

Transitions 1997 - 2024:  
Artistic and Scientific works  
between Psychology and Religion  
Kathrin Rothenberg-Elder, 2024

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# Background



Kathrin Rothenberg-Elder 6/2024, © R. Rothenberg

Since my ph.D. thesis on Christian passage rituals in 1997, updated and expanded to include monotheistic passage rituals in 2022, I have worked as an artist and scientist in the area between religion and psychology.

Born in 1967, I studied psychology, practical theology and modern German literature.

I work as an appointed professor at the Diploma University of applied science and continue to work as an artist, mainly as a poet and "photo composer".

My voluntary work as climate activist for Scientists For Future & Servas International is essentially separate from this, but sometimes flows into these works.

I live in an international, multi-religious and atheist family and environment.

# The Purpose

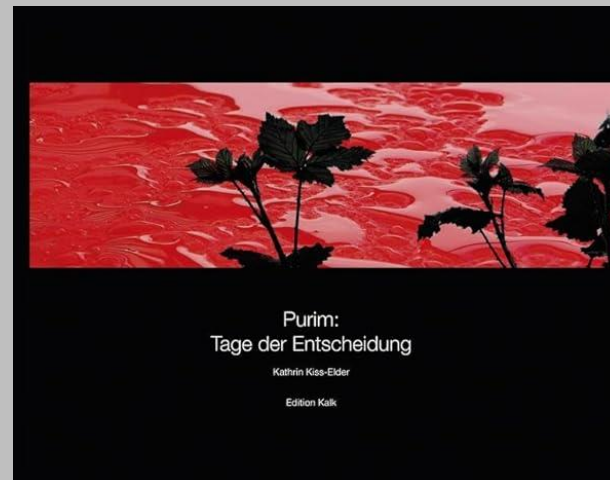
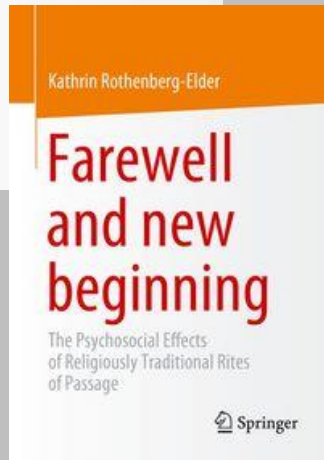
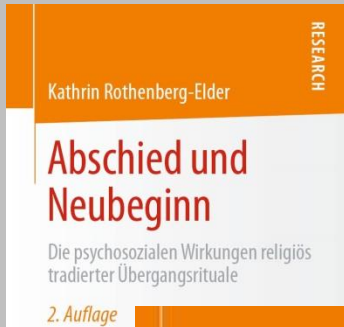


In this times of transition we need dialogue, art and storytelling is one of those tools.

Religious fields can promote those rooms of encounter, development, safety and understanding.

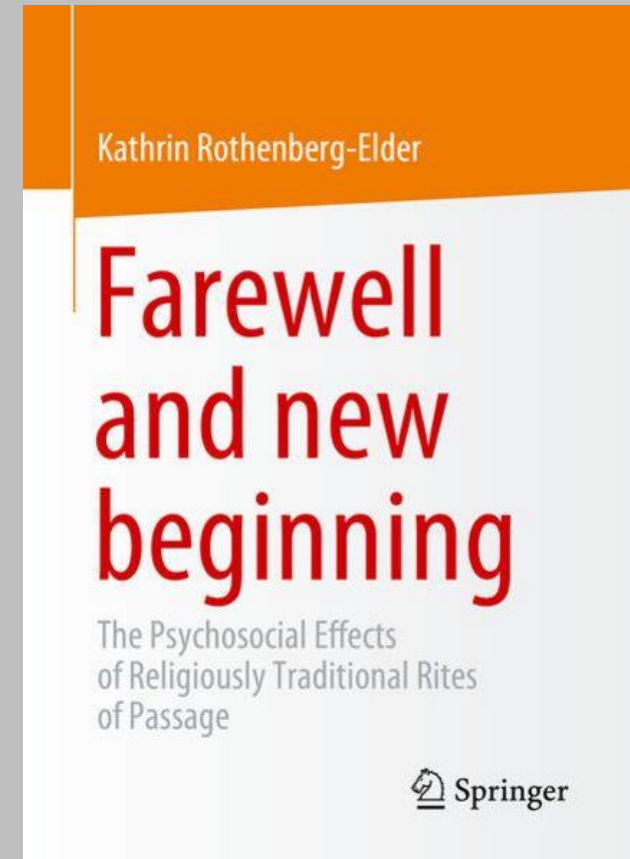
Hereinafter a short presentation of my projects in those fields:

# Projects 1997 - 2024



# Farewell and new beginning

Life is full of transitions. These transitions have to be addressed, shaped, processed and integrated into our lives in some way. Regardless of the belief in a God, traditional structures always come into view, here especially religiously traditional rites of passage such as baptism and circumcision, communion and bar mitzvah, marriage as well as convalescence, death and funeral rites. What is the psychological function of religiously traditional rites of passage today? This question was investigated with the help of interactive interviews with functionaries and members of the religious communities of all three monotheistic currents in Northern Europe, flanked by two interviews with atheists.



# The Pentateuch-Project



A multi-layered photographic project on the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses.

It contains around 140 works inspired by quotes from all five books, created with the aim of the highest religious sensitivity - no recognizable people nor places are depicted. It has been exhibited internationally in several places, including places of worship of all three monotheistic religions.

To make them easy to display and transport, they are printed on fabric in the tradition of processional flags.

Some examples here:

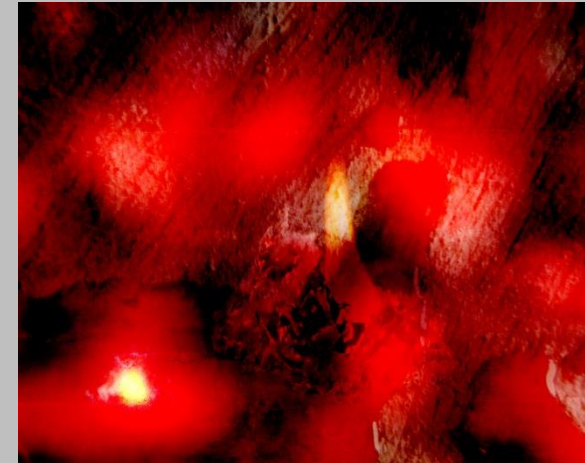
# The Pentateuch-Project: Examples



Gen 28 12 Surah 15 9



Ex 2 3



Lev 3 9 Surah 22 34

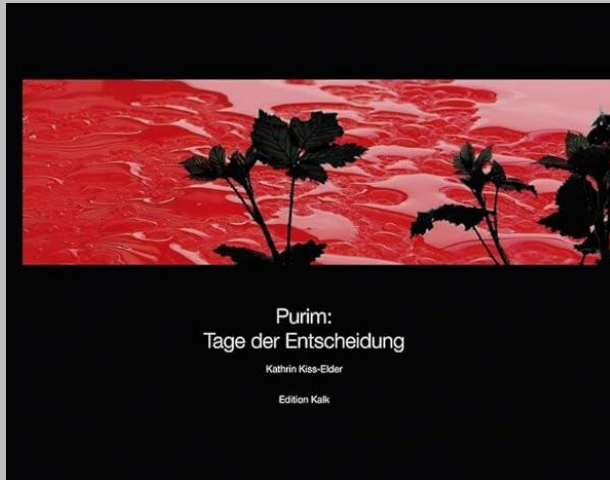


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# The Purim-Project



"The biblical story of Esther, the Jewish heroine from the Bible, and of Eva Moses Cor, who survived Auschwitz as a child, are told in two strands: They are stories of courage - and of how important it is that we remember, because memory can help protect ourselves and others. The author herself illustrated the parallel stories in colorful photo compositions." (Ohlert, 2015)



# News of the day: Poems and pictures on the Psalms



“For many generations of Jews and Christians, the biblical psalms were a natural and everyday part of their lives, a guideline for their prayers, a reflection of their emotions, a way of experiencing and searching for God. For many centuries, the psalms have been recited, sung, set to music and rewritten by the devout and the less devout, by believers and doubters. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Psalter has become very alien to most people. On the other hand, the lyrical approaches of contemporary poets repeatedly demonstrate its relevance, the human depth of the old texts, as well as the elements of lasting topicality and transcendence. With this volume, the artist and poet Kathrin Kiss-Elder presents her intensive study of the biblical psalms: with her cycle of 150 poems and just as many photo tableaux, she follows the entire Psalter and examines each psalm poetically and in an intensive imagery.” (Ohlert, 2017)

Some examples here:

# News of the Day: Poems and Pictures on the Psalms - Example



Psalm 12: My Own Voice

## “My own voice

I am drowning again  
in my misery.

In the images of me that others have of me  
my existence is irreversibly distorted  
and wiped away.

I no longer recognize myself.

Who could teach me now  
and help me in the complete darkness  
when I am almost transparent  
and my own voice

breaks? [...]”

(Rothenberg-Elder, 2017)

# Further Projects I: Sacraments of Everyday Life

Sacraments of Everyday Life is a collection of stories and - much more sparsely - photo compositions about the fascination of the sacramental. The initial inspiration was the concept of the sacramental by theologian Leonardo Boff. He pursues a very practical everyday approach by demonstrating in his Little Sacramental Doctrine (1976) how everyday artifacts are transformed into a kind of sacramental event that dresses the objective, immanent with symbolic, transcendent elements.

I started this work since the offshoots of my dissertation in 1997 and still continue today. The elements in it are always dedicated to a concrete thing such as "fire", "cable drum" or "scrabble". Two examples:



Onions, 2012



Eggs, 2015

# Further Projects I:

## Sacraments of Everyday Life - Onions

Onions and the future are one and the same for me - at least they have been for a long time.

Onions: that's my father, stomping around in some field and planting onions. That's my father, teaching us children how to cut onions - I can still hear him promising to teach his grandchildren how to plant them.

To be honest, I don't even know if my father can really grow onions. Since the moment my memory begins, I have seen above all: that he teaches us how to cut onions without hurting ourselves, how he guides our hands with thick paws; that's my father, who speaks elegiacally about onions; - how to plant them - I don't think my father knows that. But I know how much he likes onions. The story of how he teaches us how to cut onions and not hurt ourselves with the knife, that story is true too. It is part of the memories from a time when my stories were already tied together to form a solid bond.

Onions - that is the passion with which we cook in our family. Onions - that was the freedom of being able to smell of onions. Onions were the hazy afternoons in the kitchen, where something was always being cooked - usually something with onions. Onions were actually the dreams of the future that my father dreamed of us and his future grandchildren into. Onions were in general - the dreams of a permanent place on earth and of fertility - of history remaining the same and yet continuing.

The thought of onions and the stories that surround them for me is rightly a memory of my childhood: full of light and full of tears.

I now cut my onions differently, no longer according to his method. I have not lost faith in the earth and in my future - despite all the tears that my childhood is also associated with. (3/2002)

# Further Projects I:

## Sacraments of Everyday Life – Egg Salat

I recently realized that we need a story about egg salad. Not just any egg salad, but vegan egg salad, which, amazingly, in a certain supermarket is neither in the small salads in the absurdly small packaging, nor a few meters away on the shelf above which it is loudly advertised that there are vegan products here, but somewhere between cream and milk. It was a Saturday, I rarely go shopping on Saturdays, I don't like it, and I don't like myself in supermarkets on Saturdays. I don't like anyone in supermarkets on Saturdays. I reached into the shelf grumpily and with the completely justified desire to reward myself for this Saturday shopping trip with this small package of egg salad, when a man spoke to me: he would also like this egg salad very much. He put his hand on my arm in confirmation, I was a little startled by this unexpected approach, he said reassuringly that he was from Cologne, that actually calmed me down, and so we started talking.

We didn't talk much, just briefly reassured each other that we both really liked this particular egg salad. We met again at the checkout. It was written on his face that he was having or had a hard time. But he didn't force this hard time on me. He only briefly said that his wife had gone mad. So I asked. It turned out that a day and a half ago he had suddenly lost his mother-in-law, whom he obviously liked very much. A day and a half, that was his expression, his count. He added to this message one of those resigned sayings about how life gives you things you didn't ask for, or that life brings you some suffering, unprompted. Coming from him, it didn't sound banal, it didn't sound despondent, just like people pointing out to each other that the sun is shining or that it's started to rain outside.

Then he lifted his egg salad out of his shopping basket as if he were toasting me and said: I will think of you. In my memory. In his memory. Because we are such terribly vulnerable people. Because we are a community of vulnerable people.

This little spark of connection, that's where hope always begins for me. (5/2023)

# Weitere Projekte I:

## Sakramente des Alltags - Eiersalat

Mir ist vor kurzem klar geworden, dass es eine Geschichte über Eiersalat braucht. Nicht irgendeinen Eiersalat, sondern veganen Eiersalat, der in einem bestimmten Supermarkt erstaunlicherweise weder bei diesen kleinen Salaten in diesen absurd kleinen Verpackungen steht, noch ein paar Meter weiter im Regal, über dem laut damit geworben wird, dass es hier vegane Produkte gibt, sondern irgendwo zwischen Sahne und Milch. Es war ein Samstag, ich gehe selten einkaufen am Samstag, ich mag es nicht, und ich mag mich nicht an Samstagen in Supermärkten. Ich mag überhaupt niemanden an Samstagen in Supermärkten. Ich griff grummelig und in dem völlig berechtigten Verlangen, mich mit dieser kleinen Packung Eiersalat für diesen Samstagseinkauf zu belohnen, ins Regal, da sprach mich ein Mann an: Auch er würde diesen Eiersalat sehr mögen. Er legte mir bestätigend seine Hand auf meinen Arm, ich schrak etwas zurück über diese unerwartete Annäherung, er sagte beruhigend, er wäre Kölner, das beruhigte mich tatsächlich, so kamen wir ins Gespräch.

Wir kamen nicht viel ins Gespräch, vergewisserten uns nur kurz, dass wir beide diesen speziellen Eiersalat wirklich sehr gerne mögen würden. An der Kasse trafen wir uns wieder. Es stand in seinem Gesicht geschrieben, dass er eine harte Zeit hatte oder gehabt hatte. Aber er drängte mir diese harte Zeit nicht auf. Nur kurz meine er, seine Frau wäre durchgedreht. Da fragte ich nach. Es zeigte sich, dass er vor eineinhalb Tagen seine offenbar sehr gemochte Schwiegermutter plötzlich verloren hatte. Eineinhalb Tage, das war sein Ausdruck, seine Zählung. Er ergänzte diese Mitteilung mit einem dieser resignierten Sprüche, dass einem das Leben manches geben würde, dass man nicht bestellt hätte, oder dass das Leben manches Leid brächte, ungerufen. Aus seinem Munde klang es nicht banal, nicht verzagt, einfach wie man sich gegenseitig darauf hinweist, dass die Sonne scheint, oder dass es draußen angefangen hat, zu regnen.

Dann hob er seinen Eiersalat aus seinem Einkaufskorb, als würde er mir zuprosten, und sagte: ich werde an Sie denken. Zu meinem Gedächtnis. Zu seinem Gedächtnis. Weil wir so schrecklich verletzliche Menschen sind. Weil wir eine Gemeinschaft verletzlicher Menschen sind.

Dieser kleiner Funken Verbundenheit, damit beginnt für mich immer wieder: Hoffnung.(5/2023)

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# Further Projects II: The Night of Pessach

One of my current projects, in cooperation with my husband Rafi Rothenberg, is a modern Haggadah, the ritual guide for Passover – for modern, multi-religious and often atheist people, perhaps even multilingual like our own family...

The project includes carefully modernized texts in German, Hebrew and English as well as photo compositions, like this example.



Erev Pessach, 2024