Article

Ritual and the Resiliency of Immigrant Families

by Kevin Zubel

Her eyes revealed the depth of the anxiety underlying her words. After living in the United States for over 15 years, Aricela was slowly realizing that her native Mexico would never again be her family’s home. Nonetheless, as she shared with me her concerns, she expressed embarrassment that something seemingly minor—in this case, Halloween festivities—could cause her emotional difficulty. As her tutor in English as a Second Language (ESL), I recognized that the cultural tensions arising between the celebration of Halloween and the Mexican commemoration of Los Días de los Muertos were exacerbating Aricela’s ongoing sense of disorientation within her new community, and the fact that her children favored the candy and costumes of Halloween over her cherished faith traditions and rituals made Aricela feel almost like a stranger in her own family.

Aricela’s discouragement over her children’s preference for Halloween offers only a small glimpse into the broader personal narrative of her struggle to establish her self-identity and sustain her growing family within the crucible of the immigrant experience. In addition to the material difficulties of relocation, immigration layers psychological and emotional costs in the form of acculturative stressors. For Latin@ immigrants in particular, the drama of displacement and relocation enters into the spiritual and theological life and imagination of the family. In this context, therefore, one key dimension of ministerial accompaniment of Latin@ immigrant families includes discovering ways of nurturing resiliency—the inner capacity for emotional coping—in and through spiritual formation and practice. This requires a deeper understanding of the psychological, theological, and spiritual perspectives not only of newly-arrived immigrants and migrants, but also among the succeeding generations whose formation of self-identity occurs within a plurality of cultures.

In this light, I propose that rituals offer a significant means of sustaining resiliency within Latin@ immigrant families even as different generations struggle with multiple cultural belonging. To explore both the psychological and spiritual potential of rituals in a Latin@ context, I draw upon Roberto Goizueta’s investigations of anthropology, culture, and spirituality within his proposed Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment, and bring these into conversation with psychological analyses of identity formation and the effects of immigration on emotional wellbeing. Here, we will discover how embracing popular religiosity not only contributes to the emotional and spiritual thriving of Latin@ families but also the Church as a whole. I then introduce elements of ritual studies to demonstrate how the creation of new rituals enriches the communal faith practice fundamental to Latin@

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2 For my analysis of ministry among Spanish-speaking persons from Central and South America, I adopt the term Latin@ primarily because it originates from the assertion of the right to self-name on the part of theologians and others arising from members of those communities in North America. Additionally, the Latin@ designation avoids gender binaries that, in my opinion, needlessly confuse discourse regarding a community of persons.
spirituality while negotiating intergenerational conflict. Following this analysis, I suggest concrete ways in which rituals might support both the faith life and resiliency of Latin@ immigrant families.

The key to understanding the inextricable link between spiritual and psychological well-being among Latin@ families involves exploring the foundational role of communal integration and popular religiosity among these communities. Christian spiritual formation within this context involves sustaining relational spirituality against the headwinds of the individualistic culture that Latin@ immigrants encounter not only in the social milieu of the United States, but also within the US Church. From a theological perspective, this calls for an appreciation and promotion of popular religiosity both within the immigrant community and the wider body of the faithful. Reflecting on his own experience as a foundation for a theology of accompaniment, Robert Goizueta points to popular Catholicism as essential both to community cohesion and to the formation of links to the wider Catholic church, which “make it possible for U.S. Hispanic communities to draw on the riches of the larger Christian tradition, interpreting that tradition from within our own particular histories, thereby discovering its liberating power.” Goizueta thus argues that in order for Latin@ communities to preserve a strong sense of identity and communal integration and progress, they ought to embrace a Christology that recognizes the roots of liberation within the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Expressed in psychological terms, a theology of liberation has as its goal the empowerment of self and community, thus nurturing resiliency against the particular stressors brought about through migration and acculturation. This axis of psychological and spiritual liberation has taken on new importance in recent years as an increasingly toxic public discourse around immigration policy has created a hostile environment for immigrants in some regions of the US. Facing economic perils or threats of violence in their countries of origin, many families immigrating to the US experience a heightened sense of displacement and exile while caught between two unwelcoming social realities.

Although the goals of popular religiosity focus on the spiritual formation of particular communities, the related psychological goals build upon the holistic needs of individual immigrants and their families. According to Goizueta, the foundation of the relationship between the individual and community in a Latin@ context rests upon a highly personalistic understanding of autonomy that emphasizes relationality as inherent to self-identity. For Goizueta, “to be an isolated, autonomous individual is, literally, to have no humanity, no identity, no self; it is to be no-thing, a no-body” and, thus, identity formation remains consciously relational. Therefore, popular religiosity, in affirming community identity, also supports the integration of self-identity within this highly relational perspective of the human person, a process essential to psychological development under the theory of the reciprocating self as described by Jack Balswick, Pamela Ebstyne King, and Kevin Reimer. According to these authors, the maturing of a reciprocating self is a developmental process, nurtured by relationships and characterized by unconditional love commitments, graciousness, empowerment, and intimacy. The goals of developing the reciprocating self reflect what Goizueta identifies as the fundamental anthropology underlying the sense of identity within the Latino@ community.

Goizueta’s insights find scientific support in Adrian Visscher and Merle Stern’s wider study of family spiritual practice, as they propose that popular religion promotes psychological well-being because “It takes account of subjective needs, of emotional communication, of face to face rapport as opposed to all the cold forms of functioning of the traditional religious institutions.” Popular religiosity, by its nature, promotes the formation of self-identity by aligning individual human narratives with a wider tradition of stories, practices, and symbols filled

4 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 50-51.
with meaning and made accessible to homes and neighborhoods. However, because these practices subsist outside of the routine liturgical life of the parish community, promoting this goal of spiritual formation necessitates intentional outreach toward families in their home setting rather than relying on parish-based programming.

What happens, however, when the familiar stories and symbols are shared in an unfamiliar environment? Within the US, two agents acting against the spiritual and psychological trajectories of popular religiosity include the counter-narrative offered by a more individualistic cultural system and the tensions that arise as successive generations develop their self-identity in conversation with multiple, sometimes competing cultures and value systems. As such, another significant goal of spiritual formation of Latin@ families in this context involves facilitating spiritual dialogue that offers an opportunity for faith formation, communication of values, and, when necessary, reconciliation within families, local communities, and the wider US Catholic family. In the example of Aricela and her family, if her local parish or other community group offered a guided opportunity to discuss US holidays—or at least provided a setting conducive to such a conversation—the broader contours of their struggle with Halloween might have found a more supportive, communal venue for coping and strategizing.

From a theological perspective, this goal of spiritual formation draws upon the value of inculturation as the model of engagement of two cultures. In defining *inculturation* as distinct from *acculturation*, Anscar Chupungco notes that a theology of inculturation accepts not only the interaction of two cultures, but embraces “mutual assimilation” through the “dynamic of transculturation” in which “the interacting parties are able to retain their identity or essential features throughout the process of mutual enrichment.”7 In this way, spiritual formation of both the majority Catholic culture as host and the Latin@ immigrants as new arrivals has as its goal the enrichment of both communities—recognizing that, while all may be one family in faith, that faith is always lived in a particular context, with different types of human experience brought to bear upon Catholic tradition.

In other words, spiritual dialogue recognizes that Latin@ immigrant families live in a liminal, ever-changing dynamic between two cultures that calls for more than trying to recreate one’s country of origin in a new home. This fails to acknowledge the role that perspectives of dislocation or exile play within spirituality. In a study of the psychological effects of religiosity of Mexican-origin adults in the US, researchers working in California made a paradoxical discovery that illustrates what is at stake in the success or failure of creating occasions of spiritual dialogue. While the researchers concluded that, in general, “individuals for whom religion plays an important role may benefit emotionally from a sense of meaning and purpose that is derived from religious teachings and worldviews,” they also noted that religious practice actually exacerbated the stresses associated with acculturation and migratory status.8 Thus, spirituality in the crucible of immigration is not necessarily conducive to psychological resiliency.

While the study only speculates as to the cause of these findings, Goizueta offers one possibility in his observations on how individualism within the majority culture in the US acts against the relational foundations of Latin@ self-identity by promoting the “socially unsituated self,” that is, an identity for which all relationships and attributions are seen as extrinsic to the person considered individualistically.9 Goizueta laments that “Latinos and Latinas are caught between our own experience of loss, on the one hand, and a dominant culture which encourages us to deny and repress that pain: we must forget the past, we are told, ‘pull ourselves up by our bootstraps’ and forge our own future.”10 That loss—of a sense of belonging and orientation within the world—is amplified by the tendency within the wider US culture to privatize family and religious bonds, thus minimizing their importance.

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9 Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 58.
10 Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 61.
to self-identity. The message received by immigrants and their families is that, in order to achieve personal and religious maturity, they must accept their relationships as extrinsic to and not constitutive of their personhood.\textsuperscript{11} As such, spiritual formation of both immigrant families and the wider US Catholic faithful ought to have as its goal the mitigation of these cultural counter-narratives that risk turning religious practice into a source of psychological disintegration.

Intergenerational tension within families and communities acts as another contributor to acculturative stress and negative self-identity. In response to this, another goal of spiritual formation among immigrant communities involves nurturing and empowering the family as the \textit{domestic church}.\textsuperscript{12} While tensions across generations are not unique to immigrant families, the psychological health of adolescents in these families suffers from particular acculturative stressors, including “discrimination, negative stereotypes, intergenerational acculturative gaps, and pressure to speak multiple languages.”\textsuperscript{13} Summarizing research on the cross-cultural psychology of religion, Vassilis Saroglou and Adam Cohen note that beginning with the first succeeding generation, the children of immigrants decrease their ethnic and religious identification with their place of origin while, interestingly, strengthening the interrelation between their religion and their ethnicity.\textsuperscript{14} In earlier generations, however, religious identification often results in the rejection of the majority culture, possibly as a defense against the effects of discrimination and hostility. Saroglou and Cohen propose that “The origin ethnoreligious identity may thus become, in some cases, an oppositional identity.”\textsuperscript{15} A single family may experience significant intergenerational tension as the children move closer to the majority culture and away from their ethnic and religious heritage, which they see as one interrelated dimension of their identity. Recalling Aricela and her family, the festive energy surrounding Halloween and its reinforcement in the majority produced a nearly irresistible attraction for the children. It is events like these—near holidays unique either to the country of origin or the new host nation—that call out for some process of mediation, dialogue, and creativity.

Thus, in its goal of promoting the family as the domestic church, the Christian spiritual formation of immigrant families benefits from discovering creative ways of addressing the intergenerational tensions manifested in conflicting methods of coping with acculturative and other psychological stressors associated with migration. Rituals, which may be defined as a set of symbolic actions repeated frequently with minimal change in content,\textsuperscript{16} operate through familial and other communal relationships and thus offer one solution towards the goals of spiritual formation of immigrant families. Kevin Ladd and Bernard Spilka, in a summary of observations of ritual behavior, conclude that “a primary function of ritual is the provision of social cohesion or stability, especially in moments of elevated threat or ambiguity,” which, in turn, offers a sense of well-being and security to individual participants.\textsuperscript{17} In a spiritual context, rituals appeal to a transcendent ideal and offer a creative and imaginative bridge between lived experience and an aspirational horizon, motivated by a spirit of hope. Further, Ladd and Spilka argue that, by creating a space for individuals to identify with the ideal, rituals provide a “basis for personal mastery” which, for some, “enhances meaning and reduces stress, anxiety, and impulsivity.”\textsuperscript{18} In times of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Goizueta} Goizueta, \textit{Caminemos con Jesús}, 62.
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difficulty and disorientation, therefore, rituals provide one concrete, communal means by which participants can regain some sense of control over their environment.

Rituals therefore address the goal of nurturing a communal spirituality because they offer a time and space for individuals to band together for security and support during periods of upheaval. For Latin@ immigrants and those who accompany them, popular religiosity provides a foundation for rituals that local communities can maintain, adapt, or integrate within a new culture and society. Because popular religiosity is, by its nature, of the people, it builds upon the personal narratives of the community and draws from a treasury of common symbols. One example offered by Goizueta includes the Good Friday processions in commemoration of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. This emotional event ends with the ritual of La Soledad, where participants console Mary in her solitude. Reflecting on this sorrowful but powerful moment, Goizueta describes how individuals come before the image of La Soledad and share their own sufferings with her, and thus “there is an abiding sense that we are strengthened and given new life even in the midst of our common suffering, perhaps precisely because it is a suffering undertaken in common.” Here, ritual facilitates intimate solidarity and thereby offers an occasion of healing and empowerment—elements necessary for the development of the reciprocal self.

However, while spiritual formation and accompaniment of immigrants benefit from the promotion of a rich ritual life, Latin@ families and those who minister with them must address certain significant risk factors. As noted above, a study of the effects of religiosity among Mexican-origin adults concluded that religious involvement often exacerbated the deleterious effects of acculturative stressors. One speculative reason offered included the possibility that “some highly religious Mexican Americans are deferential to authority—worldly and spiritual—and therefore may be more prone to feel guilt or shame over their undocumented legal status than their less devout counterparts.” Ladd and Spilka support this theory by warning that “Normal uses of ritual can shade into obsession, compulsivity, and a dogmatic rigidity that takes over one’s daily life,” resulting in scrupulosity or a sense of irredeemable unworthiness. Spiritual formation through the promotion of the ritual life therefore ought to recognize that symbolic meanings are not neutral or uniformly positive. Rather, because rituals intertwine individual experience with the communal engagement of symbols and stories, a risk always remains that they will potentially enable and reinforce psychological pathologies.

In order to encourage the developmental and therapeutic aspects of ritual and prevent the reinforcement of disintegrative pathologies, rituals should offer a time and space for creative dialogue and mutual enrichment. Reflecting on the moral dimension of ritual action, K. Helmut Reich highlights the importance of imagination in sustaining and communicating an ideal world as a guiding horizon, and notes that the ability of ritual to retain its powers of motivation relies on the varying creative and imaginative contributions of different members of the community. Acknowledging the repetition inherent in ritual activity, Reich notes that “In all likelihood, the most imaginative will contribute visionary aspects to the ritual” and that “They will also be motivated to further the adhesion of others to this vision.” Through ritual, members of a faith community enter into a familiar pattern of behavior, but—in and through each other—engage their imaginations in pursuit of the ideal and are changed through this moment of mutual enrichment before they return to the “common sense world.” Reich concludes that “An effective symbolic ritual immediately evokes something for many people, representing a world view of indubitable factuality, engendering moods and motivations which resonate with that world view, and carrying

19 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 21.
20 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 37.
23 K. Helmut Reich, “Rituals and Social Structure: The Moral Dimension” in Heimbrock and Boudewijnse, Current Studies on Rituals, 123.
24 Reich, “Rituals and Social Structure,” 124.
over such moods and motivations into everyday life.”25 As such, the effectiveness of rituals relies on an authentic correspondence between the worlds within and outside of the ritual time and space—much like the ritual of La Soledad incorporates personal testimonies of suffering into a long-standing ritual action of “consoling” Jesus’ mother following a remembrance of the crucifixion.

Today in the US, the “common sense world” of immigrants and their families includes the multiplicity of cultures and sociopolitical realities that alternately affirm, challenge, or even commit violence against the faith, culture, and values of Latin@ immigrants. This provokes the question: What roles do the prevailing and dominant cultural systems and values in the US play as conversation partners in the creative dialogue essential for effective and authentic ritual? Spiritual formation of the ritual life of immigrants and their families necessarily engages this question in discerning how to adapt, replace, or integrate rituals carried forward from countries of origin. In some ways, rituals such as Las Mañanitas on the Feast of La Virgen de Guadalupe can be practiced in much the same way as before. Communities can also adapt or reinterpret ritual symbols in order to reflect the struggles they face in their new home. For example, during the Delano Grape Strike between 1965 and 1970, the United Farm Workers under Cesar Chavez adapted rituals such as communal rosaries, pilgrimages, and open-air liturgies into moments of protest and demonstration, embracing the rituals’ powers of liberation in the face of discrimination and injustice. From a psychological perspective, the role of prayer and liturgy as vehicles of empowerment during the Delano Grape Strike illustrates how collective ritual symbolic action can serve to deconstruct and rebuild an individual’s image of society and, in turn, their self-identity.26

In facilitating the dialogue between the immigrant cultures and those of the wider US, the spiritual formation of immigrants and their families also provides an opportunity for engaging the ritual life within families, empowering them—as the domestic church—to help multiple generations bridge the acculturation gaps that may arise as children move away from the faith and ethnic identity of their parents. Aricela’s personal story illustrates how seemingly simple conflicts between cultural celebrations may actually reflect deeper anxieties and the disintegration of one’s self-identity. In their study of family rituals, Visscher and Stern describe how the family is “the arena where subjective needs are met; emotional communication is at the core of family expectations, identity and face to face rapport is a continuous event,” and thus “The religious ‘doing’ of families is expressed in what they do together; it is this doing that will reveal what they believe and what they find important in those beliefs.”27 Family rituals identify and attempt to affirm core life values, and even within the context of religious practice, those human values and ideals take precedence over specifically Christian doctrine or beliefs.28 Again, within the family, human experience is integrated with a treasury of shared religious symbols as a means of bridging the “common sense world” with an ideal understanding of the world. However, immigrant parents like Aricela might therefore interpret their child’s rejection of faith rituals as a dismissal of core family values.

Reflecting on this dynamic of family rituals as communicators of values within the Latin@ context, Goizueta explains how the family remains a “principal locus of Latino popular Catholicism,” and the divine family, home altar, and devotional practices form the center of family life.29 For Goizueta, family relationships comprise the foundation for the theological praxis that fuels the engine of liberation theologies, but “before these relationships are explicitly political, they are human relationships—even those with Jesus and Mary are human relationships.”30

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25 Reich, “Rituals and Social Structure,” 125-126.
27 Visscher and Stern, “Family Rituals as Medium,” 105.
28 Visscher and Stern, “Family Rituals as Medium,” 117.
29 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 112.
30 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 112.
However, as noted above, a prevailing US anthropological understanding of the individual as a “socially unsituated self” acts against this interpersonal understanding of the human person so crucial to many Latin@ families living in the US. Negotiating this challenge can give rise to intergenerational tensions which, in turn, contribute to depression or other mental health struggles in adolescents. As successive generations move away from the ritual practices of their parents and grandparents, the fabric of popular religiosity begins to tear, and consequently Latin@ identity loses one of its most essential foundations and defenses.

Each family may approach human values and ideals from a range of conflicting spiritual, anthropological, and experiential perspectives as multiple generations acculturate and assimilate at different rates and in varying ways. While one generation suffers violence and discrimination in the workplace, their children may struggle under the pressure to adopt a new language and develop a self-identity that dissociates from their ethnoreligious family origins. Symbols seen as healing and empowering for one generation become a painful reminder of “otherness” for younger generations. The family is therefore a microcosm of the broader attempts at dialogue between Latin@ culture and the wider US religious and cultural context. Goizueta suggests that theological discourse within North America offers opportunities for mutual dialogue but also carries the risk of further disintegration of Latin@ identity and dignity by framing these conversations within a preset agenda geared toward rapid assimilation. Constructive dialogue requires that those who minister with or accompany Latin@ immigrants and their families create environments that welcome and incorporate the spectrum of values, frameworks, and implicit anthropologies of immigrant peoples, recognizing the family as a locus of interaction among religious and cultural identities. Following Chupungco’s model of inculturation, a mutual, transformative interaction and mutual assimilation of these religious and cultural dynamics emerges as a key issue for the spiritual formation of the ritual life of these families. In turn, the ritual life offers a means through which different generations mediate and negotiate their identity within a plurality of competing values.

How, therefore, might the spiritual accompaniment of immigrants and their families address the acculturation gaps that fuel intergenerational tensions and threaten to break down relationships within families and, by extension, the wider community? In their discussion of the reciprocating self, Jack Balswick, Pamela Ebstyne King and Kevin Reimer highlight the inherently relational and contextual nature of the development of self, and note that in the natural process of differentiation among adolescents, adults in their lives aided the process when they “came alongside of them and affirmed their gifts and vision, encouraged them in their service to others and helped them clarify their beliefs.” In a Latin@ immigrant family context, daily ritual, prayer, and devotion represent possible occasions for accompaniment, challenge, and encouragement. This requires that families accept the risk of opening up their ritual spaces to assimilate new ideas or actions introduced by younger generations.

In the case of Aricela, rather than offer any particular suggestions, I instead invited her to a group class where we discussed some of the history behind Halloween as a blend of pre-Christian and Christian religious practices, and its relationship to the Feast of All Saints. Aricela recognized that her concerns were shared by other Catholic parents in the US who also struggled to address their children’s preoccupation with themes of violence and evil. She felt less isolated as a parent and found new cognitive and emotional bonds with parents of different cultures in her new country. Additionally, upon identifying a relationship—however tenuous—between Halloween and Día de los Muertos, Aricela felt she gained more control over her engagement of the cultural conflict and discovered a point of departure for a healthy conversation with her children. I believe in the case of Aricela and her family the next step involves co-creating a family ritual around the two separate celebrations. This conversation need not take place in isolation. Rather, Aricela might find strength and support in working with other families in her community as they determine how to celebrate the separate events in ways that resonate with the values they

31 See Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 168-172.
32 Balswick, et al., The Reciprocating Self, 177.
wish to pass along to their children. Ministers and others within the wider faith community support this process first by creating the space and occasion for this constructive dialogue, conversing as equal partners in helping break open the content and meaning of local celebrations unfamiliar to new arrivals. As Goizueta notes above, throughout these exchanges, the existing community should not view itself as gatekeepers to the US church or as agents of assimilation, but as fellow-travelers who remain available to learn and grow from the presence and practice of their new neighbors. Ultimately, the most important conversations will take place in the family home, the nexus of spiritual value-sharing, so the primary goal of the wider community entails assisting individual families to experience these dialogues as sacred and creative times. By offering opportunities to explore questions of ritual and devotion in a communal setting, the faith community helps parents feel empowered rather than beleaguered.

Another possible resource for renewing the ritual life of immigrant families includes the sponsorship and cultivation of devotional practices flowing from popular religiosity, especially in circumstances where immigrant communities have limited access to material resources and available space. In two parishes, one in the South Bronx and the other in Houston, I witnessed how opening up parish space to processions and other devotional gatherings turned those locations into general community spaces where immigrants and their families found a sense of belonging and solidarity. Additionally, in one location, the boundaries between Spanish- and English-speaking communities, while clear and differentiated during liturgy, nonetheless offered some opportunities for encounter. For younger generations, this facilitated opportunities for bilingual faith formation in which Latin@ youth participated in the ritual and liturgical life of their parents while wrestling with spiritual and theological problems in English, their language for academic and social discourse. Rather than dissociating from the faith practice of their families, these youth found affirmation for their ideas and curiosity and, in turn, felt welcome to participate in celebrations of great significance to the community, particularly those honoring La Virgen de Guadalupe and commemorating Holy Week. When I asked Latin@ parents why they felt comfortable allowing their children to participate in English-language faith sharing and catechesis, almost all pointed to the fact that their children came home with respectful questions about family practice and devotion, indicating that the English-language youth group leaders respected popular religiosity and demonstrated a willingness to learn from their new neighbors.

In the effort to promote the goals of nurturing resiliency, encouraging creative dialogue, and empowering the family as domestic church, the ritual life emerges as a potent resource for Christian spiritual formation among Latin@ immigrants and their families. Rituals offer the potential for transmission of faith values, exploration of symbols, and affirmation of communal and self-identity. Within the highly relational, family-oriented context of Latin@ immigrants, rituals provide a means for engaging the spiritual life as a support to greater psychological resiliency against the acculturative stressors brought about by the process of migration and the disorienting experience of adapting to a new culture and society. However, spiritually accompanying immigrants requires discernment regarding whether rituals, either carried forward or adapted to a new environment, integrate dimensions that support maturation and self-development in the face of acculturative challenges within families and across generations. As children curate among a universe of new cultural options, they present their families with a challenge—and an opportunity. Rather than fearing or avoiding these occasions of tension, families can embrace these moments as sacred times of creativity, co-discovery, and faith-sharing by imagining new rituals that respond to a new reality.