

BOOK REVIEW

Joshua Cockayne and Gideon Salter. 2025. *Why We Gather: Psychology, Theology, and Liturgical Practice*

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Reviewed by Kristine Stache

What do we mean when we say individuals share an experience of worship? Does it matter if we worship together in one space or not? What happens when we attend to something with someone? Why is this important “for a life of faith” (3)?

These are but a few of the questions Joshua Cockayne and Gideon Salter explore in their book, *Why We Gather: Psychology, Theology, and Liturgical Practice*. As a theologian and psychologist respectively, these authors spent “half a decade of collaboration, discussion, and friendship,” focusing on the gathering of people in Christian worship (1). For them, “The significance of a project like this, we hope, is not confined only to *what* we have argued, but also to *how* we have argued it ... we have sought to show the ways in which the disciplines might complement and inform one another” (139).

From the beginning of the book, the authors make the claim that “ritual behavior plays a formative role in the development of human thinking and feeling” (34). Rituals and practices matter in the formation and identity of communities of faith. More specifically, they position “the place of liturgy as an important part of this development” (35). Liturgies are more the words we speak together. In the shared language and movements “humans can establish some of the world as shared with others, what some have termed ‘shared situations’” (35).

Six chapters, bookended with an introduction and conclusion, make *Why We Gather* a fairly quick read, without compromising its thoughtful inquiry. The ultimate goal for Cockayne and Salter is that readers will understand liturgy as something more than just what people do together, but that liturgical practices “allow participants to *share attention* with other people and thereby create rich and varied experiences of jointness with others” (9). *Jointness* and *joint attention* are two important terms for this work, with research on these characteristics informing the case

the authors make in this book. The latter, *joint attention*, is defined as the “ability to attend to some feature of the world with another person, with the awareness that this attention is shared” (6). It is in this sharing attention with one another that creates a sense of *jointness* (9). Something, they argue, happens in the shared attending that transcends a mere shared experience. It is in the difference between an individual’s participation in a group experience and a shared experience with shared attention where a participant’s understanding shifts to understanding “that their actions form part of a wider ‘We’” (39). This, the authors claim, deepens a community’s sense of identity.

Chapter 1 grounds their work on liturgy anthropologically. Rejecting more traditional models of experience, they lay out an argument for how “rituals shape human beings because they are social creatures, whose minds and bodies are shaped through engagement with others” (36). This sets the reader up for chapter 2, which looks at how this experience is not just about engagement with one another but also with God. How does our shared experience in worship differ from other kinds of shared experiences? Liturgy, they argue, “allows participants to mutually attend to God in concrete, bodily ways” (42).

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 speak to practices and rituals that weave in and through liturgy-prayer, giving thanks and remembering. While each of these practices is distinctive, all contribute to shared attending within the worship experience in their unique ways. Communal prayer draws those gathered deeper into their “communal life of God” (61). The practice of gratitude, in song and prayer, creates space to share emotions within the community. And finally, the acts of remembrance, as in the Eucharist, connect this sense of jointness beyond the current community into the past. The authors refer to this as the theory of *actualization*, allowing individuals to “experience events of the past in a way that unites the community throughout history” (12).

Chapter 6 focuses on the limits of their argument concerning jointness. Who is included and who is not when it comes to a shared experience? Do participants need to experience a shared event in the same way for it to unite them with each other and with God? They conclude that “all members of the community have a role to play in shaping the sense of jointness, even if they cannot contribute in the same way” (132).

So, who might benefit from reading this book? Three groups come to mind immediately:

- Those who love to think and reflect about theology through a multitude of disciplines. Science and religion, for example, are not in opposition to one another, but each offers insight into further understanding the great mystery of God and God’s good creation. This book offers content and method for such conversations.

- Those who are curious as to what God is up to in and through the gathering of all the generations of God's people in time and place and across time and place, and how we are formed in and through the gathering, particularly liturgically. Practitioners, worship leaders and scholars alike can find something to ponder. This kind of discussion is about what we as people gathered do, how we do it, and where God is in the midst of it all.
- Those who are curious about communal formation, beyond merely participation of a community's members. Leaders designing ministry experiences intergenerationally may benefit in particular. We, as beings created for relationality by a God that exists in relationship with Godself and creation, continue to be formed in Christ. How ministry leaders design experiences contributes to a shared understanding of our life together in Christ.

The gift of this book lies in its ability to put new language (at least for this reviewer) into conversation with familiar language, and to think further about how the roles of ritual and practices, worship in particular, contribute to communal formation. The final words of the conclusion speak to the ultimate purpose of such conversation:

While communal prayer might lead to social cohesion, and group gratitude to social inclusion, pursuing the life of worship solely for its social benefits is missing a crucial part of the theological impetus for worship, and even attempts to naturalize liturgy must engage with its theological rationale; liturgy provides a means of joining attention with one who is worthy of worship, praise, and adoration. "For from him and through in and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" Romans 11:36. (141)

About the Reviewer

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