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Crisis, Solidarity, and Ritual in Religiously Diverse Settings: A Unitarian Universalist Case Study

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Abstract: How can religious ritual foster solidarity in religiously diverse communities in times of crisis? This question is crucial in social contexts characterized by increasing religious and nonreligious diversity and ongoing intersecting crises associated with violence, inequality, and climate change. Solidarity is necessary both as an immediate response to crisis and to the pursuit of long-term solutions that address underlying causes. Situated in the literature on disaster ritual, this study draws on Randall Collins' sociological theory of interaction ritual chains to analyze the weekly ritual of sharing "Joys and Concerns" followed by a "Meditation" practiced by a theistically diverse Unitarian Universalist congregation. Anchored in one year of ethnographic research in this community, it concludes that the trusted structures, shared stories, and embodied symbols associated with this practice contain the ritual ingredients necessary to produce social solidarity in response to personal and societal crises and may be a model to apply in other religiously diverse contexts.

Keywords: religious diversity; nonreligion; disaster; crisis; ritual; liturgy; prayer; interaction ritual chains; solidarity; Unitarian Universalism

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1. Introduction

How can religious ritual foster solidarity in religiously diverse communities in times of crisis? This question is pressing in social contexts characterized by increasing religious diversity, including a growing proportion of the population that identifies as nonreligious. This question is urgent in response to the ongoing intersecting crises associated with the impacts of climate change, social and economic inequality, localized and international violence, and more. This question is also important for individuals facing personal crises related to physical or mental health, loss, or life transitions who are surrounded by religiously diverse family and friendship circles. Solidarity is necessary both as an immediate response to a crisis and in the pursuit of long-term solutions that address underlying causes. In this paper, I explore how ritual can foster social solidarity in religiously diverse communities in times of crisis through a close analysis of a weekly sharing and prayer ritual in a theistically diverse Unitarian Universalist community. I draw on recent studies of disaster ritual and Randall Collins' sociological theory of interaction ritual chains to examine how the trusted structures, shared stories, and embodied actions associated with this practice can serve as a model of the ritual ingredients necessary to produce social solidarity in response to personal and societal crises in religiously diverse settings.

2. Ritual Theory

This study integrates three ritual theoretical frameworks: my work on occasional religious practice; recent studies of disaster ritual in the discipline of ritual studies; and ritual theory from sociology centered on interaction ritual chains, especially as it is received in the sociology of religion.

2.1. Occasional Religious Practice in Times of Crisis

Elsewhere, I introduce and develop the concept of *occasional religious practice* to describe and analyze a way of relating to religion that is defined by participation in religious

practices occasionally rather than routinely, most often in connection with certain types of occasions. Four types of occasions are associated with occasional religious practice: life transitions, including birth, marriage, and death; holidays, such as Christmas and Easter; personal or communal crises, such as medical diagnoses or natural disasters; and incidental circumstances, such as attending evensong as a tourist or providing transportation to an aging parent. With routine religious participation declining in Canada, the United States, and Europe, occasional participation may be the dominant way people relate to religion, including in times of crisis (Johnson 2021).

Life transitions often contain elements of crisis, and classical ritual theorist Victor Turner even terms them "life-crisis rituals" (Turner 1967, pp. 6–9). However, this paper is primarily concerned with Turner's second category, "rituals of affliction", as it is developed by Catherine Bell to refer to rituals that "attempt to rectify a state of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered" (Bell 1997, p. 115). In other words, my focus is on ritual responses occasioned by personal or communal events that would primarily be categorized as crises. A turn to religious ritual in the immediate aftermath of crisis is well documented, such as in the case of Americans attending religious services following the terrorist attacks in New York City on 11 September 2001 (Walsh 2002). Times of crisis are one of the occasions when people are more likely to engage in religious rituals, in contrast to ordinary times when they participate in religious practices less frequently. This type of occasional religious practice may also be considered disaster ritual.

2.2. Crisis: Disaster Ritual

In the discipline of ritual studies, there is a growing literature that explores ritual responses to disasters. This disaster ritual literature includes the volume, *Disaster Ritual: Explorations of an Emerging Ritual Repertoire* (Post et al. 2003), and the recent publication of the substantial *Handbook of Disaster Ritual: Multidisciplinary Perspectives, Cases and Themes* (Hoondert et al. 2021). In this context, disasters are defined as sudden and unexpected collective events characterized by extensive destruction and human suffering, generally in the form of loss of human life (Post et al. 2003, p. 24). Examples include natural disasters, pandemics, accidents, mass shootings, terrorist attacks, and genocides, among others.

The disaster ritual literature is primarily focused on identifying an emerging international *repertoire* of public practices that take place in the aftermath of collective disasters. While it acknowledges that there may be personal and individual dimensions of disaster ritual (Post et al. 2003, p. 8) and that ritualization may occur before, during, and after a disaster (Hoondert et al. 2021, p. 15), the corporate practices that follow a disaster are most often addressed. For example, in the Dutch context, Post et al. identify "four fixed pillars" that compose the "classic" ritual response to disasters: a collective service of remembrance, a monument, an annual commemoration, and a silent procession (Post et al. 2003, p. 246). While these and other practices vary to reflect the nature and context of specific disasters, in many cases ritual responses focus on singular events or annual commemorations that bring together one-time communities. In contrast, in this paper I consider an *ongoing* practice in an *enduring* community that addresses collective disasters, as well as individual crises, and yet has the potential to be replicated in response to singular events in one-time communities.

In addition, the disaster ritual literature is invested in exploring the *functions* of disaster ritual, which include channeling emotions, expressing convictions, confronting the contingency of life, condensing complex realities, establishing ethical norms, and creating group identity—what I refer to here as solidarity (Post et al. 2003, pp. 41–42).[1] While the disaster ritual literature is concerned with ritual repertoires and functions, it is less attentive to the *mechanisms* involved in achieving these results: how and why does a specific repertoire of rituals result in solidarity? I address this gap by drawing on ritual theory rooted in the discipline of sociology.

2.3. Solidarity: Interaction Ritual Chains

Ritual has long been a focus in sociology of religion. Classical theorist Émile Durkheim argued that group ritual produces collective effervescence which leads to social solidarity (Durkheim [1912] 1995). *Collective effervescence* is often depicted as the buzz of the crowd at a concert or sports event, but it also includes more subtle feelings of human connection in daily life. Collective effervescence is ephemeral; social solidarity preserves the feeling generated by collective effervescence. *Social solidarity* is "a long-term feeling that allows people to know with confidence who they are, what they are certain of, and what they want to do in the future" (Draper 2019, p. 5). Social solidarity includes feelings of welcome, belonging, and membership in a group, as well as prolonged allegiance to the symbols and goals of the group (Draper 2019, pp. 15–16). While the disaster ritual literature acknowledges Durkheimian ritual dynamics, it does not engage with more recent research in this theoretical tradition (Post et al. 2003, p. 260).

In his influential volume *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Randall Collins develops Durkheim's theory by outlining specific micro-level ritual ingredients that generate collective effervescence: group assembly, barriers to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and shared mood (Collins 2004). If managed successfully, these ritual ingredients produce certain ritual outcomes: group solidarity, individual emotional energy, symbols of social relationship, and standards of morality (Figure 1). These are relatively straightforward ingredients and extraordinarily consequential outcomes. It is also noteworthy that Collins' ritual outcomes parallel the functions of the disaster rituals identified by Post et al. (Post et al. 2003, pp. 41–42).[2]

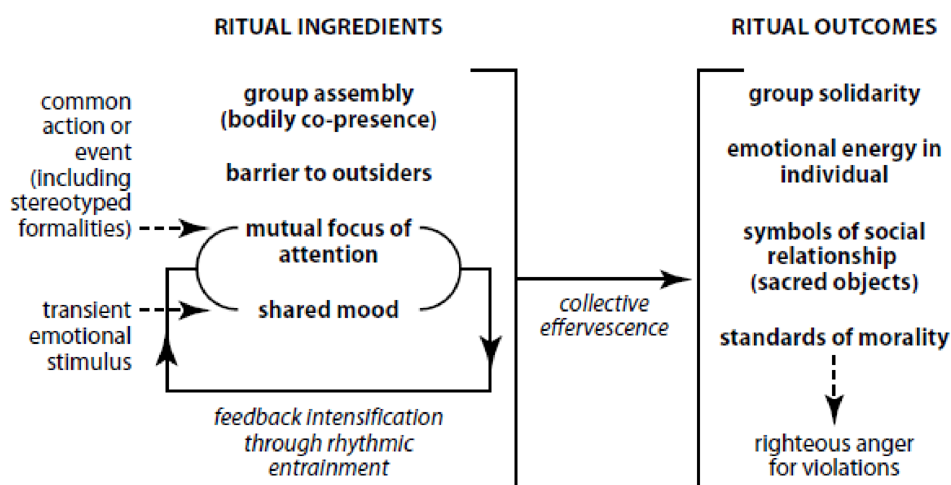

Figure 1. Interaction Ritual Chains (Collins 2004, p. 48). Reproduced with permission.

While Collins does not apply this theory to religion, the connections are obvious, as two recent ethnographic studies demonstrate. In *High on God: How Megachurches Won the Heart of America*, James Wellman, Katie Corcoran, and Kate Stockly make the case that megachurches have mastered the management of interaction ritual chains, particularly in addressing the human need for individual flourishing in community settings, which is the source of their tremendous success in the American religious landscape (Wellman et al. 2020). In a contrasting interreligious study, *Religious Interaction Ritual: The Microsociology of the Spirit*, Scott Draper explores these ritual dynamics in six ordinary religious communities in Texas, including a synagogue, a mosque, and a Buddhist meditation center, as well as black and white Baptist churches, and a Latinx Catholic mass. Draper evaluates how religious communities can help or hinder their efforts to achieve a "feeling of the supernatural"—his interpretation of collective effervescence in religious rituals—and the corresponding ritual outcomes outlined by Collins, including social solidarity (Draper 2019).

Both volumes, as well as a handful of journal articles that apply Collins' theory to religion (Ferguson 2020; Wollschleger 2012; Draper 2021; Wollschleger 2017; Tavory 2013), focus on traditional religious communities where the participants are presumed to share certain beliefs and practices. Notably, all the communities studied in this research (apart from the Buddhist meditation centre) are explicitly theist—they make strong claims as to the existence of God and relationship with God. Draper argues that "'Images of God', or 'God concepts' . . . function as foundational ontologies and basic theologies that impact how humans interpret and respond to the world around them", and, as such, are among the most important shared symbols produced by group ritual (Draper 2019, p. 141). Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly likewise argue that, although it is ritual practices that give beliefs their force and resilience, "beliefs remain essential to the process of generating religious forms of human energy" (Wellman et al. 2020, p. 12).

It is in this context that I examine how religiously diverse communities, and especially *theistically diverse* communities, can ritualize together in effective ways. In other words, how can religious ritual produce social solidarity without a shared image of God, with many different God concepts, or with no image of God at all? This question is essential in increasingly religiously diverse and nonreligious social contexts, especially in times of crisis that bring diverse communities together. To investigate these dynamics, I turn to the example of an enduring theistically diverse community.

3. Case Study: First Unitarian Church

The Unitarian Universalist tradition presents an excellent case for studying an enduring, theistically diverse religious community that engages in corporate ritual practices that are instructive in increasingly religiously diverse social settings.

3.1. Unitarian Universalism

The Unitarian Universalist Association was formed in 1961 through the union of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, two liberal Christian groups that emphasized individual choice in matters of faith. Both traditions trace their history to the early centuries of the Christian tradition and to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and both took root in America in the eighteenth century. Although Christian in origin, Unitarian Universalism moved away from its Christian heritage in the twentieth century. It first adopted a humanist orientation, which remains dominant, and later became a home for Earth-centered traditions. Today, Unitarian Universalism brings together theists and non-theists, including atheists and agnostics.[3]

Since 1984, the theologically diverse Unitarian Universalist community has claimed seven principles (Unitarian Universalist Association 2022b).[4] The first, "the inherent worth and dignity of every person", and the seventh, "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part", are particularly foundational. According to Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove, the principles "are not dogma or doctrine" but rather a guide for those who choose to participate in the tradition (Unitarian Universalist Association 2022b). Today's Unitarian Universalists draw on six sources in reflecting on and living out these principles: direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, the words and deeds of prophetic people, the wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, humanist teachings, and the spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions (Unitarian Universalist Association 2022a). The principles and sources are manifest in a commitment to social justice; Unitarian Universalists are often associated with progressive political activism. Despite its distinctive content, the Unitarian Universalist Association functions in ways that are largely analogous to Protestant denominations in Canada and the United States, including meeting on Sunday morning for worship.

3.2. First Unitarian Church

First Unitarian Church in South Bend, Indiana is affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association and reflects these broader patterns. In 2012, First Unitarian Church South

Bend conducted a congregational survey that reveals a dominantly humanist orientation (45.3%), followed by naturalistic theism (18.6%) and mysticism, open agnosticism, and atheism (all 14%). A variety of other viewpoints are also represented (Figure 2). Furthermore, over half the congregation feels loyal to faith traditions in addition to Unitarian Universalism, the most common being Buddhism (42.2%%), "theological Christianity" (17.8%), and Neo-paganism (13.3%), with Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam also represented.[5] This religiously and theistically diverse community gathers weekly for worship. Worship at First Unitarian was the focus of eleven months of ethnographic research conducted in 2016.[6]

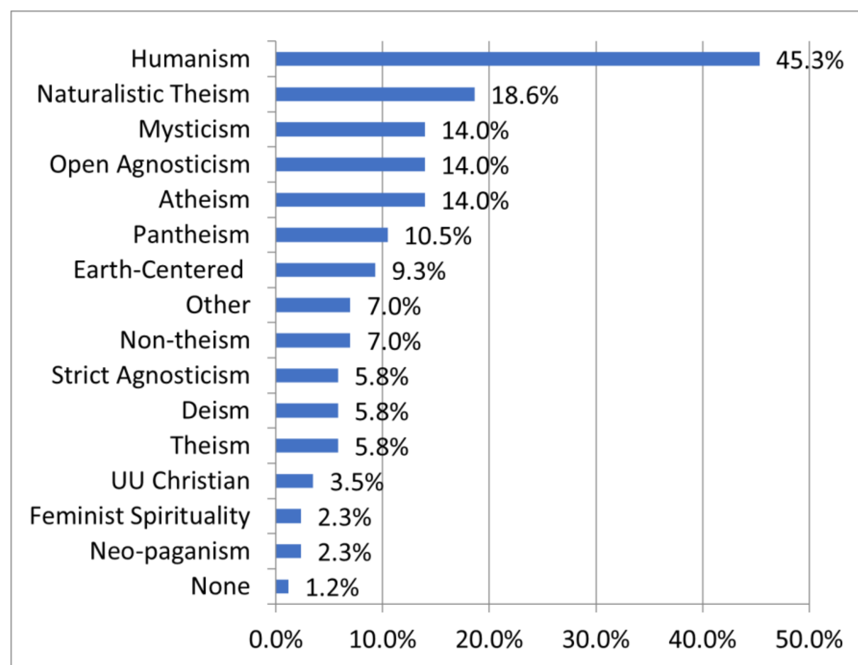

Figure 2. Viewpoints at First Unitarian Church.

First Unitarian Church meets every Sunday morning for worship at 10:30 am. Worship draws on a Protestant pattern, following a didactic "sermon sandwich" structure in which discrete elements, including readings and hymns, are selected based on the theme of the sermon (White 1989, pp. 131–33). There are also elements that occur every Sunday: lighting the flaming chalice at the beginning of worship and extinguishing it at the end (the flaming chalice is the primary symbol of Unitarian Universalism); extending the hand of fellowship, a time for greeting one another; announcements; collecting a monetary offering; and reciting the church covenant in unison while holding hands in a circle at the close of worship. This paper focuses on another element that occurs every week: the opportunity for participants to share "Joys and Concerns", followed by a time of "Meditation".[7] The remainder of this discussion centers on the description and analysis of this ritual practice.

4. Ritual Description: "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation"

In the 2012 survey conducted by the congregation, the participants identified "Joys and Concerns" as the second most important item in the Sunday service, closely following the sermon which rated most important. The practice of sharing "Joys and Concerns" is not unique to First Unitarian but is present in many Unitarian Universalist congregations. Similar practices are found in other interreligious communities as well as in Christian worshiping communities. Drawing on my observation of twenty-four instances of this ritual practice, I identify and describe three key dimensions of the ritual: trusted structures, shared stories, and embodied symbols.

4.1. Trusted Structures

The "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" consist of four components: (1) invitation, (2) sharing, (3) silent meditation, and (4) spoken meditation. This portion of the service is led by the primary worship leader. The pastor leads worship about three Sundays a month, with lay participants or visitors leading once or twice a month. The pastor follows a similar script each week. Lay leaders may adapt it slightly. I draw on the example of 28 February 2016.[8]

The sequence begins with an *invitation*, extended from the pulpit:

> We demonstrate our compassion in many ways, by offering rides, or rooms, or by listening to each other's stories. Some of this we do directly, in person, or by phone, or Facebook; others are so important that we want to share them in this sacred space.

The leader then moves to the area where sharing takes place: a table with a microphone on a pillow, a basket of candles, and a bowl of sand to hold the lit candles. Various objects may be used seasonally in place of candles, such as colourful wooden eggs in the spring, folded origami objects in the summer, or stones in the autumn. The leader continues:

> I will light the first candle from our chalice, symbolically shining the illumination of our faith tradition into the tragedies and triumphs of our lives. If you have a significant event to share, I invite you to come forward and light a candle; please hold the microphone close to your mouth and share your name and, if you are willing, the reason for your candle.

At this point, *sharing* begins. Individuals or pairs come forward, share with the community, and light a candle. The content of what is shared is discussed in detail below. Sharing is followed by a time of *silent meditation*, framed by the worship leader:

> I invite us into a short meditation. As you wish, please get comfortable in your seat. If you prefer, you could soften, or close, your eyes. Let us inhabit a period of shared awareness, as we take seven deep breaths together . . .

The community sits together in silence. Most weeks there are seven breaths, occasionally the leader calls for five. The worship leader moves out of silence into a *spoken meditation*:

> Becoming aware of that moment between exhale and inhale . . . and in that timeless instant, allowing ourselves to be at one with the powerful, to be at one with the impoverished; we notice that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses; our memories and imaginations are full of people we have known, or do know, or somehow know of . . .

Specific items may be mentioned, often associated with the theme of worship or related to world events, such as a refugee crisis or American politics. When the pastor is leading the spoken meditation, it always concludes with the same words:

> We desire enough food, and shelter, and peace of mind for all beings this day; we pledge ourselves in pursuit of this goal. Praise for living. So may we be.

This looks and sounds a lot like what theist traditions call "prayer"; in fact, the pastor calls the spoken meditation "prayer" in his personal notes. However, the word "prayer" is not used in the order of service and is rarely spoken in worship.

When lay people lead the meditation, they also invite a time of silence, often including seven breaths, and share spoken words, although their words may follow a different pattern. There is little variation in the structure of the ritual over time. Participants can trust that they will have the opportunity to share stories in worship and that these stories will be held in the meditative presence of the community.

4.2. Shared Stories

"Joys and Concerns" consists of *people* telling stories. It gives everyone the opportunity to speak every week, and many choose to speak. One hundred and eighty sharings occurred over twenty-four instances of the ritual practice.[9] The number of sharings per week ranged

from 4 to 12 with an average of 7.5. The participants who share are diverse. Usually individuals share, although pairs came forward together on 12 occasions. Women share more often than men at a ratio of approximately 2 to 1. Children leave worship before the sharing; however, on one occasion a boy remained to share about a successful school music event. An adult with a developmental disability participated several times. The invitation to participate in silence is extended each week, and on one occasion a couple did come forward and light a candle in silence. There are certain individuals who share more often than others; however, a wide range of people participate, including first-time visitors.

The *content* that is shared is also diverse. I coded the mood, focus, and themes of each sharing.[10] Somewhat surprisingly, the *mood* of sharing is evenly divided between (1) joys, and (2) concerns or items that are a complex mix of concern and joy (Figure 3). For example, one older participant shared about the death of her brother in a way that revealed the complex mix of joy and concern that characterized this loss, including her grief at his passing but also her gratitude for the time they had spent together recently, as well as her satisfaction that he was an organ donor whose death was helping four families.

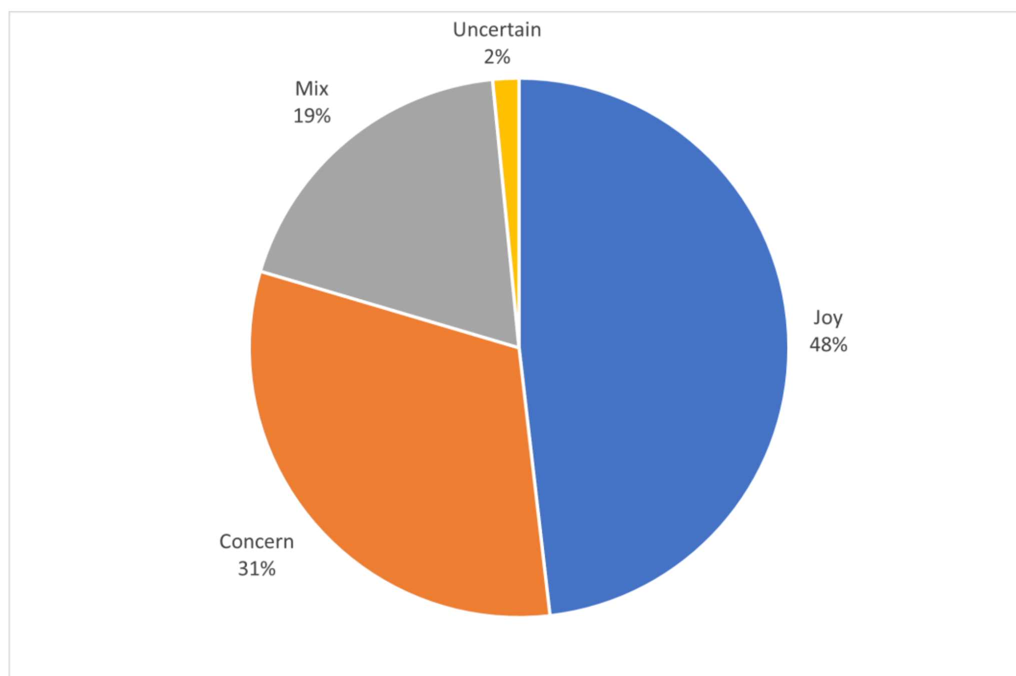

Figure 3. Mood of Sharing.

Most often, the *focus* of the sharing is personal (Figure 4). It frequently relates to the family and friends of those sharing or to the sharers themselves. The participants also share about the church, for example, greetings from other congregations, and a team winning the annual church trivia night. Sharing touches on local concerns, for instance the death of a South Bend artist and the formation of a local chapter of #BlackLivesMatter. National and global matters are also mentioned, such as an experience abroad working with Engineers without Borders and concern about ongoing gun violence.

Sharing touches on many *themes* (Figure 5). Approximately one third of sharing is related to significant life transitions, including birth, marriage, and death, and transitions associated with moving, work, or school. The participants occasionally mention milestones such as birthdays and wedding anniversaries. Medical concerns are prominent, including diagnoses, treatment plans, and positive and negative outcomes. Approximately one third of sharing addresses what I call “significant moments”. These are moments that are important to participants yet are not tied to major life events. For example: a mother shared the joy of Skyping with her daughter who is spending the year abroad and is now starting to dream in Spanish; a woman told the story of a how her broken relationship with her in-

laws was rekindled over the weekend in the emergency room; a couple shared their delight in adopting two rescue cats with drastically different personalities; and a woman lit a candle of joy for kayaking on Potato Creek. Sharing common life transitions and distinctive personal moments builds and strengthens emotional connections among participants.

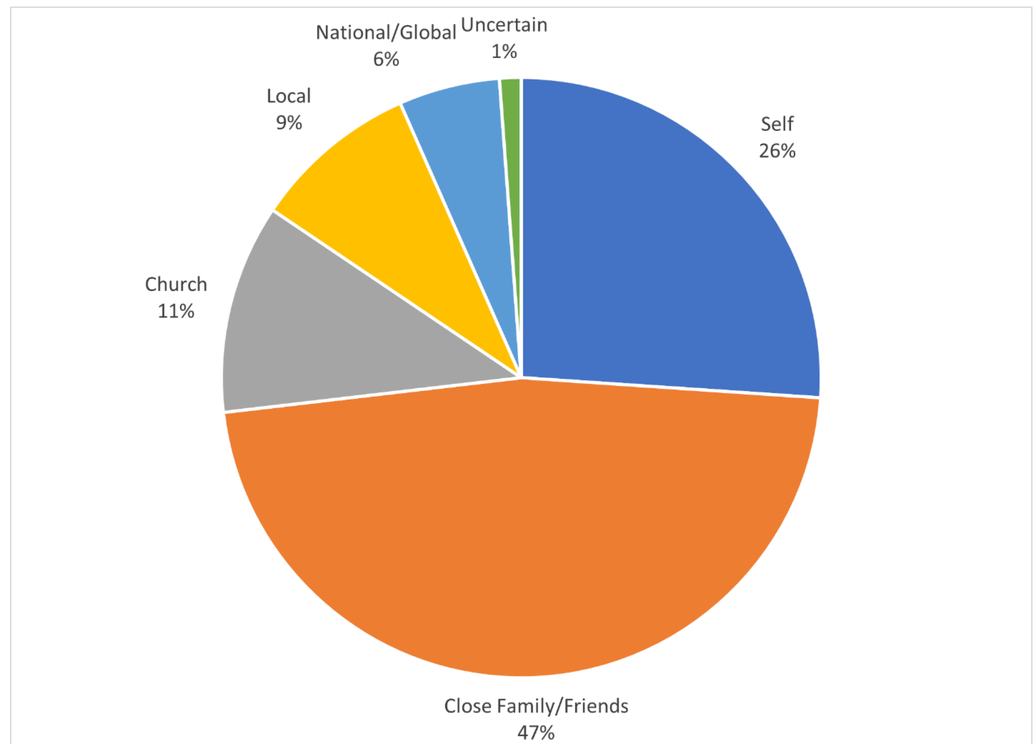

Figure 4. Focus of Sharing.

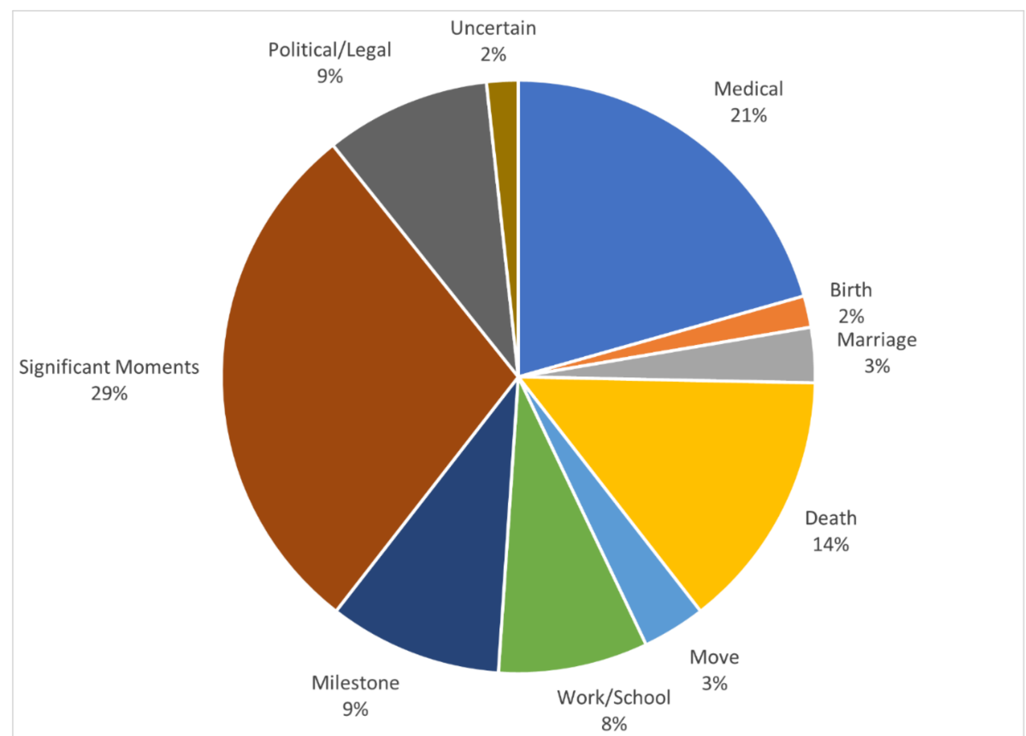

Figure 5. Theme of Sharing.

In addition to more personal sharing, about one in ten sharings relates to communal concerns such as large scale *political and legal matters*, including, for example, gratitude for a positive experience at a #BlackLivesMatter event, concern that Indiana is one of five states that does not have a hate crime law, or appreciation for President Obama's visit to Hiroshima and commitment to nuclear disarmament. In some congregations this may be divisive. However, a common commitment to progressive political engagement is a hallmark of Unitarian Universalism, and therefore, this type of sharing has the potential to unify rather than divide. Furthermore, individuals who share political and legal concerns are often visibly distressed or enthused, prompting an emotional connection, if not an ideological one.

Although sharing encompasses a vast range of material, there are limits to what can be shared.

On two occasions, the leader intervened in sharing, once to prevent an "announcement", and on another occasion to stop a person from repeating a racist comment in the context of telling a story. In this instance, when the sharer seemed determined to repeat the comment, the leader took the microphone from her, returning it only when she consented to refrain from doing so.

The community actively *responds* to what is shared. Laughter and sympathetic sighs are common. On 24 occasions, there was applause. Eclectic items prompted applause, including the "housing first" initiative in South Bend, a couple celebrating their 45th wedding anniversary, and an older woman who joyfully shared the accomplishment of learning to ride a unicycle. I have also seen someone stand and hug a person noticeably upset during her sharing. At other times, whispers and laughter surround the sharer once they return to their seat. On one occasion, the pastor wove several items that were shared into the sermon. Many times, I overheard individuals following up with others about what they shared after worship, immediately or weeks later. Who shares, what is shared, and how it is received all foster solidarity in this theologically diverse community. However, a structured approach to sharing stories is not enough.

4.3. Embodied Symbols

Two embodied symbols are a consistent part of the sharing and meditation: the action of the person sharing, either lighting a candle or engaging the seasonal object, such as the eggs, origami, or stones (Figure 6), and the silent seven breaths of the community. Both the action and the breath are richly *ambiguous* symbols:

> They are extraordinarily flexible and adaptable to multiple social uses. Such symbols can work in different ways for different people simultaneously, depending on their sensitivity to different valences. (Rothenbuhler 1998, p. 18)

The ambiguity of these symbols allows them to function differently for participants with different beliefs. For example, a candle could point to the light of knowledge for an atheist, the light of Christ for a Christian, and light in the darkness of winter for an Earth-based practitioner.

The ambiguity of the symbols used in this ritual at First Unitarian could result in individualistic meaning drifting off in different directions. However, the *embodied*, physical nature of the symbols keeps the focus anchored in the community. The physical action is essential. On several occasions, the person sharing forgot to move an object, and someone in the congregation shouted out a reminder. One participant described how he associates placing the egg in the basket with letting go of his concern. Participants often draw a connection between their egg, origami, or stone of choice and the content of sharing, such as a "sparkly egg" for a trip to Paris, the "city of lights", or an origami "box" for the "box ISIS has put us in". Similarly, the church not only sits together in silence, but frames this silence as breathing together. It is an embodied experience of co-presence, not a time for individual reflection. The use of ambiguous yet embodied symbols is a vital aspect of the ritual.

Figure 6. Examples of Objects Used in Sharing.

5. Ritual Analysis

The trusted structures, shared stories, and embodied symbols that compose the ritual of “Joys and Concerns” and “Meditation” at First Unitarian Church are an example of how a theistically diverse community can foster solidarity, especially in response to crisis.

5.1. Solidarity: “Joys and Concerns” and “Meditation” as an Interaction Ritual Chain

The structure, storytelling, and symbols of the “Joys and Concerns” and “Meditation” together provide the *ritual ingredients* necessary to foster solidarity in this theistically diverse community. The four ritual ingredients that Collins identifies as necessary for interaction rituals to produce collective effervescence are present in the “Joys and Concerns” and “Meditation” practice:

1. Bodily co-presence. The participants are physically gathered.[11] Those sharing present themselves physically before the group. The experience of bodily co-presence is amplified in the action of taking seven deep breaths together.
2. Barriers to outsiders. Worship is open to all who choose to attend. However, the group is defined by internal norms and expectations. There is a sense that the worship context is set apart from other environments. For example, on one occasion a participant asked the community to keep a concern “within the walls of the sanctuary”.
3. Mutual focus of attention. The community is intently focused on listening to the story of the individual sharing, observing the action of the sharer with the symbol, and participating in the meditation, including the deep breaths. Storytelling and embodied symbols are both highly engaging points of focus. Furthermore, the participants play a primary role in this interaction ritual, which strengthens their experience of it.
4. Shared mood. The mood of the sharing time reflects the emotional content that is shared. This is evident in the physical and audible responses of the congregation in laughter, sympathetic sighs, and applause.

These four ritual ingredients feedback on one another to produce *collective effervescence*. However, First Unitarian is *not* a megachurch. The collective effervescence at First Unitarian is more subtle than the intense emotional highs that Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly describe in relation to megachurch worship (Wellman et al. 2020, pp. 99–114). At the same time, the sharing and meditation is the most sustained portion of the service when cognitive experience gives way to emotional, embodied experience. Other aspects of worship tend to be didactic; even songs and poetic readings are placed in historical context and explicated.

Collective effervescence, as Collins suggests, in turn produces four *ritual outcomes* that also interact in feedback loops which are evident in connection with the “Joys and Concerns” and “Meditation” practice.

1. Individual emotional energy. For instance, there is a sense of release following sharing a concern or the boost that comes from being applauded for an accomplishment. The importance of the ritual to the participants may reflect the emotional energy they acquire from it.

2. Symbols of social relationship. Symbols include the objects representing joys and concerns that are prominently placed at the front in the worship space, as well as the less tangible symbol of shared breath. It is noteworthy that a shared image of God is not a central symbol in this religious ritual at First Unitarian, nor is there a common conception of this practice as "prayer".
3. Standards of morality. The community's commitments to mutual support and social justice are evident both in what is shared and how the community responds to sharing. This is evident in the immediate response to sharing, such as applauding certain personal choices or local social programs, and in the ongoing activism of the community.
4. Social solidarity. Central to this analysis, the ritual produces a feeling of membership and commitment to shared symbols and goals. This is evident in what and how the participants share, the immediate response of those gathered, and in how the participants follow up with one another over time. The way the practice of sharing "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" fosters solidarity may also account for its centrality in the worship experience of the participants at First Unitarian.

These ritual outcomes are evident in participant observation of the immediate context of the "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" ritual and are also visible in the broader common life of this enduring religiously and theistically diverse community.

As discussed, most scholars who apply Collins' theory to religion focus on religious communities that are presumed to be relatively uniform in terms of the sacred objects at the center of the ritual, especially in focusing on a shared image of God. This is not the case in relation to this religious ritual in the theistically diverse community at First Unitarian. A helpful comparison, therefore, is Anne Heider and Steven Warner's application of Collins' theory to *Sacred Harp* shaped-note folk singing, a musical ritual that brings together an eclectic group, including atheists, Amish, New Age practitioners, and conservative Christians, to sing explicitly Christian texts. Heider and Warner helpfully emphasize that:

> Solidarity does not necessarily mean that they come to agree with one another. . . . Powerful solidarity does not rest on, or even necessarily produce, common ideas or common emotions. Solidarity is, instead, a matter of common identity, a conviction that we share with others 'something in us that is other than ourselves'. (Heider and Warner 2010, p. 95)

The structured ritual storytelling and symbolic action of the "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" likewise fosters solidarity that does not depend on shared belief in a diverse community that includes both theists and nontheists. It resonates with Heider and Warner's argument that "Social solidarity, the conviction on the part of individuals that they are part of a collectivity larger than themselves, is grounded in physically involving, emotionally compelling group rituals" (Heider and Warner 2010, p. 77). The capacity for the sharing and meditation ritual at First Unitarian to produce solidarity in the absence of common beliefs is significant in increasingly theistically and religiously diverse contexts, especially because this is also a ritual response to crisis.

5.2. Crisis: "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" as a Ritual Response to Crisis

The "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" ritual at First Unitarian often functions as a ritual response to crisis. While some sharings are more mundane—a visit with friends, a birthday, a beautiful blue heron—most joys and concerns refer to a potential crisis, an ongoing crisis, or a resolved crisis. As discussed, the participants frequently share about life transitions and the crises associated with birth and death. They also name crises associated with personal health, from testing, through diagnosis, to treatment and recovery. As such, the sharing and meditation has aspects of being a "life-crisis ritual" and a "ritual of affliction" within the theoretical frameworks employed by Turner and Bell. While the crises addressed in this ritual are most often deeply personal, the practice can also be readily adapted to address crises in the local community and beyond, including disasters.

I observed the potential for this weekly practice to become a ritual response to disaster on the Sundays following what ritual theorists would consider a disaster—a sudden and unexpected collective event characterized by extensive destruction and human suffering (Post et al. 2003, p. 24). In June 2016, 49 people were killed, and 53 were wounded in a mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub, in Orlando, Florida. Most of the victims were Latinx members of the LGBTQ+ community. A "classic" settled, coherent, and orderly ritual repertoire was employed in response to the disaster (Post et al. 2003, pp. 246–48), including the creation of a "grassroots memorial" (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011), candlelight vigils worldwide (Taylor 2016), a visit to the site of the disaster from the President and Vice President of the United States (C-SPAN 2016), and a commemoration of the anniversary one year later (Time 2017). However, the "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" at First Unitarian was also part of the response to this disaster, both the morning of the shooting and a week later.

When I arrived at First Unitarian on the morning of the shooting at Pulse, I checked the news on my phone in the parking lot. The shooting, which took place in the early hours of the morning, was the top story. As I entered the church building, I wondered whether and how this would be addressed in worship. The Unitarian Universalist tradition has a long history of connection with the LGBTQ+ community. A rainbow banner in the worship space at First Unitarian proudly proclaims: "Supporting Marriage Equality since 1984". The connection with the LGBTQ+ community is so widely known that a news crew was at the church the morning of the shooting to interview members after the service. Following a few words of welcome, the minister asked: "Who has heard about the attack in Orlando?" There was a mixed response. He briefly outlined the events known at the time, concluding, "That's awful".

"Joys and Concerns" became a space where the community addressed this disaster. The morning of the shooting, a woman named it as a concern in the context of sharing about two other deaths. "It has been a sad week", she said. A friend she worked with on a political campaign took his own life. A singer was murdered after her concert. There was the mass shooting at the Orlando nightclub. "That tears my soul", she concluded, speaking through tears, "I can't comprehend that anymore". The following week, a man named the shooting again during "Joys and Concerns", this time in the context of a joy. He described attending a dance at the LGBTQ Center with his family. They attended the event to show support and a lack of fear after the shooting and had a great night. True to its name, "Joys and Concerns" was a space to name both grief and hope in response to the Pulse disaster.

This is not the only instance when a mass shooting was addressed during "Joys and Concerns". On another occasion, a man came forward and said, "I would be remiss not to light a candle for the shootings in Kalamazoo", a random series of shootings that took place about 75 miles from the location of the congregation, in which six people were killed and two injured. The man who shared connected this local event to the Unitarian Universalist struggle to put an end to gun culture and gun violence. "Joys and Concerns" was not only a space for grief, but also a call to action.

Past disasters may be revisited years later as part of "Joys and Concerns". On the anniversary of the terrorist attacks that took place in the United States on 11 September 2001, a man shared that he had spent much of his adult life in New York City and, although he was not in danger himself, he lost friends in the attack. Fifteen years after the attack, he shared a "stone of joy" because of the positive impact of therapy and therapists: "I would not be here without my phenomenal therapist who changed my life forever". In this instance, "Joys and Concerns" provided space to explore what long-term healing following a disaster may involve.

The sharing and meditation ritual which often addresses personal crises can also be a response that holds collective disasters "in prayer" in this theistically diverse community. It is an opportunity for participants to name the personal impact and implications of disasters (including disasters that take place at a distance from the congregation) through reflection on the immediate or long-term personal experience of the disaster and through examples

of and commitments to social action in response. Enduring solidarity beyond ephemeral collective effervescence is evident in these patterns. As a practice that functions both as a response to the personal crises and disasters facing the wider community, the "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" ritual at First Unitarian can be considered among and in dialogue with the emerging repertoire of disaster rituals.

6. Conclusions

How can ritual foster solidarity in religiously diverse settings in times of crisis? The "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" at First Unitarian is a religious ritual oriented toward managing personal and communal crises in the face of enduring theistic diversity. It consists of trusted structures, shared stories, and embodied symbols that together provide the necessary ritual ingredients to produce collective effervescence, which fosters social solidarity. This social solidarity is important in the aftermath of a crisis, especially for forging communities that are committed to addressing the long-term underlying causes of the crisis, rather than simply offering short-term consolation. This case study has numerous theoretical and practical implications.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

On a theoretical level, this analysis brings together two approaches to the study of ritual from different disciplines and contributes to each. This study contributes to the *disaster ritual* discussion by exploring the mechanisms—the specific ritual ingredients—that can help foster solidarity in response to a crisis. Furthermore, it does so in connection with a practice that could be called "prayer", which is a common, if fraught, element in the disaster ritual repertoire. In addition, this research contributes to the literature applying *interaction ritual chains to religion* by looking at a much more subtle case and at a theistically diverse community where images of God cannot be presumed to be shared sacred symbols.

These contributions are especially significant in relation to my research on *occasional religious practice*. My research reveals that people who are present at Christian baptisms and funerals (among other occasions for Christian worship) claim a diversity of religious and nonreligious identities. Attention to occasional religious practice reveals the eclectic mixture of participants who are present for rituals occurring within specific religious traditions on certain occasions (Johnson 2021, pp. 174–96). One advantage of the Unitarian Universalist tradition is that this diversity is out in the open. The findings of this Unitarian Universalist case study raise questions about how religious practices in other religious traditions, such as Christian liturgical practices, may function in similar ways on certain occasions, and they present possibilities for how these effects may be amplified.

6.2. Practical Implications

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this case study has practical applications. Elements of the "Joys and Concerns" and "Meditation" practice at First Unitarian could be integrated in other settings where there are existing practices of sharing and prayer, such as in Christian communities that have such a practice. In addition, this could be a beneficial ritual model in other explicitly theistically and religiously diverse settings, including interfaith and ecumenical gatherings. It may be valuable in public ritual contexts where diverse participants gather to mark communal milestones or tragedies. For example, this practice could inform rituals on college campuses that celebrate the beginning of the academic year and local ritual responses to national tragedies, such as ongoing natural disasters. In addition, many families are theologically diverse in both acknowledged and unacknowledged ways. This practice could be a model for family funerals or holiday celebrations. There is a great deal to learn from First Unitarian about how ritual can foster solidarity in religiously diverse settings in times of crisis.

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Notes

1. A similar list can be found in *Handbook of Disaster Ritual* (Hoondert et al. 2021, p. 5).
2. Several studies have applied Collins' theory to responses to disasters, although these responses have not primarily been in the form of explicitly religious rituals (Rigal and Joseph-Goteiner 2021; Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Massey 2013; Høeg 2015).
3. A 1999 survey allowed Unitarian Universalist respondents to select multiple labels to describe their religious identity; on average, they chose 3.66 labels. The largest group was Humanist at 54.4%, agnostic was second at 33%, followed by Earth-centered at 30.6%. Atheists were next at 18%, Buddhists followed at 16.5%, and both Christians and Pagans came in at 13.1%. Various other traditions were also represented. Other labels respondents could select included: Muslim, Quaker, Deist, Theist, Taoist, Pantheist, Gnostic, Hindu, and Rationalist (Casebolt and Niekro 2005, p. 238).
4. Seven Principles: (1) the inherent worth and dignity of every person; (2) justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; (3) acceptance of one another and encouragement of spiritual growth in our congregations; (4) a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; (5) the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; (6) the goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and (7) respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part (Unitarian Universalist Association 2022b).
5. First Unitarian Church conducted surveys of its congregation in 2007 and 2012. The 2012 survey had 85 respondents. Eighty-five percent of the respondents were formal church members and 15% were "friends". Fifty-nine percent of the respondents had been associated with the congregation for 11 or more years. Sixty-three percent had been Unitarians for 11 or more years.
6. I conducted ethnographic research at First Unitarian Church, South Bend from January to November 2016; this included attending worship and community events, semi-structured interviews with the pastor, and numerous informal conversations with community members. Orders of worship and detailed scripts provided by the pastor were also subjected to analysis. I am grateful to the leaders and members at First Unitarian Church for welcoming me and giving me permission to name them as collaborators in this research. This research was reviewed and approved by the University of Notre Dame IRB.
7. Only one of the twenty-five Sunday worship services that I observed did not include the opportunity to share joys and concerns. This service was intended to echo the form of worship at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly.
8. Rev. Chip Roush served as the minister of First Unitarian Church, South Bend at the time of this study. He has given permission to name him and share his words.
9. A sharing consists of an individual or group coming forward. Sharings frequently include more than one item.
10. A single sharing may be coded in multiple categories, especially when the participants mention more than one item when they come forward to share.
11. There is a growing literature related to how interaction rituals function in online environments, although this is beyond the scope of this study, which centers on an in-person ritual (DiMaggio et al. 2018; Collins 2020).

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