–15), Pludwinski writes only the letter *heh* (ה). This *heh* is an abbreviation of *hashem* (השם), “the name,” a Jewish euphemism for the Tetragrammaton which Jews traditionally avoid writing or pronouncing. (These practices reflect respect for God, and a sense that the written name of God should not be erased or end up in a landfill.) Pludwinski writes the letter *heh* as a swirl (see Image 12).

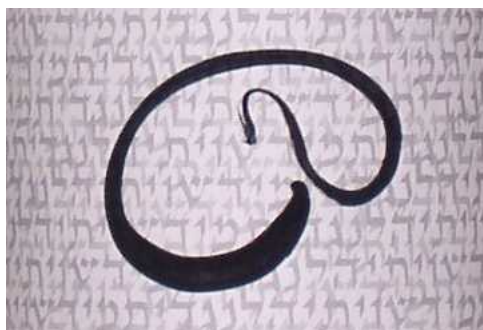


Image 12: Close-up of the letter *heh* (ה) in *Shivity* Column, by Izzy Pludwinski (2002–5). Photo: Izzy Pludwinski

I discern a kind of calligraphic apophysis here. In medieval Jewish manuscripts, calligraphed names of God can represent the divine presence.⁴⁷ Here, the scribe writes the letter *heh* (literally, “the”) instead of the word *hashem* (“the name”), which is in turn a euphemism for the Tetragrammaton. We might read the line as “I keep ‘the’ before me at all times.” This avoids any name of or metaphor for God, inviting the viewer to ponder what image of God fits their prayer at the moment. Pludwinski describes writing Hebrew Zen script as a process of play: “When in a state of play one lets go of expectations and predefined results. The focus is rather on the here-and-now.”⁴⁸ Just as Pludwinski wrote this *Shivity* in a state of openness to experience, so the column invites the viewer to let go of “expectations and predefined results” to prayer, or overly predefined images of God.

Perhaps the swirl is also a play on the *ensō*, the inked circle ubiquitous in Zen art. The *ensō* can mean many things: the universe, the void or emptiness of Mahayana thought, enlightenment, the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*). It can also aid meditation. The *ensō* is not a static symbol. *Ensōs* at first seem the same, but each Zen master creates unique *ensōs* through subtle variations in

⁴⁶ He discusses this technique in Calderhead and Pludwinski, “Writing, Argument and Contemplation,” 45.

⁴⁷ Katrin Kogman-Appel, “The Role of Hebrew Letters in Making the Divine Visible,” in *Sign and Design: Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak and Jeffrey F. Hamburger (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016), 153–72.

⁴⁸ Pludwinski, *Mastering Hebrew Calligraphy*, 183; cf. 177.

bodily gestures, ink properties, qualities of line, and circular shape.⁴⁹ Pludwinski himself includes an *ensō* at the end of his *Mastering Hebrew Calligraphy*, commenting that “we have come full circle.”⁵⁰

If we see Pludwinski’s *heh* as an *ensō*, then each of the meanings of the *ensō* may suggest something of God. If the *ensō* is emptiness, then in Jewish terms, it suggests the need to empty our tightly-held images of God in order to experience God—or the need to empty our ego’s task-driven, distractable mental chatter to cultivate focus and intention (*kavannah*) in prayer. If the *ensō* represents infinity, it evokes God as infinite or in all things. I do not know whether Pludwinski intended any of these meanings, or even if he intended the *heh* to resemble an *ensō*. But my playful viewing fits perfectly with his desire for calligraphy to spur contemplation.

Clayton also reveals and conceals his image of God, the sumi Jesus in the triptych’s center (see Image 13).



Image 13: *AIDS Icon* (80 x 180 cm), by Ewan Clayton (2005), seen from above and to the left. Photo: Robert Cooper

⁴⁹ Audrey Yoshiko Seo, *Ensō: Zen Circles of Enlightenment* (Boston: Weatherhill, 2007); Stephen Addiss, *The Art of Zen: Paintings and Calligraphy by Japanese Monks 1600-1925* (Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Books, 2018), 12, 63, 73, 137–38, 199.

⁵⁰ Pludwinski, *Mastering Hebrew Calligraphy*, 185.

At first, this simply looks like Jesus crucified. But a closer look reveals his arms are words: “HIV” and “AIDS.” As I gaze, my mind tries to find more letters in the body. At one moment I see “Christ,” with the “C” as the head. The next I see “has,” as in “Christ has HIV AIDS.” As with Pludwinski’s swirl, I am not sure how much of this Clayton intended. But by creating multiple possible viewings, Clayton succeeds in making this icon a contemplative space.

Given his Catholic background and the fact that an Anglican diocese commissioned the work, Clayton naturally depicts Christ in word and image. For him, one of an artist’s roles is to provide form to the inexplicable pain of suffering:

Whereas the raw emotion of the event might strike you dumb or be expressed in a helpless scream, we calligraphers and artists seek to give such human experience form and so make it containable and creative and livable.⁵¹

This triptych, the diocesan pamphlet explains, aimed to speak to people outside Christian faith: “Through its portrayal in countless pieces of Western art, the crucifixion of Jesus has become a symbol of universal human suffering and it is in this spirit that it is employed here. . . . HIV/AIDS knows no barriers of race, gender or creed and the icon is intended to reflect this.” In the United Kingdom, which is historically Christian, the symbol of the cross is recognizable by the public in a way that other religions’ symbols are not. From my Jewish standpoint, however, I question how universal a symbol the crucifixion is. Given the history of Christian anti-Judaism, many Jews find the cross not only unmeaningful but uncomfortable.⁵² Even so, a Jewish viewer might not relate to the iconography personally yet recognize its cultural power.

Pludwinski’s work, I suggest, is easier for a Christian to appreciate than Clayton’s is for a Jew to engage. Christians have their own long tradition of praying Psalms in the light of Christ. In Acts, Peter uses this psalm to describe David looking forward to the coming Messiah (Acts 2:25–28). In Peter’s reading, the “Lord” in Psalm 16:8 refers to Jesus. For Christians, then, “I set the Lord before me” could refer to the Christian call to become Christ-like. Jerome comments that “the one who resembles the Savior in his integrity places God at his right side and says, *he is at my right hand to keep me steadfast*. . . . For the Lord Savior, or through the Lord Savior for his saints, God is always standing at the right side.”⁵³ Even the metaphor of Torah as pathway or road works well for Christians: Jesus describes himself as “the door” (John 10:7) and “the path” (John 14:6), and some early Christians described their movement as “the path” (Acts 19:9).

Visually, I also find Pludwinski’s work more open to different viewers because his letters are abstracted into form and shape more radically than Clayton’s. A viewer could appreciate the *Shiviti* without knowing what the shapes represent. Visually, his lines function like *nigunim*, the meditative Hasidic melodies which rely on repetitive syllables such as *yai-dai-dai*. Such melodies

⁵¹ Edward Wates, “Ewan Clayton: Practising Contentment,” *Exhibit 21*, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 57.

⁵² On the intersection of Christian liturgy and Judaism, see Lucinda Allen Mosher, *Toward Our Mutual Flourishing: The Episcopal Church, Interreligious Relations, and Theologies of Religious Manyness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 55–64.

⁵³ Jerome, *Homily on Psalm 15*, trans. in Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, vol. 2, *Homilies 60-96*, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald, FC 57 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1966), 29.

can create sonic, liturgical spaces for many different types of people, because they do not contain prayers or beliefs which some might feel uncomfortable singing.⁵⁴

In both the *AIDS Icon* and the *Shivity* columns, words are important but also limited. The opaque, less-legible letters call attention to language itself as a tool to describe God. The calligraphers both say: yes, language is a useful tool to communicate; but it is a tinted lens, not a clear glass window into the nature of God or the experience of God in prayer.

Language, Orientation, and Liturgy

Thus far, I have suggested deep similarities between the *AIDS Icon* and the *Shivity* columns: a focus on gesture and line, East Asian inspirations, deliberately opaque legibility, and visual strategies which both conceal and reveal God's nature. This final section draws a sharper contrast between the two. The liturgical use of the *AIDS Icon*, as well as the way Clayton understands written artifacts as social tools, help me grasp elements of Pludwinski's work which I did not immediately discern. Clayton sheds light on the liturgical and artifactual possibilities of the *Shivity* columns.

Clayton made his icon for liturgy, not just display. Two features invite viewers to engage with it as a liturgical object. First, the triptych opens and closes. When closed, the triptych has a padlock suggesting the secrecy and stigma around HIV/AIDS—another kind of concealing and



Image 14: Image of closed triptych, *AIDS Icon*, by Ewan Clayton (2005). Photo: Robert Cooper

revealing (see Image 14). Clayton worked with bookbinder and cabinet-maker Peter Jones, who selected woods from around the world—in elm, oak, and birch—suggesting the global reach of AIDS. Clayton recounts, “The overall aesthetic of the icon is one that values natural materials, revealed for what they are—the unvarnished truth. . . . Their grain shows growth and the way they have responded to the vagaries of different climates.” By opening the triptych in liturgy, the presider models the unveiling required to end AIDS stigma and secrecy.

the front is about crucifixion, sacrifice, prophecy, bearing burdens, standing up and being counted, the reverse side is about resurrection and renewal—so I aimed to create a gentle, contemplative space.” He leaves “contemplative space” for viewers to place their own prayers,

Second, Clayton and Jones created pockets on the back of the icon where members of the public could insert photos, letters, and other mementoes of loved ones. Clayton explains: “If

⁵⁴ Illman, “The Arts as Arena,” 140–41. Pludwinski too draws this comparison in “Abstract Hebrew Calligraphy,” http://www.impwriter.com/Abstract_2.html.

their own responses. He devised similar pockets previously for AIDS memorial books commissioned in the 1990s. He recounts the process of designing these:

I wanted the artifact to be one that people would own and experience personally. I realized there were already many documents in the community that were more valuable to them than my book. Photographs, letters, cards, and notes had been kept to remind people of the friends they loved. These precious objects were carried around, taken out of wallets, and shown to each other. They were stored in special places, drawers and boxes. These were the real “memorial books.” Perhaps my memorial book could offer a housing for these objects which were so intimately connected to the lives and friendships the book hoped to celebrate.⁵⁵

Clayton employs this technique in other triptychs he describes as portable shrines or domestic shrines.⁵⁶ He views it as a strategy of connecting people: “This is one of the magic things about writing—that it connects people, it involves giving and receiving, writing and reading, speaking and listening, it offers the chance of a dialogue.”⁵⁷ For Clayton, writing is social, embedded in materials and artifacts and social contexts, connected to all manner of social interactions and institutions.⁵⁸ His written objects foster those dialogues. As he writes, “Artifacts are the bodies of letters.”⁵⁹ Such artifacts enables letters and words to perform social functions.

Clayton also describes this work as “a kind of portable shrine that could be carried in procession,” and supplied images of a special service at St. Brandon’s Church in Brancepeth which uses it (see Image 15).⁶⁰ Here it functions as a contemplative space in three dimensions. Some of its viewers see the contemplative backside, others see the Jesus and prayer in the front. Images of the service also depict several people wrapped in cords or ribbons, in red echoing the AIDS ribbon (see Image 16).



Image 15: Image of *AIDS Icon*, by Ewan Clayton (2005), being used at a service at St. Brandon’s Church, with attendees encircling it. Photo: Robert Cooper

⁵⁵ Clayton, *The Calligraphy of the Heart*, 13.

⁵⁶ Peter Halliday, ed., *Holy Writ: Modern Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Calligraphy* (Lichfield: Lichfield Cathedral, 2014), 24–25.

⁵⁷ Ann Hechle and Ewan Clayton, *Findings: In the Calligraphic Work and Teachings of Irene Wellington, 1904–1984* (Pinner, UK: Irene Wellington Educational Trust, 2021), 11.

⁵⁸ Ewan Clayton, “Introducing the Exhibition,” in *Codes and Messages: Lettering Today*, ed. Ewan Clayton (Crafts Council, 1995), 11–17; Clayton, *The Calligraphy of the Heart*, 12–14; Clayton, “Recalling the Sacred,” in *Holy Writ: Modern Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Calligraphy*, ed. Peter Halliday (Lichfield: Lichfield Cathedral, 2014); Clayton, “Communities of Writers,” in *Writing: Making Your Mark*, ed. Ewan Clayton (London: British Library, 2019), 118–57.

⁵⁹ Clayton, *The Calligraphy of the Heart*, 12.

⁶⁰ These images were taken by the Rev. Robert Cooper, who estimates that the service took place in 2007.

These cords represent the bonds of shame, the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. They suggest the bonds of community severed when those suffering are neglected by their communities. Clayton explains the function of this and other “portable contemplative spaces”:

I’m trying to provide focal points, things that will attract people to stay with them for a while and to enable them to reflect on their life’s journey or story, and as a result of that in a sense to be changed. What these things do is to provide pausing points, stopping points in a world that is full of frenetic activity. I think that this is also what an artwork does, as does an icon or a chapel—even a cup of tea! All it’s doing is opening space.⁶¹

These images of liturgy show just how Clayton’s work creates space for contemplation and conversation. Elsewhere he explains:

Mine is an ancient and noble profession. I am one link in a chain of people who from time immemorial have made written artifacts for the communities they lived in. These artifacts have come in all shapes and sizes, answering to the specific circumstances and local traditions of different places; they have been central in helping communities to celebrate, to remember, to grieve, to welcome, record, and mark whatever they held to be significant.⁶²



Image 16: Image of *AIDS Icon*, by Ewan Clayton (2005), set on an altar in St. Brandon’s Church, with a man, wrapped in red ribbon, sitting on an adjacent bench. Photo: Robert Cooper

Clayton’s art helps a community to grieve, to transform into a more inclusive, caring space. Hackneyed distinctions of “art versus craft” do not apply here. Clayton declares that “the only way calligraphy can have a meaning is if it relates to some kind of human purpose and activity.”⁶³ This calligraphy serves as expressive art and social function.

Clayton’s focus on his work as liturgical artifact and contemplative space suggests a similar role for Pludwinski’s *Shivity* columns. Pludwinski mainly speaks of his artistic process, the way that creating and viewing these columns is a kind of meditation. However, as a *sofer*, Pludwinski knows how materialized sacred writings can orient a community. Just as the parishioners at St. Brandon’s encircle the *AIDS Icon*, so synagogue members orient, spatially and spiritually, around the Torah scroll.

⁶¹ Wates, “Ewan Clayton in Conversation,” 18.

⁶² Clayton, *The Calligraphy of the Heart*, 14.

⁶³ Wates, “Ewan Clayton in Conversation,” 18.

The *Shivity* columns indeed draw on a tradition of synagogue art: *Shivity* plaques. These pair “I set the Lord before me always” with Psalm 67 in the shape of a menorah, often accompanied by kabbalistic texts or meditative aids. This tradition dates at least to the eighteenth century.⁶⁴ *Shivity* plaques are placed on the walls of the synagogue, on the Torah reader’s table, and in prayerbooks (see Image 17).⁶⁵



Image 17: *Shivity* with Hebrew text in the form of a menorah. Image in Det Kongelige Bibliotek, author unknown - 18th or 19th century shiviti Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Denmark (Department of Oriental and Judaica Collections, Cod. Heb. 46:5). Source: See fn. 65.

The metaphor of “Torah as pathway” comes full circle here. The psalmist fashioned the embodied experience of walking down a road into a metaphor for God’s guidance throughout life. The *Shivity* plaques mold this verbal metaphor into a meditative object which appeals to the senses, a ritual object. This kind of “ritualized metaphor” is found throughout Jewish practices of employing material forms of sacred texts.⁶⁶

Pludwinski’s columns transform the *Shivity* plaques into three-dimensional objects which enable a wider range of embodied engagements and scriptural metaphors. A column exists in space. It invites conversation. Several people gazing at a painting see, mostly, the same painting. Not so with sculpture: every viewer sees a different angle. Pludwinski reflects: “I do like the fact that one does not see the entire text, that the letters curve around the bend a bit so there is the feeling, perhaps, that ‘there is more out there than what meets the eye’.”⁶⁷ Every viewer knows that their vision, their perspective, is incomplete. And every viewer may have a different understanding of just Who is being placed in front of them at all times.

The column form also suggests scriptural images. As the Israelites traverse the desert between Egypt and Canaan, God guides them in the form of a column of cloud and a column of smoke. Following the column, Israel literally places God before them. Before the Israelites enter Canaan, God commands them to “set up large stones” (Deut 27:2) and write all the words of God’s teaching upon them (cf. Josh 8:30-35). As Israel enters the land, those inscriptions remind them who is worshiped in that land. The written stones mark the boundary between Israel and other nations, between worship of Israel’s God and other gods.

⁶⁴ Esther Juhasz, “Shiviti-Menorah,” in *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, ed. Raphael Patai and Haya Bar-Itzhak (Armonk, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 492; Esther Juhasz, “The Making of a Jewish Votive Object between Text and Image, Spirit and Matter: The Example of the Shiviti-Menorah Plaque [in Hebrew],” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 24–25 (2006): 349–82. See also images in Joseph Shadur and Yehudit Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts: An Inner World of Art and Symbol* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), esp. 58–60.

⁶⁵ Image from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiviti#/media/File:A_shiviti_Denmark.jpg

⁶⁶ I draw the term “ritualized metaphor” from Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁶⁷ Izzy Pludwinski, personal communication, May 25, 2022.

Despite this potential, I do not know of these columns being used in any liturgical space. Pludwinski commented that “I had hoped to attract an interest by some synagogue in the work. I had even hoped to find a commission to create these on floor to ceiling architectural structures in an appropriate setting.”⁶⁸ Such an offer never materialized. But Clayton’s triptych, and his view that calligraphy is a tool for embodied communication, help me see how the *Shiviti* could be used in such a way. These columns could easily live in a synagogue.

Beyond Mere Words

Pludwinski and Clayton both shape sacred texts into letters and words which communicate beyond mere signification. They express the bodily gesture and character of the scribe. Their verbal-visual art both reveals the presence of God and points to the limits of language to explain God. Yet Clayton’s insights into the liturgical and artifactual dimensions of lettering suggest ways in which Pludwinski’s columns could communicate further.

In calligraphy as in choral music, there is no forced choice between text or art. Both are present. Clooney writes of the disposition needed for interreligious reading:

To learn, we must read the text before us with deep respect for its breadth and expansiveness. We must be vulnerable to possibilities we can probe only to a modest extent, and ready to surrender ourselves to the mysteries latent in what we read.⁶⁹

In their own deep engagement with brief but resonant texts, Clayton and Pludwinski both model this disposition. They find new mysteries in their texts by connecting sacred text and language to body, artifact, beauty, and the creative process.⁷⁰

РЯ

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⁶⁸ Izzy Pludwinski, personal communication, November 9, 2022.

⁶⁹ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 58.

⁷⁰ I would like to thank George Greenia and Aaron Rosen for their comments on a draft of this essay.