

PRACTICING FAITH: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURALISTIC WORLD

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This paper brings together two educational conversations that are typically pursued independently and often at cross-purposes. Interlocutors in the first conversation, tend to be “wall builders,” concerned about the educational task of maintaining religious identity in the face of the corrosive powers of modern individualism, pluralism, relativism, and consumerism. The other conversation engages “bridge builders,” convinced that the encounter with religious pluralism is not only inevitable, but also theologically and educationally necessary and enriching (Eck 19). But what are the connections between these two educational concerns?

In recent years I have had exceedingly rich opportunities to reflect on the relationship between educating for religious particularity and pluralism. My long-standing interest in the history, theory and practice of Catholic education took a distinctive turn when I became coordinator of “For I Am Joseph Your Brother” a continuing education program of Jewish Studies for Catholic educators. Working with Jewish colleagues from Gratz College, we created a program designed to change the way Catholics educated about Judaism. For one year, 15 Catholic educators engaged in intensive three hour weekly seminars learning about Jewish faith, culture and history from Jewish instructors. Outside of classes, participants celebrated Shabbat with Jewish families, attended worship services at various Jewish synagogues, met with Jewish educators, and explored first-hand elements of Jewish cultural life, including a three-week study-tour of Israel. Concurrent with this project, I also participated in a two year colloquium among twelve Jewish and Catholic religious educators led by Dr. Mary Boys of Union Theological Seminary and Professor Sarah Lee, Dean of the School of Education at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles to explore issues of “Educating for Religious Particularity and Pluralism.” Using the experience of the colloquium, Boys and Lee facilitated a workshop for Catholic and Jewish educators in the Philadelphia area entitled, “Catholics and Jews: How to Teach About the Other.” While this paper does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of these innovative programs, it does seek to elaborate two fundamental insights that emerged consistently from engagement in these projects.

First is the conviction that the tasks of educating for religious identity and responsible pluralism are intrinsically related, not antagonistic concerns. At the end of the grant supporting “For I Am Joseph Your Brother,” appeals for extending the program were rejected by officials, one of whom commented that “Catholics don’t even know their own tradition; why should we invest in acquainting them with another?” And to a

casual observer, it is “counter-intuitive” to insist, as I did, that it is precisely through deep engagement with a religious “other” that participants came to understand and appropriate their own religious tradition more deeply and critically. The second insight had to do with the critical role of “practices” in forming religious identity and in making accessible an experience of the “other.” Not all education happens conceptually. We come to know and have a “feel” for a religious tradition not only through stories remembered and theological beliefs defined, but as Robert Bellah observes, by “participat[ion] in the practices—ritual, aesthetic, ethical—that define the community as a way of life. (Bellah, *Habits* 154).

My task, then, in the first part of this essay is to demonstrate the necessary link between religious identity formation and a serious encounter with a religious other. With a specific focus on Jewish and Christian relations, I will explore how the *intra*-religious dynamics of educating for religious identity and the *inter*-religious dialogue between the two traditions are mutually affected in a postmodern age. In a brief concluding section, I will explore the specific contribution of religious “practice” in educating for religious particularity and pluralism. I will argue that “practices,” rooted in and expressive of specific communal traditions, are critical to nurturing and sustaining a particular religious identity. At the same time, as expressions of shared human goods, religious practices can also function as a meeting ground for participants in different traditions to explore the “boundaries” that differentiate” as well as the “bonds” that connect us in relationship with one another.

Educating for Religious Identity: The Postmodern Challenge

There is an old saying that the best thing we can do for our children is to give them “roots and wings.” To know that one belongs and has a specific place in the world is to be grounded as a human being, to have a center. But without sufficient room to grow, roots get pot-bound, twisted in on themselves, strangling new life. To long for “home”—community and connection—is deeply human, but so too is the desire to explore beyond our particular horizons. The encounter with another, especially the stranger, can expand, deepen and enrich our lives. Nonetheless, by de-stabilizing and de-centering our world, it can just as readily threaten the very ground on which we stand. Human identity is always relational, forged in a constant process of negotiating boundaries and border crossings.

Something analogous happens within communities of faith. We are always religious in some particular way. There is no “generic” religion because our way to God is always mediated by some set of images and symbols, metaphors and stories, beliefs and practices. Religious traditions embody a particular people’s experience of the divine over time. Each is a unique and irreplaceable embodiment of the accumulated wisdom of a people bound together by common memories and hopes that shape the religious and moral imaginations of its members. Yet religious identity is not some unchanging essence handed on from generation to generation, but a dynamic process through which treasured religious meanings are interpreted, reconstructed or even changed over time in light of new, ever changing historical and social circumstances. To participate in a living faith

tradition is not only to identify with an historical people; it is to engage in an on-going communal conversation about how best to live in relationship with God in *this* time and *this* place.

Historically, this adaptive, developmental “traditioning” process took place slowly, even glacially. Change could be absorbed and integrated over time in ways that did not overwhelm a community’s sense of continuity and identity over time. However, in the midst of contemporary pluralism, individualism, and awareness of the historically situated condition of knowledge, as Kathleen Tanner observes, religious identity “is fluid and complex; its meaning contested by different interpretations and definitions, ever subject to changing conditions and multiple understandings. It is always in the process of qualification and modification” (25). Beliefs and practices that constitute clear and definitive boundaries in one age may become less significant and move to the periphery in another. What some members consider essential in one contexts, others merely tolerate, ignore, or even reject in another. What was once excluded may later be embraced. As theologian Ronald Theiman concludes, the identity of a religious tradition “Can never be fixed or final because it is always in the making” (149).

As communities of faith struggle to live out treasured religious meanings from the past in new, ever-changing historical and social circumstances, we come to appreciate that “the tradition we have received is itself the accumulated efforts of past generations engaged in a similar task” (Sawicki, 376). For religious educators who bear responsibility for nurturing religious identity and commitment, it is no small task to equip new generations of the faithful to abide in this creative, tension-filled relationship between identity and difference, continuity and change, commitment and criticism, memory and hope. It requires what Mary Boys terms “education for paradox,” a distinctive approach to faith formation: one that seeks to foster “religious commitments that are both clear and ambiguous, rooted and adaptive.”(7). Even under optimal conditions, this is a delicate balancing act; but for Jews and Christians educating amidst the centrifugal forces of postmodern cultural developments, it is a daunting challenge.

For example, we recognize that religious identity is communicated both formally and informally through active participation in a community of faith. But many of us live in what Stephen Carter has termed a “culture of disbelief” in which religion is a private, individual affair and a matter of choice, not obligation. How are we to encourage participation in the shared rhythms of corporate, communal life in cultures that oblige each individual to create him or her self? Moreover, as communal participation depends increasingly on religion’s subjective appeal, can “religious identity” be sustained amidst local congregational cultures shaped less by distinctive religious traditions and practices than by the personal needs and preferences of its members?

Just as individuals require clear psychological boundaries to maintain an enduring sense of self, religious identity is nurtured in communities whose members share a common sense of identity and purpose, however differently interpreted. But for the most part, we no longer live in the kind of cohesive, bounded communities where religion, ethnicity, class and neighborhood reinforce a distinctive sense of peoplehood (Bellah, et.

al.) We are “saturated selves” living in multiple communities of discourse, each with distinctive histories and traditions, some complementary, others contradictory (Gerken). Personal identity becomes diffused and fragmented as individuals are increasingly forced to sift and weigh competing moral, religious, aesthetic and intellectual claims (Wuthnow). As members bring these conflicting commitments and divided loyalties to their participation in religious communities, our “particularities” become more “plural.” Religious communities become increasingly diverse, including groups that may or may not see themselves as compatible with one another (Hunter). When the differences *within* particular religious traditions seem as great as those *among* them, they tend to lose their distinctive character as communal bonds become more fragile and boundaries become more permeable. If education is a community building enterprise in which individuals come to see themselves as a people sharing a common vision and way of life, how does a community educate when the very definition of what it means to be a people is itself at issue? How do we sustain a sense of corporate identity amid tensions generated by multiple and diverse religious understandings and practices?

While there are no easy answers to these questions, it is important to note that in “educating for paradox,” our contemporary context largely insures that religious commitments are “ambiguous” and “adaptive.” Little intentional effort seems required to cultivate these qualities. On the other hand, the culture provides little support, indeed, actively militates against religious commitments becoming “rooted” and “clear.” In the face of such challenges, despite our best efforts, the “roots” we cultivate are often shallow, barely able to sustain life and growth; and the “wings” we seek to strengthen prove unable to navigate a sure course, easily tossed about by every passing current. No wonder it is tempting for religious communities to invest their best energy, imagination, and efforts to identity maintenance, while viewing engagement with religious “others” as, at best, a distraction and, at worst, a burdensome obstacle in an already difficult endeavor.

How Jews and Christians respond to these *intra*-religious dynamics will play a large role in shaping the future of *inter*-religious dialogue between the two traditions. Recognizing the ambiguity and pluralism within each tradition has the potential for deepening the conversation between Judaism and Christianity, but it may also lead either or both traditions to turn inward and retreat from dialogue out of a heightened concern for sustaining communal identity. Which path our communities choose, in large part, depends on how we conceive of the relationship between identity and difference.

Educating for Religious Pluralism: A Rationale

As Diana Eck observes, we live in a world where religious diversity is “an existential fact” Our inevitable encounters with religious “others” alert us to the spiritual depth, power and beauty in different religious traditions as well as confront us with the darker shadow side of our own. Whatever the strength of our own commitments, we know on some level that it is possible to choose otherwise. Moreover, to listen to a religious “other” is not just to hear someone else’s story. It is to consider a claim about the fundamental nature of the world that often differs from and challenges our own. To

put it bluntly, to hear another's religious story is to hear a rejection of our own. When educating for religious commitment faces so many challenges, why should a religious community actively seek opportunities for dialogue and engagement with others?

The answer to these questions depends in large part on how we understand the character of religious traditions and the relationships among them. For example, if we understand our own tradition as the sole bearer of truth while all others are in error, there is little purpose in dialogue other than to convert the other to one's own point of view. Resistance to the truth—interpreted as stubbornness or hardness of heart—must be worn down and overcome. Sadly, this oppositional, even adversarial view has characterized the long, tragic history of Jewish-Christian relations. Until recent times, most Christians believed, like the early Christian theologian John Chrysostom, that “the truth of one religious [is] dependent on the invalidity of the other” (Quoted in Wilkens 148). On the other hand, if all religious choices are merely subjective preferences, then nothing of consequence is actually at stake in the encounter with the other. Is it possible to foster commitment to our own particular faith traditions without demonizing, absorbing, or relativizing the other?

In my view, neither fundamentalism nor relativism is theologically or ethically tenable as a way of educating for responsible religious pluralism. If one takes religious claims seriously and, at the same time, recognizes the existence of religious diversity as fact of life, then we cannot afford to ignore or merely tolerate one another. Instead, we need to find ways, in Eck's words, “to make a home for ourselves and our neighbors.” In contrast with either “exclusivism” or “relativism,” Eck proposes another option. “Pluralism,” she argues, is “the complex and unavoidable encounter, difficult as it might be, with the multiple religions and cultures that are the very stuff of our world, some of which may challenge the very ground on which we stand.” Pluralism requires active engagement with differences, seeking genuine understanding, not mere tolerance of the other.” When pluralism is embraced as a value, dialogue becomes a “truth-seeking encounter” between religiously committed participants who seek to “find ways to be distinctively ourselves and yet be in relation to one another” (191-99).

While I find Eck's analysis helpful, there is a deeper level of complexity to religious traditions that alludes her typology. The problem is one Lee H. Yearly describes as “false fixities.” Eck's analysis assumes a view of “religions” as separate and distinct objects lying in space, each having a certain essence, an identity that distinguishes it from all others. But this physical model of “self-contained entities interacting across stable boundaries” is insufficiently nuanced to account for the enormous complexity of religious traditions. Her analysis, for example, does not recognize that religious traditions are internally, as well as externally differentiated; that our “particularities” are themselves plural. To defend the proposition that educating for authentic religious identity and responsible pluralism are intrinsically related, we need to conceptualize “identity” and “difference” in ways that better illumine the interdependence and inter-relatedness of religious traditions.

In *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, sociologist Anthony P. Cohen defines community as a symbolically constructed "system of values, norms, and moral codes which provides a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members." This idea of "community" implies relationships of both similarity and difference; i.e. that members of my group have something in common with each other, which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other groups. Communal identity is inherently "relational" and "oppositional" in the sense that groups "only need to formulate a sense of themselves as coherent and distinctive because they confront others." I can only recognize "sameness" because I am aware of "difference." Boundaries have "a symbolic character and function" that allow them to be perceived in rather different terms, not only by people on opposite sides of it, but by people on the same side." This conceptual fluidity is precisely what makes social solidarity possible; it provides community members "with the means to gloss over the innumerable factors which divided them in the course of day to day social life, in order to present themselves, by contrast with other communities, as having an essential likeness" (27-32). It is no wonder that social groups often seek to reinforce group identity and solidarity by an oppositional strategy that heightens and reinforces differences between "us" and "them" .

But religious identity is also relational in the sense that particularities do not exist as isolated wholes. The other's story impinges upon and informs my own identity and self/understanding. As theologian Kathleen Tanner observes, religious traditions have been forged in relation to one another and to the larger cultures of which they are a part, appropriating and refashioning certain elements, while opposing and excluding others. "It is not so much what materials are used, but how they are used that establishes religious identity. Different ways of life establish themselves. . .in a kind of tussle with one another over what is to be done with the materials shared between them" (110-19). If religious identity is relational in this sense, Tanner concludes, then

any boundary distinguishing Christianity from a non-Christian way of life cannot be determined by looking at Christianity alone. . . . Boundaries are determined by how a Christian way of life is situated within a whole field of alternatives. The boundaries distinguishing a Christian way of life from others will shift with shifts in the practices of the other ways of life making up the field (111).

For Christians and Jews, educating for religious identity *requires* attention to pluralism because the shape of our traditions has the imprint of the other on our respective histories. It is not just that encountering the other *enriches* my own self-understanding, but that the relationship with the other is in some sense *constitutive* of that identity. In the words of Jewish scholar Jean Halperin, "we not only need to understand one another, we need one another to understand ourselves" (Quoted in Eck, 189). This is especially true for Christianity where "the encounter with Judaism is not only an external conversation with a religious other, but "an internal conversation between two parts of

our own tradition-- indeed, two parts of our written scriptures, what we have traditionally called the Old and New Testaments”(Soulen, 21). You can’t educate about Christianity without at the same time making statements about Judaism. As Christopher Leighton observes, “Christians walk a path that repeatedly crosses Jewish boundaries. There is no way around this stubborn fact. Christians cannot enter into relationship with the God of Israel without simultaneously becoming entangled with God’s covenantal partner, Israel” (1). Phil Cunningham’s 1991 study of Catholic religion textbooks illustrates in practical terms the truth of this claim: nearly half of primary grade lessons contained specific references to Jews or Judaism.

Bonds, Boundaries and Border Crossings

If this relational understanding of religious identity is accurate, then education for authentic particularity and responsible pluralism are inextricably linked; each task impacts and informs the other. Given the increasing fragility and permeability of communal boundaries in a postmodern world, religious educators may be tempted to retreat from engagement with others, to rely on various forms of homogeneity-of ethnicity, class, race, neighborhood, or lifestyle--to sustain communal solidarity, and to focus exclusively on strengthening the internal vitality of faith communities. But the reality of our fragmented, contentious postmodern world pushes religious education to locate itself at the various "borders" that inhabit our divided lives--the borders between communities of discourse, between religious traditions, between faith communities and the public world, and among the multiple commitments that structure our personal identities.

At the same time, it is not unreasonable for Jews and Christians to anticipate that such educational “border crossings” will further intensify and accelerate the destabilizing, de-centering forces that persistently undermine communal traditions, authorities, and values. I would make the case that educating for pluralism must attend to the impact of dialogue on a community’s efforts to form the religious identity of its members. Shifting perceptions of the boundaries that divide us inevitably impact religious self-understanding. For this reason, a community’s engagement with religious others cannot afford to move forward independently of efforts to integrate new insights and learning in the life of the community of faith--in the stories we tell, the beliefs we articulate, the practices we enact, and the values we embody. Border crossings and boundary building need to feed into one another for the integrity and flourishing of both traditions.

These inevitable tensions between educating for particularity and pluralism, however, can be at least partially negotiated by a postmodern reading of identity and otherness suggested in this essay. Until recent times, modern forms of education have largely been shaped by the search for universal truths and values that could transcend and/or reconcile the religious and cultural differences that divide and separate human communities. Efforts to maintain and define cultural and religious particularities were suspect; diversity was viewed as source of social conflict, an obstacle to social integration and cohesion. But as Miroslav Volf so eloquently argues, there is a commensurate danger in the failure to recognize that boundaries not only divide and separate, they also contain

and hold.

Vilify all boundaries, pronounce every discrete identity oppressive, put the tag “exclusion” on every stable difference—and you will have aimless drifting instead of clear-sighted agency, haphazard activity instead of moral engagement and accountability and, in the long run, a torpor of death instead of a dance of freedom” (64-65).

Honoring particularity is not opposed to valuing pluralism; indeed, the former is a necessary pre-condition for the existence of the latter. Religious education in a postmodern time will seek to honor pluralism, not by ignoring or obliterating differences, but by exploring the "boundaries" that differentiate as well as connect us in relationship with one another.

This postmodern reading of identity and difference also suggests the challenge of sustaining religious identity cannot adequately be addressed by guarding boundaries and strengthening borders alone. As Jewish educator Jonathan Woocher argues, neither an uncritical relativism nor a defensive triumphalism is an adequate response to the contemporary crisis of religious identity “It’s not that I believe that all religious commitments are equivalent. I *will* defend the value and validity of my beliefs. But long history argues that it is much more rewarding and important to build up and improve the interior of our meaning systems than to defend their boundaries.”² Sociologist Cohen’s analysis of “community” reinforces Woocher’s insight. Cohen argues that "*whether or not its structural boundaries remain intact*, [italics mine] the reality of community lies in its members perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity" (18).

Woochers and Cohen remind us that religious communities are “bound” together by something more than the “boundaries” existing at the “borders” distinguishing one group from another. Perhaps again, we are trapped by spatial metaphors that are inadequate to the organic character of communities. Notice the distinctions we make between the term “boundary” and two other closely related words derived from the verb “to bind:” “bound” or “bond.” A “bond” is something that binds, connects, or holds things together. We are connected, held together in relationship in multiple and complex ways. The strength of those communal “bonds”—be they memories, practices, theology, experiences, geography, ethnicity, nationality, ideology, gender, or merely accidents of birth—are not necessarily dependent on the clarity, precision, or stability of the community’s boundaries. We can feel strongly “bound” or committed to a tradition and a community whose boundaries we experience as fragile or in flux, just as we can feel “disengaged” and “alienated” in a community with strong and stable borders. Analogously, religious traditions certainly cannot long survive if their members become indifferent to the beliefs, values, and practices that constitute their common life, but a

¹ Woocher’s comments were made at a meeting of the Colloquium of Jewish and Christian Educators in which the author participated, New York, May 2, 1999.

community cannot necessarily insure its future simply by preserving continuity with its past. The identity of a religious tradition is ultimately sustained not by guarding boundaries, but by the meaningfulness and vitality of a community's symbols and practices.

The Role of Practices in Educating for Identity and Pluralism

The term "practices" has become a central category of social analysis across a variety of disciplines, though it is often used in quite different ways. In religious education Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass use the term "Christian practices" to refer to "*things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world*" (18). In *Practicing Our Faith*, they, together with eleven colleagues, identify twelve practices as integral to the "shape and character" of a "Christian way of life": honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God.³ A similar concern for attention to the lived practice of faith is central in Michael Warren's book, *In This Time In This Place: The Spirit Embodied in the Local Assembly*. Warren draws on both broad and narrow meanings of the term "practice" to examine the "range of activities used by local churches as a way of being a church... what we do regularly and ordinarily" (128). Together, these works shift attention from concepts and beliefs to embodied activity as central to the task of forming people in faith.

Do religious practices which root us in particular faith traditions also play a role in mediating the encounter with religious differences? Can those symbolic, meaningful actions which most concretely and obviously divide us also constitute a bridge affording us entrance into one another's religious worlds that cannot be accessed in any other way? A story related by Senator Joe Lieberman's mother, Marci, illustrates a certain dynamic of religious practice that might explain in part this paradox.

"On the second day of Rosh Hashanah the family celebrates *tashlikh*, the ritual casting of crumbs upon the water to symbolically throw away mistakes from the past year." During the 2000 campaign, the Lieberman family was seen walking toward a New Haven park, carrying bags of bread to toss into the pond. Hadassah, the children and the senator, who was pushing Marcia in a wheelchair, attracted a group of onlookers. "Joe began explaining to them what we were doing," Marcia Lieberman said. "Before we knew it, we had a whole group walking with us--we must have had 30 people--all in a line. When we got to the park, Joe recited the prayer. He usually does it in Hebrew, but this time he did it in English so our new friends could understand. . . ." "on the way back, an Italian gentleman presented me with a bouquet of flowers. 'That's because you raised a son like

³ In addition to Bass and Dykstra, the team included Amy Plantinga Pauw, L. Gregory Jones, M. Shawn Copeland, Thomas Hoyt Jr. John Koenig, Sharon Daloz Parks, Stephanie Paulsell, Ana Maria Pineda, Larry Rasmussen, Frank Rogers Jr., and Don E. Saliers.

Joe,' he said." (Philadelphia Inquirer, 8 September 2002)

What strikes me about this story is the compelling power of this simple, meaningful human act. While some of the on-lookers were perhaps motivated by curiosity, or drawn by the Senator's fame, I suspect there was also something deeper going on that was powerfully attractive, even to those who were not Jewish. Celebrating *tashlikh* may be distinctively Jewish, but one does not have to be Jewish to recognize *tashlikh* as a particular community's response to a deeply human need to acknowledge and come to terms with our shortcomings and failures, to manage guilt, to learn to forgive ourselves and others. And even though we are rooted in traditions which respond to these needs in different ways, we can come to understand and appreciate, even be encouraged by the witness of others to the possibility of human transformation.

Another illustration comes from a *60 Minutes* profile of the American-born conductor, Gilbert Levine, the first Jew to serve as conductor of the Krakow Philharmonic Orchestra from 1987 to 1993. Dubbed "the Pope's Maestro" Levine first became acquainted with then Archbishop Karol Wojtyla during his tenure in Poland. He was later invited to Rome to meet the Pontiff personally and was tapped to conduct the celebration of the 10th anniversary of John Paul II's papacy. Other performances followed such as the 1993 World Youth Day in Denver and a concert at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris dedicated to healing the rift between Jews and Christians during disputes over the Carmelite monastery at Auschwitz.

However, it was one concert in particular that earned Levine, a practicing Jew, the son of Yiddish-speaking parents and the grandson of Polish Jews, the award of papal knighthood. Levine had approached the Pope with the idea of a concert in Rome to commemorate the Holocaust. The Pope readily agreed, but insisted that the concert be held in the Vatican. The Papal Concert to Commemorate the Holocaust included music by Franz Schubert, Beethoven, and Leonard Bernstein. In attendance were over 200 Holocaust survivors, the chief rabbi of Rome *Rav Elio Toaff*, and 7,500 invited guests. But what was historic about the occasion was the playing of the Kol Nidre and the reciting of the Kaddish. That had never been done before. For the first time, Jewish prayer was heard in the Vatican. Reflecting on the event, Levine spoke movingly of the impact of that concert. "Here I was performing in the Vatican, and yet it truly became a synagogue.

In comments at the beginning of the performance, John Paul, too, alluded to the paradox of a transformed identity through the recognition and embrace of the other.

Among those who are with us this evening are some who physically underwent a horrendous experience, crossing a dark wilderness where the very source of love seemed dried up. Many wept at that time and we still hear echoes of their lament. We hear it too: their plea did not die with them, but rises powerful, agonizing, heartrending, saying 'Do not forget us!' It is addressed to one and all. Thus we are gathered this evening to commemorate the Holocaust of millions of Jews. The candles lit by survivors are intended to show symbolically

that this hall does not have narrow limits. It contains all the victims: fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters and friends. In our memory they are all present. They are with you, they are with us.

These events, for me, speak of power of music, ritual, art, dance, and other aesthetic practices to create an embodied, non-literal zone of meaning, an ambiguous “space” that allow us to occupy common ground in ways that honor rather than obliterate our differences. Practices make possible the creative interplay of identity and difference in ways that words and concepts are unable to effect.

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate how the encounter with a religious “other” can strengthen rather than diffuse religious identity. Because of our historical relationship, Jews and Christians in particular need vigorous and passionate engagement within and between our two communities around the nature of our common life and the character of our relationship with one another. The paradox is that it may be at least in part through the on-going conversation about how to deal with “the other” that Christians and Jews can strengthen the bonds that constitute each as a particular faith tradition.” In Tanner’s words, “the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary as *at* it” (115). The wisdom we gain facing inward toward one another may then empower us to face outward together, speaking of what we have learned about integrity and healing to a broken world.

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