

Celebrations Connecting Religions

Embracing Diversity and Overcoming Divisions

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This chapter examines practices and interpretations of prayers and celebrations where adherents from different religions are co-present. It is based on a qualitative empirical study in Switzerland and Germany that focuses on interreligious contact zones in the context of Christian, intercultural communities.¹ The study focuses on Christian stakeholders and takes as its beginning Christian, intercultural communities. The project team assumes that in these intercultural settings interreligious contacts are more prominent. One of the main interests of this volume is to better understand the dynamics of boundary making and belonging that animate convivial practices (Bieler and Nagel in this volume). With three reconstructed case studies, I will highlight ephemeral and affective dimensions of belonging, but also symbolic forms of boundary drawing. Moreover, the case studies provide insights into dimensions of so-called interfaith or interreligious prayers that have been rarely explored. The prayers and celebrations discussed here are not publicly staged prayers, but prayers in more intimate spaces where people also pray for each other. These celebrations represent a form of interreligious celebrating that is not yet well documented or analyzed. For further research on interreligious conviviality, it would be recommended to focus on Muslim stakeholders and their interreligious contact zones.

The practice of so-called interreligious celebration has become widespread. This practice is expected and taken for granted by the public, but is viewed critically by religious communities, above all by churches. In the German-speaking countries, various Christian actors have written about 100 guidelines on the topic over the past 30 years, ranging from enthusiasm to rejection to tentative affirmation of such celebrations (Gässlein 2022). In the Islamic context, joint prayers seem to be less controversial: At least in the German-speaking countries, there are no official guidelines from the central council of Muslims in Germany (Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland, ZMD) or

¹ The study is part of the research group “Conviviality in Motion. Exploring Practices and Theologies in Multiethnic Christian Congregations in Europe” (SNSF 100015_192445). For further information see <https://theologie.unibas.ch/en/research-project-conviviality-in-motion/conviviality-in-motion/>.

the federation of Islamic umbrella organizations Switzerland (Föderation Islamischer Dachorganisationen Schweiz, FIDS). It might be more difficult to formulate criticism or even rejection in a minority position, which is the case in the German-speaking countries. There exist only a few voices from a liberal context. These voices emphasize the peacemaking intention and the concern for mutual understanding of such prayer meetings and the intimate character of these encounters as an important dimension of living together in difference (Alboga 2007: 45–49). Moreover, it can also be questioned whether it is even legitimate to discuss the theological justification of common prayers. In a Christian and Muslim understanding, prayer is an expression of the agency of the individual to turn to God in any situation. This positive religious freedom may not be regulated and must be taken seriously, also in theological discussions (Bauschke/Homolka/Müller 2004: 17; Alboga 2007: 41). Interreligious celebration is also a perennial topic in academic debates, although interest in the subject of prayer in the interreligious academic context has declined sharply in the last ten years.²

1 Methodological Considerations

In addressing the issue of celebrating, this study works at the level of lived religion. We are not talking about religion as a discourse of ideas and principles, but about religion as a tangible phenomenon. Such an approach to religion is interested in daily life, religious practice, and lived religion at the micro level. Practical theologian Drea Fröchtling records how a Ghanaian defines religious practice in an interview in the following way: “Everything people do to survive with God by their side and see light in the shit you are in: praying, singing, throwing bones, suras, psalms, meditation and whatever else there is.” (2019: 33)

Many different disciplines such as theology, religious studies, and sociology research interreligious activities. But there is no interdisciplinary debate on the topic; the various disciplines set specific emphases and largely ignore other perspectives on the same subject (Nagel 2012: 245). Each discipline also has its own methodology and its own methods. In theology, examining lived religion and religious practices and working with empirical methods is still less common than engaging theoretical-dogmatic questions (Wrogemann 2015: 212–215). So far, a “theology of religions” is not constructed with empirical research methods and concentrates instead on normative and dogmatical questions (e.g. Schmidt-Leukel 2005).

For sociology and religious studies, the need for empirical research on interreligious encounters has been clear for quite some time (e.g. Klinkhammer/Neumaier 2020). But

2 For the most recent publications see Gässlein 2022, discussing the German-speaking church guidelines; a case study about the “Leibhaftigkeit” (dimension of embodiment) of such prayers Ritter 2010; multidisciplinary and multireligious perspectives on ritual participation Moyaert/Geldhof 2015. Bauschke/Homolka/Müller (2004) contains prayers from the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic prayer traditions for multi- and interreligious celebrations. With the goal of a theological determination of the relationship between Christianity and Islam, prayer (theology and forms) is examined by Schmid/Renz/Sperber (2006).

these disciplines also bring different perspectives to analyzing interreligious encounters. There exist a set of practical and problem-oriented approaches when researching in the field of interreligious encounters (e.g. Klinkhammer 2008; Baumann 2012) as well as more descriptive approaches, which try to categorize the different forms of interreligious activities and show the somehow conflicting relationships in which they are embedded (e.g. Schmid 2020; Nagel 2012). Often interreligious activities are analyzed by considering questions of relationship to the state and focusing on the overall societal role of interreligious activities.

This contribution is based on a qualitative empirical study and focuses on dimensions of celebrating and praying within interreligious activities, therefore the societal role of these activities is not at the center of this study. In an iterative way, in the style of grounded theory, I collected data in three communities in Germany and Switzerland in the years 2021 and 2022. In total, my data corpus consists of 25 self-conducted interviews and 12 observations of services, prayers, celebrations, and events, and one focus group interview conducted with a colleague. Furthermore, the research notes I compiled over a period of two years contain important additional information about the contexts and atmospheres in which my research partners and I found ourselves.

The first aim of this contribution is to show how interreligious conviviality works as a co-presence that often remains ephemeral and thin. Praying in co-presence becomes possible when emphasizing the transcendent dimension of the ritual and minimizing the socio-religious dimension. Second, this contribution emphasizes the importance of prayer, worship, and celebrating to questions of interreligious conviviality, since they concern the very heart of faith and religion (Ritter 2010: 12). Third, I intend to show the potential of the empirical study of religious practices, such as praying and celebrating, for theological research on interreligious activities. Qualitative empirical research has the advantage of being less oriented towards rational insights and the individual, and of considering non-religious factors in interreligious relations and encounters. These empirical findings will then help to construct an empirically based ecclesiology or a theology of religions.

2 Celebrating with People of Different Religious Affiliations: What Questions Arise?

Celebrating or praying happens as a relational and bodily encounter. Praying interrupts and transcends everyday life. A human being not only has a physical body but is a body. This perspective of corporeality and body theory is not only central to practical-theological issues, but should also be included more explicitly, following Jahnel (2021: 147), in intercultural and interreligious contexts.³ Furthermore, in praying and celebrating together, there are not only human beings involved, but God or a transcendent experience forms a counterpart.

Celebrating and praying takes place in a specific context. This contribution sheds light on so-called interreligious celebrations in the context of intercultural Christian

3 On the bodily dimension of conviviality see also Jahnel in this contribution.

communities in two larger cities in Germany and Switzerland. Even after the Second World War, Switzerland and Germany were still characterized by two confessions, Catholic and Protestant. Migration from Southern Europe and Turkey only started in the 1950s after which Islam became an increasingly relevant factor in the religious landscape of these countries (Liedhegener 2022: 718–723). Elsewhere, I have identified three developments that form both the religious and the church landscape in Switzerland: secularization, pluralization, and a boom in the establishment of new churches (Hoffmann 2019: 93). These developments take place primarily in larger cities in Switzerland and also in Germany. In both of these countries people tend to react rather cautiously to the new reality of religious pluralism and increased secularization (Gässlein 2022: 9). Unfamiliar liturgical forms of encounter therefore face a more challenging reception. The topic evokes a certain boundary anxiety as we can see in the fact that over 100 church guidelines have emerged over the last 30 years. In addition to this boundary anxiety, it is worth noting that the churches did not lose their hegemonic power. Gässlein (2022: 32) observes, that even though the influence and cultural significance of churches in the German-speaking world is declining, they are still a central meeting point for religious celebrations. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is churches that organize public celebrations in the aftermath of catastrophes, crises, or accidents, and, increasingly, in interreligious formats.

The first case study illustrates how conviviality works as a form of togetherness in which all those involved nevertheless remain distinct. We can speak here of a symbolic boundary drawing that does not detract from conviviality but rather reinforces it. The differences that can be perceived highlight the special moment of belonging together.

The second and third case studies emphasize the ephemeral and affective dimension of conviviality. The vulnerability of belonging together is suspended in the intimate atmosphere.

In all three cases, power issues are not addressed neither by those involved nor by those responsible. The boundary anxiety, the fear of losing one's own identity, often prevents diversity work from going beyond the superficial level.

2.1 Interreligious Prayer on Good Friday

For many years, an open-air prayer has been held in Hamburg. Christians gather with Muslims on Good Friday: “Christians and Muslims, praying together in public on the day Jesus died is something we see as an important visible sign of peace and coexistence in our district,” says a pastor from the Protestant congregation (“Karfreitag – interreligiös” 2019). The prayer in 2022 was led by two Protestant pastors, the vicar of the Lutheran congregation, a Catholic representative, the imam of a large Turkish mosque, a member of the board of an Arabic-speaking mosque, and, for the first time, a representative of a Buddhist community. The Jewish community of the district was not present due to preparations for Passover. The participants involved in the celebration had different functions within their religious communities, but mostly they were religious leaders, and could be distinguished by their clothing.

The prayer takes place in a public space. The venue for the celebration is easily accessible and low-key, it is situated between a noticeable church and a well-attended but invis-

ible mosque in a commercial building across the street. At two o'clock in the afternoon, about 60 people gather in this place. There are those who have come together especially for this event as well as those who passed by accidentally, some people know each other, and others are there on their own. Some stay, while others move on. Some are there for the first time and others come every year.

The prayer takes place in an in-between space from several points of view. The space is not only located between two religious buildings, but also between life and death. The celebration takes place on Good Friday. Why did those responsible for the event choose Good Friday? After all, the death of Jesus actually represents a great disagreement between the Islamic and Christian traditions. While the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are central to Christians, according to Islam the prophet Jesus did not die on the cross. It is generally understood that there was no crucifixion according to the Qur'an, but there was an ascension of Jesus. This is how a majority of Islamic commentators interpret the events.⁴ "Good Friday and the death of Jesus provide a different perspective on the world, which is in desperate need of peace. This has become even clearer with Russia's attack on the Ukraine," says the pastor in her opening words. The joint prayer that takes place every year on Good Friday is appropriate across religions because it focuses on common points: first on the shared living space, second on the longing for peace, and third on the fact that God turns towards those who are suffering.

It is noticeable that the celebration follows a Protestant liturgy. It consists of a welcome, Bible reading, speeches, the Lord's Prayer, and a blessing. Is this Protestant liturgy dominating or monopolizing the event? Or is the Protestant liturgy being watered down to such an extent that it is no longer recognizable? The Bible reading from the Gospel of Luke is read from the "BasisBibel", a modern German translation. The plea for forgiveness is central in this reading (Lk 23,26-30.33-35,44-46). The four speeches from the perspectives of different religions all concentrate on the topic of peace. The imam of a large Turkish mosque speaks about forgiveness. In Islam, forgiveness is the highest offering a person can make. He addresses himself to all those present: "What distinguishes us between the desirable and the undesirable?" The contribution of the vicar is very personal. She speaks of her emotional world, and of how torn she is. One day she is annoyed by those who only talk about the war in Ukraine, then by those who make their vacation plans. For one of the Protestant pastors, himself representing an African community, the open borders for the people from Ukraine could be read as a sign of hope in times when people of color are often victims of exclusion. No distinctions should be made between people who want to escape from war, this is his main message. The representative of the Buddhist community takes up the half-sentence from the Biblical reading: "For they know not what they do." "Do we know what we are doing?" she asks. She explains that the teaching of Buddha says that peace does not become possible when our own heart lives in discord. She concludes with a prayer, "Dalai Lama, ocean of peace may you live long. Place of refuge, servant of the needy." She folds her hands, ending with an "Om" that touches me and, as I observe, many of those who attend the prayer service. The member

4 For a direct source comparison see Reinbold (2022); for different interpretations of the quaranic verse al-Nisa 4:157 see Oakes (2020) and O'Brien (2020).

of the board of the Arabic-speaking mosque addresses those present as Abrahamic brothers and sisters. He quotes a verse from the Qur'an (Sura 7:56): "Do not cause mischief on earth." He emphasizes that what they do here is not a common prayer. Those present are from different religions; they remain, like two siblings, different, despite the many similarities. After his speech, the imam of his mosque, who was invited from Egypt especially for Ramadan, recites from the Qur'an. His voice is warm, clear, and soothing. The board member translates. "Grant us mercy, for you are the Lord, bring people together, verily Allah never misses his deadline" (no source given). The Protestant pastor then leads the group in a common Lord's Prayer. The people all stand up, most of the crowd prays aloud. The board member of the Arabic-speaking mosque takes off his beanie. A feeling of togetherness arises. Afterwards the pastor gives the Abrahamic blessing for all with her arms raised high.

In the observed celebration it becomes apparent that the liturgical form adapts to the participants. However, in my observation, it is not reduced so much that it is unrecognizable. The death of Jesus is not concealed, but statements that could be hurtful to other participants are avoided. Furthermore, I do not see a process of appropriation, moreover, the celebration is a demonstration of a successful integration process of diverse religious communities in a highly politically oriented district. The particular performance of the celebration and also its informality stands in the foreground. It is important that the celebration is finished on time. People disperse again after the celebration, some to the concert for the hour of Jesus' death in the church, others to the Friday sermon in the mosque.

2.2 Intercessory Prayer Night on an Ecumenical Holiday Week

For more than 20 years, a team of over 30 volunteers connected to an ecumenical movement in Switzerland has offered a holiday week in a beautiful mountain setting. The ecumenical holiday week combines relaxation, outdoor experiences, creative moments, and opportunities to develop one's own faith in an international fellowship of young and old, families, couples, and individuals. About 150 people from around 20 nations with different denominational and religious backgrounds take part. On one evening there is an intercessory service which involves moving between different locations and different religious themes. The prayer evening can be characterized as a shared spiritual journey. The prayer evening starts in the main hall, where people also gather for other community events. A wooden home-made cross stands in the middle of the hall, a Kyrie is sung together with accompanying dance movements to begin the journey. In this journey it is clear that everything is framed by the event of Christ on the cross. The wooden cross is alternately carried by different people and held and set down throughout the whole journey. Different people are praying. First inside in the main hall, then outside at a big fireplace, then, the last stop, in a small church lit only by candle lights and filled with Taizé chanting. Orthodox Christians take off their shoes as they enter the church, Muslim men sit in the back rows of the church. Everyone is silent and now and then somebody walks to the front, lights a candle, and leaves it on the altar. The prayer evening represents a common journey, from outside to inside, not only spatially, but also in the way prayers are offered. First, different people pray aloud in the languages of their countries, they

pray for peace and for health. Then everyone prays silently for his or her own concerns. Not everyone is praying, some just look and listen, but all are mutually devoted and respectful. It is noticeable that the neediness of human beings and their dependence on an unseen and transcendent helper is the focus of the evening and unites the people.

Light, darkness, and singing create a space that is shared by all. What role do the meditative songs and the darkness play in people's ability to pray? This case study leads to questions about the affective and aesthetic dimension of particular prayer practices. The focus on such "affective arrangements" can enrich research on interactive practices (Bieler in this volume, Eugster-Schaetzle et al. 2023).⁵ Affective arrangements depend on relationality and highlight the interactions between humans and the non-human world. The acoustic contour of praying and singing in darkness induces certain feelings and moods. It could be this affective environment that mediates togetherness. Music as a medium in interreligious encounters is enjoying increased popularity. Music helps people to open up to the religious, and sound and space can trigger calmness, thoughtfulness, and a prayerful mode. However, as Verena Grüter has shown, music is by no means a universal language that can simply bridge the differences between different religious affiliations. The practice of music rather shapes religious identity. At the same time, the aesthetic experience of music opens up the possibility of including different identities, at least temporally and playfully (Grüter 2019: 13–18). This can be seen in the intercessory prayer night. The Taizé chants are Christian in character, they draw on biblical images and texts.⁶ The chants illustrate the "inescapable location-boundness" (*unhintergehbare Standortgebundenheit*, Bernhardt 2005: 217) of interreligious contexts, however, in my case study this is true for only one side of the interreligious partnership. Interestingly this specific location-boundness does not stand in the way of the faithful attitude of all participants, regardless of their religious affiliation. At the same time, religiously defined spaces, like the Catholic chapel with many Christian symbols, can create conflicts in interreligious encounters. As is shown in this case, these conflicts have been circumvented by the use of light and darkness. Therefore, the aesthetic experience of music and of being together in darkness possibly transcends the cognitive interpretation of symbols and content and enables people to cultivate an open attitude towards people of different religious affiliations. Additionally, the whole week, with its "camp atmosphere", might have its own effect on the success of the prayer.

2.3 Opportunity for Personal Prayer in a Sunday Church Service

Every Sunday, an evangelical free church near an asylum center in Switzerland invites people to worship. After the service, this diverse community has lunch together. Afterwards, those present have the opportunity to pick out second-hand clothes for themselves. On Sunday morning, a bus picks up people at the asylum center and brings them back in the afternoon. People with different biographical, denominational, and religious

5 To learn more about the concept of affective arrangements see Slaby (2019).

6 For further information on the ecumenical spirituality of Taizé see Sheldrake 2013: 192. For information on what role Taizé songs play in a multilingual context see Eugster-Schaetzle in this volume.

backgrounds and interests come to the service. Some want to sing, pray, and read the bible, while others are happy to get out of the asylum center on a Sunday, while still others are looking forward to getting new clothes. A central component of the service is the prayer opportunity towards the end. Everyone is invited to come forward if they have a prayer to offer or if they simply want to share their concerns. The entire service is evangelical in nature. It starts every week with “The Jesus Film” from 1979, a documentary feature film produced in the evangelical environment of “Campus Crusade for Christ International”, distributed by “Jesus Film Ministry” in various formats and translated into 2,000 languages (“The History of Jesus Film Project”, 2023). The motivation is for people to get to know Jesus – this is the main message of the whole service. The church hopes that those attending the service will become Christians, or rather “turn towards Jesus”. The church speaks openly about its intentions, but at the same time remains welcoming towards those who do not choose this path. This is vividly manifested in the open prayer opportunity at the end of each service. All are invited who desire prayer, including those who are not Christians or do not want to become Christians. A group of people gather in front of the screen, prayer occurs in small groups, and the prayers also transform into conversations. The prayers are free-form, intimate, and personal. One person is pleading on behalf of another for God to intervene. The bodily presence and closeness between the petitioner and the intercessor, the one speaking on behalf of the other, connects all individuals involved. Is it invasive and trespassing to pray for someone in the hope that she will convert? Is a missionary intention ever allowed in interreligious encounters? This case study points to the much-discussed connections between interreligious dialogue and mission.⁷ What is the relationship between these two dimensions? Can interreligious encounters work even with a very exclusivist view of truth and salvation?⁸

“Mission” was also a topic in my other research contexts. In an interview an imam talks about the goals of interreligious encounters, saying that he doesn’t care if the pastor tries to convince and convert him:

One can come together, that is, to engage in interreligious, intercultural dialogue, in order to shape common life together, that could be one goal. (.) Another goal could be to get to know each other. (..) Yes, also good. Maybe to love each other (..) as a goal, like that. Or to (..) invite people to their own religion. For me, we talked about that once, (.) also a legitimate goal, in my opinion. It’s okay if the pastor meets with me to convert me to Christianity, wonderful. He can do that, (.) because I myself can’t separate the two at all, yes. (.) I am religious and I am religious because I think this way is right. And that would be egoistic if I wanted to keep this way exclusively for myself. So I want (.) my, (.) I don’t know, my Christian friend to share in it. (...) And religion is something that you can choose, that you should choose. (Interview with Yusuf, June 16, 2021)

“Mission” does not seem to be a problem, at least for some leaders of religious communities. Nevertheless, mission is a contentious issue in Christian-Islamic relations. Expe-

7 For an overview see Schmid et al. (2011b); Krämer/Vellguth (2012).

8 On the question of exclusivism in interreligious activities see also Körs in this volume. For the evangelistic moment in multilingual contexts see Eugster-Schaetzle in this volume.

periences with the misuse of mission in the course of colonialization and current fears of repressive domination and monopolization, or even appropriation, play a major role in mistrust in interreligious encounters. The misunderstandings associated with mission must be overcome in dialogue. It might be helpful, as Schmid et al. suggest, to use other terms for mission, such as witnessing, invitation, and conversion (2011a: 11–12).

2.4 Dimensions and Components of Interreligious Celebrations

These case studies lead to an initial and central outcome. They show that interreligious celebrations contain multiple components and have at least two dimensions. Every prayer has a transcendent dimension that enables participation by all, regardless of religious affiliation. One can relate to transcendence without assuming and taking on the practices and beliefs of a religion. Individually, it is possible to try to combine two or more paths of believing and celebrating or allow them to exist in parallel. However, participation in the official worship or cult of a community has stricter and more exclusionary conditions. The second dimension of interreligious celebrations, the socio-religious dimension, presents more of a problem (Amaladoss 2013: 90). The socio-religious dimensions of the prayers observed do not play a central role, it is the personal experience in the common ritual that brings the people together. It is the personal experience and the transcendent dimension of the rituals that enable conviviality.

In addition to these two dimensions, celebrations with people from various religious backgrounds are characterized by several components. Each celebration is characterized by its spatial form and arrangement, the symbols used, and the way language is employed in singing and speaking to and with each other. The celebrations are characterized by their affective arrangements through singing and darkness and the practice of spacing (for further explanations see Bieler in this volume). Symbols, such as the wooden cross, are carried through different spaces and reorder the bodies present. This process, coined as spacing by sociologist Martina Löw (2016), must be accompanied by efforts of interpretation. Physical places that we pass by in our daily life, such as the public space between the church and the mosque in Hamburg, are transformed into social spaces, into spaces of conviviality, even into sacred spaces.

The celebrations consist of scripture readings, speeches, and prayers. Prayers played a central role in the celebrations I observed. Prayer becomes part of a celebration as soon as it takes the form of a worship service. In the following section, I will focus on prayer with and between people of different religious affiliations. The case studies have already shown that personal and intimate prayers play a central role in interreligious contexts, while the ritual and obligatory aspects take a back seat. Concerning the question of conviviality, praying in co-presence becomes possible when emphasizing the transcendent dimension of the ritual and minimizing the socio-religious dimension. Combined individualized practices like praying in silence then serve to prove the social aspects. The

social form of such practices and how or if the social form of such prayers lasts after the prayer remains an open question.⁹

So far, I have noted that praying in the celebrations I observed means, primarily, listening to the prayers of others and praying in the presence of others. In these examples, people do not pray together. Second, praying in many cases takes the form of intercession, praying for someone or something. Third, symbols are frequently used in the prayers, candles for example, and silence has a high value.

3 Theological Concepts Behind the Scenes

In order to thoroughly analyze and understand prayers and celebrations with people of different religious affiliations, the normativities and theological concepts that are at play must also be taken into account. Theological concepts and reflections circulate in every community and accompany prayers and celebrations in each case. Such “circulating normativities” (Bieler in this volume) underpin the action and show how the relationship is understood. In the following, I will explore three basic forms of theological reflection that I encountered in the observed celebrations, conversations, and interviews.

In all religiously connecting celebrations that I have witnessed, a particular theology of creation was used as its rationale. A Muslim representative says: “We want to honor the creation of God together” (Interview with Ali, April 4, 2022). The belief that all are created and loved by the same God comes to the fore and enables the acceptance of the other. One of the people responsible for the ecumenical holiday week said in an interview:

God’s love binds us. God’s love is so broad. The great love of God. That loves every human being. I think if we/ that this is it, the image of God’s love to all people, no matter who they are, small, big, black, white. God loves all people. [...] We are all equal in the eyes of God and this strengthens us. It also helps us to be patient and to love those who think differently. (Interview with Jim, May 18, 2021)

A second approach to justifying the prayers and celebrations that connect religions is an interpretation based on peace ethics. Common prayer represents a response to the discord in the world. The celebrations often focus on peace in their content, and at the same time are themselves effective public signs of peace, solidarity, and a shared humanity. This is demonstrated in and through a joint celebration, despite all the differences in dogmas and fundamental convictions. One of the pastors organizing the annual prayer on Good Friday says:

The fact that there are imams next to pastors and black next to white and women next to men is a visible symbol of the possibility of peace between the cultures. So it’s symbolic communication, actually, and that’s also why we have people saying:

9 For the role of social structures in a ritual see Walthert in this volume, discussing Durkheim, ritual, and difference. Durkheim would inquire about the social structures that enable the personal experience in the ritual.

'Well, the fact that you're standing there like that, that alone is an image of hope in a difficult time'. (Interview with Bernd, June 16, 2021)

The third way of interpreting common prayers and celebrations occurs especially when people are praying for each other and is most clearly articulated by the Muslim partners in my case studies. I call it an anthropological form of reasoning. A young Muslim woman justifies her participation as engagement with a common humanity: "We are human beings, and human beings are human beings, just with different views and different beliefs" (Interview with Aliyah, February 24, 2022). This anthropological reasoning consists of three components. First, that faith constitutes human existence, faith is at the center of the human condition. The people involved are all people of faith. As a Muslim interview partner puts it: "You simply notice that you are on the same wavelength, also in terms of content" (Interview with Dilara, April 15, 2022). A pastor of the ecumenical fellowship explains it like this:

But the people coming to us are all believers. They often don't know what they believe and it is a complete 'Birchermüesli', and they would also like to know more, somehow, and it doesn't matter if they have a Christian background or a Muslim background or whatever background – it is just a 'Birchermüesli'. (Interview with Rainer, March 23, 2021)

People have religious belief, this is the point, what they believe is secondary and often a complete hodgepodge of beliefs. Second, beyond this basic human condition, belief and prayer also motivate people. A bishop said at the opening event of an interreligious gathering during Ramadan: "Those who pray advocate" (Protocol Ramadan Pavillon, April 8, 2022). Faith represents a kind of driving force for human action. And third, human beings are viewed as deficient and dependent on prayer. Christians, Jews, Muslims all turn to God with their prayers and depend on God's blessing. The main things that the prayers of diverse religions have in common is that people bring their cares and concerns before God and the belief that God turns to their suffering.

Co-intentionality might be a necessary requirement for acts of praying together with people of different religious affiliations. At least for monotheistic religions, belief and ritual are closely intertwined. What people can do together also depends on doctrinal questions. In the above cases of prayer celebrations, we do not see high-level teaching at the doctrinal level, but instead grassroots doctrines play a central role. It is not just one doctrine that is used at the grassroots level, but a range of theological concepts that speak to the human condition in the world. These concepts are not entirely congruent with the three most common paradigms, as presented by Reinhold Bernhardt, that have been used to justify interreligious activities. According to Bernhardt, the first paradigm is based on the idea that all religions are related to one fundamental truth. This paradigm is related to the pattern I observed above of a shared theology of creation informing prayers between religions. The second paradigm is rooted in the assumption that the relationships between religions can be determined genealogically (Abrahamic ecumenism). This only plays a role in one of my case studies where the participants of the celebration are addressed as Abrahamic siblings. The third paradigm asserts that neither an essential

connection between religions nor a theological kinship is important, but instead relevant analogies between religions are the core considerations (comparative theology) (for further information on the paradigms see Bernhardt 2019: 341–430). This paradigm can probably be seen in the use of peace ethics that play a central role in the first case study. Above all, the case studies have shown that it is not God or the transcendent who is at the center of how we consider cross-religious prayer, but the human being and their relationship to the world is the starting point for theological concepts that justify celebrations with different religions present.

4 Challenges and Chances for Celebrations that Connect Religions

In summarizing the findings of the literature on interreligious celebrations, three main risks stand out. The fear of syncretism is the most prominent. Praying together seems to promote the mixing of religion. The second set of problems focuses on who the prayer addresses. Although it is largely assumed today that we all pray to one God, different concepts of God pose a significant risk to celebrating and praying together. The third risk is seen in the fact that in celebrations that connect religions, an individual's own identity can be lost or given up. Such a celebration can be in danger of appropriation and proselytization (for a concise summary of the problems see Gässlein 2022: 187–198). Due to these risks church leaders and church guidelines discourage celebrations with common prayers. It is exactly these fears that cause the work of diversity or conviviality to stop at the cosmetic level.

Based on the findings of my empirical study I see the benefits and possibilities of celebrations and prayers that encompass different religions as largely outweighing the risks and challenges. Celebrations that connect religions are important to complete the repertoire of existing interreligious formats. Up until now, many interreligious formats have been shaped by theological debates and are full of prerequisites that do not appeal to a wide range of people. However, to celebrate in a way where different religions are present is based on experiences and is a more holistic approach to interreligious questions and understanding. Therefore, celebrations that connect religions appeal to a wider range and greater diversity of people than do debates and dialogues that have a strong emphasis on the intellect. To get to know one's neighbor and the religious other is a goal and a task of every interreligious encounter. Ritual participation, and sharing a common spiritual journey, for example, enables a deeper understanding of the other. "Many people feel that inter-riting is an important facet of taking dialogue to a deeper, more affective, and experiential level." (Moyaert 2015: 1) Furthermore, in the experience of praying together, people have the chance to encounter the divine anew. Their own religious identity is not in danger but is enriched. Last but not least, everyone involved in these celebrations must find a balance between loyalty to one's own tradition and openness to the traditions of the other. This negotiation between the dos and don'ts of ritual sharing is very complex and takes place not only on the level of leadership and official guidelines but also on an individual level. Therefore, we can say that the experience of praying and celebrating together fosters the boundary work of conviviality. It helps to construct a form of conviviality that

takes boundaries seriously and is not only dealing with a superficial happy-clappy form of conviviality.

5 Conclusion

Celebrating and praying together is a way to embrace religious diversity and overcome divisions. The boundaries of such celebrations are constructed not only along religious lines. The most important boundary seems to run between the religious people involved and a third secular group, those who do not believe. This construction of a third party helps to create the convivial praying community of different religious affiliations.

The celebrations and prayers in my empirical study are characterized above all by the fact that the people involved are neither high dignitaries of a religious community nor important politicians. These are not performative celebrations. They are not organized by a local interfaith group but arise out of the commitment of a Christian community. People engage in these rituals not because of confessional questions but rather to engage in questions of efficacy about what matters to them. Does the ritual work? Does it resonate within me? These are the questions that lead to the decision of whether to participate or not. While this so-called “ritual polytropy” has been observed for some time in Asia as a major trend at the grassroots level (Moyaert 2015: 6), it is more of a novelty in contexts where monotheistic religions predominate.

The presented celebrations show how prayer can serve to build relationships with other religions. According to Pratt, praying always consists of two dimensions, an outward-facing, responsive dimension, and an inward-facing, reflective dimension (2015: 60). The communities studied engage highly in political and diaconical initiatives in their neighborhood. The case studies of celebrations that encompass different religions have shown that even in liturgical settings, the outward-facing dimension is strong. In prayers, the communities respond to the needs of the people in the service and in the wider society. This gives the diaconical dimension of the community a different breadth. Praying for each other and before God enables a different conviviality where openness and readiness to “the other” is mandatory. Celebrating strengthens the connections within shared living spaces and expresses closeness to the other. Hence, embodied ritual practices are a necessary condition to interreligious conviviality.

Forms of praying for each other and sharing common spiritual journeys, where the “inward-facing” dimension of the ritual is foregrounded, is an area that is still less considered in both academia and in practice than “outward-facing” ritual events that are in response to an external event. Inward-facing formats should be given more consideration. There is still limited knowledge about the theological concepts intertwined with such formats. My contribution is a first step. In inward-facing rituals, an anthropological or creational argument justifies the common prayers and celebrations. A need for transcendent connection or spiritual community motivates common prayer. In outward-facing rituals interreligious belonging is constructed through peace ethics. In these rituals, promoting a well-functioning community, living together in a neighborhood, lies at the core.

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