For many years now, I have been crisscrossing the disciplines of religious studies and theology. As an undergraduate in a department of religion, I was exposed to the approaches and methods of Religionswissenschaft, or “the scientific study of religion,” yet I also fell in love with liberation theology, which I discovered through two courses in politics. I was drawn to liberation theology’s critique of structural sin and its attention to the fullness of life in the here-and-now. Under the mentorship of a philosopher (Cornel West) and an historian of religion (David Carrasco), I wrote an undergraduate senior thesis on the realized eschatology of Archbishop Oscar Romero. All of this goes to say that my early engagement with liberation theology was colored by the insights of a variety of scholarly disciplines (namely, religious studies, politics, and philosophy) that are not, properly speaking, theology.

Nevertheless, my interest in Latin American liberation theology has remained steadfast, though I have made some valuable side journeys along the way. Upon entering a doctoral program in religious studies, I was relatively certain that I would write a dissertation on some aspect of liberation methodology. But along the way, I discovered two other complementary discourses that gave me new insight into questions of methodology. These two discourses were US Latino/a theology, a younger cousin of Latin American liberation theology, and US pragmatism. To make a long story short, I ended up writing a dissertation on John Dewey’s philosophy of religion and its connection to his aesthetic theory and theory of education. But my interest in liberation theology never waned. Indeed, this sustained interest is evident in my first book, which crafts a dialogue between US pragmatism and liberation theology, as it is articulated both in Latin America and in the United States.

One of my ongoing questions is this: How can liberation theology and pragmatism, when put in critical conversation, shed light not only on the aesthetic dimensions of ritual, which are often so readily apparent, but also on the ethical dimensions of ritual, which tend to be more implicit? How does ritual intensify both “an aesthetics of sense,” as well as “an aesthetics of the moral imagination”?

In what follows, I will look at this question in light of a liturgy that takes place on Good Friday at the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas. San Fernando Cathedral is a flagship church for a number of reasons. It is one of the oldest churches in the country and one of the most dynamic. Over the years, its leaders have included vi-

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sionaries who see great value in the lived faith expressions of the people. For these pastoral leaders, the lived faith of the people helps to preserve cultural dignity, and it may serve as a springboard for individual and communal transformation.

San Fernando Cathedral is well known for its Good Friday processions, in particular, for its dramatic Via Crucis, or reenactment of Christ's trial and crucifixion, which draws upwards of fifteen to twenty thousand people to downtown San Antonio every year. For several hours, people literally walk alongside Jesus through the streets of San Antonio, accompanying him in his final hours of life.

As gripping as the Via Crucis is, I would like to focus on a lesser-known liturgy that happens at the end of the day on Good Friday, a traditional Mexican service called the Pésame. In this solemn service, congregants come to pay their condolences to the grieving Mary, who, in a powerful part of the service, performs a liturgical dance. I will focus my comments on the ways that Mary’s dance ignites not only a visceral aesthetics of sense but also a more encompassing aesthetics of the moral imagination. In offering this interpretation, I will draw on insights from both ritual studies and practical theology, showing how both may address similar concerns.

The Aesthetics of Viernes Santo

Across the country, Good Friday is an important day among Latino/a communities of faith. Although Easter is, theologically speaking, the high point of the liturgical year, in many parishes it is not uncommon for more Latino/as to attend services on Good Friday than on Easter Sunday. How does one account for this phenomenon?

One reason is that many Good Friday liturgies are performed in open, public spaces. Accordingly, these liturgies can accommodate hundreds, if not thousands, more people than a traditional church service. In Chicago’s largely Mexican-American Pilsen area, for example, more than ten thousand ritual participants process down 18th Street, Pilsen’s main thoroughfare. Similarly, thousands of Hispanics publicly commemorate the Via Crucis in New York City’s Lower East Side. Given the steady influx of immigrants from Latin America, one can find similar events in countless urban and rural areas throughout the country.

For many Hispanics, the Via Crucis also proves meaningful because it is a liturgy that is guided by lay parishioners themselves. Although official church leaders like priests and deacons participate in it, everyday parishioners are often the ones who assume the lion’s share of responsibility for the reenactment. Months in advance of Good Friday, parishioners organize tryouts, lead practices, and, in some cases, organize religious retreats for all those involved in the liturgies.

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2 These visionaries include Virgilio Elizondo, James Empereur, SJ, David García, and Sally T. Gomez-Jung. For a closer look at their pastoral work, see Tirres, The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith, 14–41 and 160–73.

3 According to Miguel Arias, the Pésame began in what we now call Guatemala. It was introduced by Pedro José de Betancourt, who was canonized a saint in 2002. Arias takes special note of the indigenous elements of the Pésame: “Around 1670 Betancourt began processions with the Nazareno (an image of the suffering Christ) through the streets of old Guatemala City. Christ’s body was extremely scourged, with no place for even one more wound. The people were impressed with this image because according to their story of the creation of the world, Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, had to pierce himself to water the earth. As a result of this watering, human beings were born. This wounded Jesus, the new God introduced to them, really knew their pain and suffering.” Miguel Arias, “Stay with Me,” U.S. Catholic 72 (2007): 48, http://www.uscatholic.org/church/2012/03/stay-me.

4 In 2009, it snowed in Chicago on Good Friday, yet thousands of people still participated.


6 For a look at the most ambitious annual passion play in the world, which takes place in Mexico, see Richard C. Trexler, Reliving Golgotha: The Passion Play of Iztapalapa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
Perhaps most significantly, Latino/as are drawn to Good Friday because of the aesthetic charge that it holds. This aesthetic charge alludes not only to ritual’s physical and sensorial qualities—or what we could refer to as an “aesthetics of sense”—but also to its epistemic and imaginative qualities—its “aesthetics of the moral imagination.” The aesthetics of sense is experienced through the embodied, tactile, and sensorial encounters one has on Good Friday. Participants walk with Jesus for hours. Over the course of the day, they also see and hear the agony that Christ endures, they smell incense, they taste the Eucharist, and they touch and kiss the statue of Jesus on the cross. Through these kinds of bodily encounters, participants “sense” ritual in a very real way.

At the same time, these liturgies also prove aesthetic insofar as they engage participants at the level of the moral imagination. Through their ritual actions, participants forge new epistemic connections between realities that may seem, at first glance, to be disconnected. As I will elaborate further momentarily, ritual allows participants to engage multiple identities simultaneously, to merge past and present, to straddle universal and enculturated meanings of the Via Crucis. Ritual action creates a subjunctive, ludic, and liminal space that allows participants to imaginatively conjoint what may, at first, appear to be discrete and independent aspects of experience.

As a participant–observer, I found that it was fairly easy to see an aesthetics of sense manifested in the many ritual practices of the day. Clearly, the San Fernando Good Friday liturgies heightened and intensified experience in myriad ways. What was less apparent, though, and therefore worthy of further study, was how these liturgies also prove ethically significant. In what ways do the aesthetics of sense give rise to an aesthetics of the moral imagination, and how far does the latter extend? How is the aesthetic charge of Good Friday tied to God’s kingdom here-and-now? How is the feeling of ritual experience connected to the action of living out one’s life beyond Good Friday?

Such questions, I soon came to realize, are best answered in light of particular cases. In what follows, I share my experience of the Pésame service.

The Pésame and the Power of Liturgical Dance

On Good Friday, there are four liturgies at San Fernando—an ecumenical prayer service that begins the day, the Via Crucis, the Siete Palabras service (which commemorates the seven last phrases of Jesus), and the Pésame. Of all the services on Good Friday, the Pésame perhaps best engages what I am calling here the “aesthetics of the moral imagination.” This simple twilight service begins at 7:00 p.m. The entire church is dark, except for the main altar area located in the center of the church. Congregants hold lit candles in the pews. Three male parishioners, who are dressed as disciples, come forward to take down the life-size statue of Jesus from the cross. The men gently disengage the Christ figure from the cross and fold his movable arms down to the sides of his torso.

This detail, which is a trait common to the processional art of Golden Age Spain, adds a certain realism to the ritual.8 The repositioning of the body from the cross to the funeral bed is a touching moment, for Jesus, who has suffered high upon the cross, is now brought down to be with the people. The men carefully secure Jesus’s body to the funeral bed with rope. They exit the cathedral. With candles in hand, parishioners follow. It is now dark. Everyone processes slowly across the street and around the city plaza directly in front of the church. People sing as cars pass by. The warm, yellow lights from the candles overlap with the more industrial white lights emanating from the

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7 I am drawing here, in part, on Alexander Baumgarten’s broad understanding of aesthetics as the “science of (all) sensory knowledge.” Unfortunately, Baumgarten’s wide-reaching definition, which he offered in 1735, was soon limited to a more circumscribed discussion of exceptional pieces of fine art, as seen in the shift from Immanuel Kant’s wide-ranging discussion of the transcendental aesthetic in the Critique of Pure Reason (1781) to G. W. F. Hegel’s more limited ruminations of the fine arts in his Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics (1835).

plaza’s streetlamps and car headlights. After slowly processing around the plaza, the parishioners solemnly return to the church and fill the pews once again.

When everyone has returned and the body of Jesus has once again been laid at the altar platform, three older women approach the body and tenderly rub the statue with burial oil. As they do so, a solo baritone from the choir begins singing the heart-wrenching refrains of the American folk hymn “What Wondrous Love Is This?,” and twelve female liturgical dancers in black dresses and shawls circle the altar area. Their movements and facial gestures signal pain and loss. The three older women finish generously slathering the body with oils. They cover Jesus’s body and limbs with a white cloth, leaving his face exposed, and they place some rose petals on the cloth. They leave the platform. About this time, another dancer enters the sanctuary. Her black shawl is distinctively marked by a thin piece of white cloth at the brow, distinguishing her from the others. She assumes a central role within the dance, and it quickly becomes apparent that she is playing the role of Jesus’s mother, Mary. Mary runs across the area in front of the altar, stops, folds her hands together, pauses, and faces upward with a pained and sorrowful look. She bows her head. She runs in desperation to the other side of the church and does the same. Alone she stands, in agony.

Then, in an unexpected turn of events, a family of four who are seated near the front of the church rise from the pews. The father, mother, and two adolescent girls move toward Mary. At this point, it is not clear what is happening. Are they part of the liturgy? The family members approach Mary and embrace her, one by one. This is repeated twice more. Their movements are expressive and intentional. Perhaps more than any other gesture of the day, this embrace embodies how the audience is one with the actors, how they are connected to the Passion in a real way. It reminds parishioners that they have come to this church service with an express purpose—to console a grieving mother at her son’s funeral.

The family sits down and Mary then goes up to each of the twelve dancers who are standing in a wide semicircle around the altar area. Mary consoles the dancers and is consoled by them. The reciprocity seems to suggest that there are many “Marys” in need of consolation. Another group of parishioners rises from the pews. This time, it is a family of three older women. They approach Mary and take turns embracing her multiple times. The effect is again powerful. Through ritual, the congregation is, in a very real way, sharing Mary’s suffering.

Finally, after these ritual gestures of consolation, the dancers exit. In silence, ushers guide parishioners out of their pews and direct them toward the altar, giving each parishioner a single-stemmed flower. In two lines, congregants slowly walk up to the altar platform and place their flower atop the body. Almost everyone makes some kind of physical contact with the body, either kissing or touching it. Soon, the pile of flowers is so substantial that several fall to the floor. After having paid their tribute to Jesus, the parishioners solemnly exit the church in silence. The Pésame and Good Friday have come to an end.
Ritual Theory, Practical Theology, and Actual Experience

At San Fernando, ritual clearly engages participants in an embodied and visceral way. On Good Friday, participants hear, smell, touch, taste, and see; they move their bodies through a variety of spaces, often becoming part of the ritual itself. But in addition to involving participants at the level of an aesthetics of sense, ritual at San Fernando also engrosses participants at the level of the aesthetics of the moral imagination, wherein ritual practices structure and shape a larger outlook on life. In so many words, the felt quality of ritual experience gives rise to a larger Weltanschauung, or cosmovision, with all of the ethical implications that this implies.

What do I mean here by the “moral imagination”? To begin with, I understand morality not in terms of moral law or even a system of rules for living, but rather as a continuous, reflective response to a life that is inevitably unstable, precarious, and tragic. Morality, in this sense, begins with an actual, real-life situation of instability; it involves some form of deliberation to deal with this situation of instability; and it leads to some form of judgment, which itself is always unstable and contingent.⁹

Ritual, I believe, can be a powerful mode for engaging moral dilemmas. This is especially true if we take to heart John Dewey’s insight that moral deliberation can take the form of “dramatic rehearsal” wherein, through processes like ritual performance, we can imaginatively engage precarious situations and consider our possible courses of action, without the threat of direct harm. Victor Turner, the noted cultural anthropologist and ritual theorist, understands this point well, underscoring how stage dramas serve as mirrors to larger social dramas, and vice versa.¹⁰ As Turner makes clear, stage drama is not simply a powerful form of entertainment. In a more profound sense, it is a means to deal with various forms of social instability, ruptures, friction, and pain. It is for this reason, writes Turner, that “society has always had to make efforts, through both social dramas and esthetic dramas, to restabilize and actually produce cosmos.”¹¹

In producing cosmos, ritual performance proves moral in the sense I have described it. Through structured gestures and actions, ritual confronts social instability and reestablishes a sense of order. Almost by definition, then, we could say that ritual serves an important ethical function.

But how else may ritual performance—and, in particular, the Pésame service at San Fernando—prove ethical? Ritual theory offers us a range of helpful concepts for understanding how the moral imagination can be enlarged through ritual. Most crucially, perhaps, the Pésame’s liturgical dance during the Pésame functions to create a liminal experience where concepts of time and identity collapse. In the liturgical dance, we see a figure of the past—the grieving Mary—come into direct physical contact with figures from the present—the grieving families of San Fernando—through the intentional embraces that they exchange. In an embodied and symbolic way, the past meets the present, giving way to a wider sense of communitas, or liminality experienced socially.

This liminal experience is further reinforced by the fact that the liturgical dance blurs the line between actors and audience. This happens when select families leave the pews to console the grieving Mary. When I first witnessed

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⁹ I am following here John Dewey’s situationalist and pragmatic understanding of morality. For a compelling example of how a pragmatic hermeneutic may be applied to a truly precarious and tragic situation, see Eddie S. Glaude Jr.’s “Tragedy and Moral Experience: John Dewey and Toni Morrison’s Beloved” in In A Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 17–46.

¹⁰ Victor Turner, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?” in By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8–18. It is instructive to note that Turner turns to Dewey’s philosophy at several junctures in his essay to elaborate several key themes, including the meaning of experience (8, 13), the instability of social life (as captured by the “doings and sufferings” of the present community) (9), and the connection of aesthetic drama to sociocultural life (12).

¹¹ Turner, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?,” 18.
this part of the liturgy, my first reaction was confusion. Why are these people getting up from the pews and embracing the dancers?, I asked myself. What is going on? I felt as if a social norm were being broken. Soon, however, I realized that this was indeed part of the liturgy. I was moved deeply. The moment dissolved the boundaries between actors and onlookers, between “us” and “them.” The ritual gestures reminded participants that the drama did not only take place in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, but continues in a real way in our own time and within our own communities. Even more significantly, as I discovered later, both sets of parishioners who console Mary were selected for a very particular reason: they, too, had lost loved ones in their own families during the year. Many in the congregation would have no doubt been aware of this fact, adding significantly to the meaning of their gestures.

All told, the Pésame creates liminal experiences that are both sensual and epistemic. As we have seen, the liturgical dance creates new configurations of space, time, and identities, and, in doing so, it expands the moral imagination of participants. Congregants come away from this liturgy with a wider sense of community and a heightened sense of their own capacity to accompany those who suffer, whether this be the grieving Mary of two thousand years ago or grieving fellow congregants who have lost loved ones in their own immediate families. By entering into the ritual experience of the Pésame, congregants affirm life, even in the face of tremendous difficulty and loss. As Virgilio Elizondo, one of San Fernando’s most influential pastoral leaders, puts it, the Pésame is “in a way, already resurrection” because it is assumes “the most incredible suffering of that day.” Through ritual, parishioners can identify with Jesus and say, “I have gone through [the suffering], but it has not destroyed me. I have gone through it, but it has not diminished my hope and my enthusiasm. I have not run away from it, I have not denied it. I have faced it.” This is “Good Friday in the Latino world,” continues Elizondo. It is “the radical acceptance of life as it is, but you don’t let it destroy you.”

As I have argued, interpreting the Pésame through the categories of liminality and communitas helps to shed light on the ethical dimensions of the ritual. The Pésame’s liturgical dance opens up a liminal space where many usual distinctions—such as past and present, us and them, and official presider and everyday layperson—merge together. When this happens, one’s sense of community significantly broadens. At the same time, a qualitatively new experience emerges through the performance itself, through gestures, movement, embrace, re-appropriation of space, and role reversals. It is for this reason that a performance-based approach to ritual, as exemplified in the work of Turner, may be especially illuminating for better understanding a fluid liturgy like the Pésame.

I would now like to consider how a similar set of insights might emerge from within particular strains of theology itself. Part of the irony here, as I fully recognize, is that I am using interpretive categories often associated with religious studies to shed light on a ritual that emerges from a context that is clearly theological. I am, after all, talking about a liturgy centered on Mary, the mother of Jesus, that takes place on Good Friday within a Catholic Church. As someone who has been trained in religious studies yet who is drawn to contextual and liberation theologies, I have found much value in bringing new interpretive resources to bear on theological symbols and rituals. Indeed, I think that theology has much to learn from religious studies. But I also have become increasingly aware that religious
studies has much to learn from theology, especially from theologies that emerge from the underside of history, or what noted historian of religion Charles Long refers to as “theologies of the opaque.”14 Such theologies not only ground their reflection in concrete forms of human suffering, but they also indict theology at large for assuming certain normativity in its claims to knowledge. This is the kind of theology that can be found at San Fernando.

In my work at San Fernando, I have explored the theological and pedagogical insights that inform its ritual practice. While an explication of their influences is beyond the scope of the present essay, suffice it to say that the theology espoused at San Fernando is highly contextual and liberationist, and some of the pastoral leaders are familiar with and borrow from the field of ritual theory.15

A lot can more be said here, but let me probe the question from another angle. I recently came across Ruth Illman and W. Alan Smith’s book Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith (2013). I was surprised by it. Usually, when one sees a title with the words “theology,” “arts,” and “faith” one can expect a book that presupposes a certain Christian normativity in terms of its approach and basic commitments. While the language of this book does at times fall back on Christian categories, its overall aim is to subvert some of the more traditional ways that theology has tried to make sense of the arts. It attempts to articulate a practical theology of the arts that is not limited to “the conceptual and systematic claims of theology.”16 Rather, it takes ritual experience as both its methodological starting and ending point.

One of the striking features of this book is the attention it gives to the centrality of praxis. In the book’s core chapter, “Outlining a Practical Approach to Theology and the Arts,” Illman and Smith underscore the importance of praxis to their methodological approach. Following the work of Robert Schreiter, Rebecca Chopp, Thomas Groome, and others, the authors present praxis as a process “in which agent subjects reflect critically on their social/historical situation and present action therein.”17 Praxis, they explain, is the “ensemble of social relationships that include and determine the structure of social consciousness.”18 This “ensemble of social relationships” may be understood in terms of three dimensions: an active dimension that includes and engages intentional historical activities, a reflective dimension that uses critical and social reasoning to reflect critically on individual and social action, and a creative dimension that leads to concrete forms of individual and social transformation.19

Just as Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology, has underscored the central role that orthopraxy, or “right action” (and not just orthodoxy, or “right belief”) must play in one’s expression of faith,20 so too do Illman

14 Charles H. Long, Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 185–99. Along these lines, I resonate with Michael Hogue’s pragmatic understanding of theology as “not limited to critical reflection on the symbol ‘God.’” Instead, the objects of theology can be conceived of “those diverse constellations of symbols and practices and institutions that orient us ultimately by formatting (i.e., giving shape to, stylizing, embedding) the religious meanings, purposes, and desires through which we negotiate the hazards and graces of vulnerable life in an ambiguous world.” As Hogue notes, this conception of theology is made possible by drawing on a particular philosophy of religion, one that takes quite seriously Charles Long’s conception of “orientation in the ultimate sense,” Paul Tillich’s understanding of “ultimate concern,” and Charles Sanders Peirce’s understanding “that religion is a life, and can be indentified with a belief only provided that belief be a living belief—a thing to be lived rather than said or thought.” See Michael S. Hogue, “Toward a Pragmatic Political Theology,” American Journal of Theology and Philosophy 34, no. 3 (2013): 274–75.
15 This is especially true of the work of Elizondo and Empereur.
17 Illman and Smith, 54, quoting Thomas Groom, “A Religious Educator’s Response,” in The Education of the Practical Theologian, eds. Don Browning, David Polk, and Ian Evison (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 88. In addition to the three authors mentioned above, Illman and Smith also draw generously from the work of Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, especially their Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society (London: SPCK, 2006).
19 Illman and Smith, 51. See Rebecca Chopp, “When the Center Cannot Contain the Margins” in The Education of the Practical Theologian, 85.
20 Gutiérrez explains that in underscoring the importance of orthopraxy, his “intention, however, is not to deny the meaning of orthodoxy, understood as a proclamation of and reflection on statements considered to be true. Rather, the goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy
and Smith maintain that a practical theology “does not consist in propositional claims or positivistic statements of doctrine as much as it does in critical reflection on living as persons of faith…” For all of these authors, faith, at its best, demands critical reflection and actually “doing the truth.”

Though *Theology and the Arts* can certainly be read as a contribution to contemporary debates in Christian practical theology, it can also be understood as pointing toward a much larger horizon. The book seeks to move not only “beyond the bias of modern systematic and constructive theology,” but also, and perhaps even more significantly, beyond narrow understandings of “theology” at large. Toward this end, the book focuses on series of discrete projects around the world that serve as concrete sites of transformation and healing, many of which do not seem to have a formal connection to theology at all. These case studies, all of which embody praxis, include the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, a set of Peruvian women’s cooperatives that create fabric arts, a short story collection, improvisation theater, a documentary film about a heart transplant that bridges the separation between Palestinians and Israelis, an interreligious and intercultural music project, and a dance company that incorporates dancers with and without disabilities. As the range of these cases makes clear, the form of practical theology espoused in this book moves well beyond discussions of church-based or even faith-based activities. Rather, the book seems to reverse the “hermeneutical flow” between the arts and theology. Or, in the words of theologian and film critic Antonio Sison, such an inductive and contextual approach emancipates the art form from “being a mere handmaid of a given theological proposition and agenda.” Instead, the art form is “offered prior leave to speak on its own terms as a condition for a respectful and honest dialogue with theology.”

Methodologically speaking, Illman and Smith’s book draws eclectically upon a number of discourses—including feminist, postmodern, liberationist, and dialogical/dialectical discourses—with the aim of decentering a narrow and modern emphasis on reason and the scientific method, which traditional forms of theology often uncritically accept. Drawing on the anti-foundationalist discourses just mentioned, the authors outline seven guiding characteristics of their approach, each one of which might well describe the ritual experience of the *Pésame*. First, a practical theology of the arts is embodied and not just reflected upon. Second, it has a “face” in the Levinasian sense of the term. Its truth emerges through the encounter of real-life, flesh-and-blood persons. Third, it gives pride of place to the voices of these who have been silenced. Fourth, it is accomplished through dialogue that need not be restricted to the spoken word, but instead, may emerge through various forms of intense and intentional listening. Fifth, a practical theology of the arts proceeds from and is characterized by the actual practices of the arts. Sixth, it clears a space for the emergence of the voices and concerns of the community. And seventh, it is committed to transformative praxis and social change.

Given my description of the San Fernando *Pésame* liturgy, one may note several connections here. The *Pésame* is an embodied ritual that honors the faces of those who grieve. It also gives center stage to voices—and bodies—that are not at the center of most churches, namely, the voices of women and everyday parishioners. Furthermore, its gestures and symbols serve as an implicit, yet powerful, form of dialogue, and the dance itself reconfigures a somewhat conventional church space (the altar) into a new kind of sacred space that allows the voices and sufferings of those who grieve to be heard and acknowledged.

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21 Illman and Smith, *Theology and the Arts*, 51.
the community to take center stage. When one puts all of this together, it is not difficult to see how the *Pésame* may broaden the moral imagination, resulting in significant forms of healing and transformation.

In closing, I believe that a rapprochement between religious studies and theology is, indeed, a worthwhile endeavor, especially for those of us who cross these disciplines regularly. But the real challenge, I believe, is the extent to which these discourses stay true to the ritual experience itself. There is still often a tendency in both scholarly fields to theorize the ritual experience in such a way that ultimately we are talking less about the actual qualities and force of a given ritual itself and more about the interpretive categories we use to understand ritual. Let me, however, be clear. I am not saying that that we need less theory and more descriptions of the practice of ritual. What I am saying, rather, is that when we utilize theory, we need theory that sticks closely to the experience of ritual that people actually undergo. Whether we choose to approach a ritual like the *Pésame* through the lens of religious studies or theology, the real test is how well our theoretical interpretations adhere to both the actual and ideal qualities of ritual. It seems to me that a layered approach, which borrows critically from a variety of disciplinary approaches, is at least a step in the right direction.

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25 This is a recurring conversation for many in the American Academy of Religion. For a good overview of this ongoing debate, see Michelle A. González, *A Critical Introduction to Religion in the Americas: Bridging the Liberation Theology and Religious Studies Divide* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).