

Prayer as crucible

by [Sarah Coakley](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue



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It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the 12th in the series.

There is a sense in which my mind has changed only once in the course of my career as a theologian, but once instigated, this change was so dramatic and transformative as to sweep everything else uncomfortably in its wake. Like a subterranean explosion, the intellectual fallout was initially difficult to trace to its source. But as I now see it, any subsequent theological changes must be seen as the direct or indirect result of this first one—and there is no end to the changes in sight.

This is not the story of a classic conversion experience, let alone of a pietistic revulsion against the intellect. On the contrary, it is an account of how prayer—especially the simple prayer of relative silence or stillness—has the power to change one's perception of the theological task. What started as an adventure in personal prayer—which drew me in much faster and more disconcertingly than I was ready for—has ended in a program for systematic theology (and its handmaid, philosophy of religion) which is as much implicated in the corporate and the social as it is in the personal. For that is where prayer inexorably leads us.

The familiar feminist slogan has a real point here: "The personal is the political." That is why what follows is by no means a narrative of individual religious experience in the modern sense analyzed most memorably by William James. Rather, it is an account of how a practice that might, at best, count as a failed Jamesian religious experience could nonetheless make a different sort of theologian out of me, one committed to what I now call theology *in via* (a theology "on the road"). And if one's theology is *in via*, then there is no horizon that does not potentially involve ever further personal change.

It has only been in the past decade that I have been fully able to see what all this might mean theologically. It is not a coincidence, I am sure, that it is also within those last ten years that I have been formed as a priest (with all the extraordinary humiliations, joys and transformations that this necessarily involves), have fallen afoul of the secularized academic institution (Harvard Divinity School) I was trying to serve, and have struggled with a set of increasingly destructive disjunctions—both intellectual and ecclesiastical—that afflict many of us in the field of academic theology today, especially in North America. My perspective is a transatlantic one, however, for I now teach in England, and my priesthood is exercised in the university and at an English cathedral—not that many of the difficulties go away, of course.

This may so far sound like a merely personal narrative. In fact, I now realize in retrospect that the political, social and intellectual backdrop of the time was crucial for how I responded to the initial crisis of prayer, as I shall try to indicate. But I must first attempt to speak honestly of that original subterranean explosion of prayer.

I cannot remember a time when God was not for me a holy reality and a matter of intense interest and yearning. But prayer was a problem. How on earth did one do it? Jesus gave one the simplest things to ask for (Matt. 6: 9-13, etc.), but Paul seemed to admit that prayer was pretty much humanly impossible (Rom. 8:26)—and

that was only the first of the puzzles.

I was drawn in my childhood and adolescence to several people who had the evident aura of holiness and for whom prayer was a central focus. To find out later that their lives were, in other respects, difficult, fractured and even morally blinkered was a paradox with which I continue to struggle. But holiness is not the same thing as psychoanalytic wholeness; and if it was prayer that made them what they were, then I wanted it too. Or rather, what I wanted was *God*.

After many attempts at daily intercession and scriptural meditation which seemed unsatisfying (although I am sure they were exactly what was needed at the time), it was in my mid-twenties that I finally found my way into a simpler form of prayer via an experiment with Transcendental Meditation. I took this up on the excuse of needing an antidote to stress in my first academic job. The impact was electrifying.

I hadn't been going longer than about two months with this simple discipline of 20 minutes of silence in the morning and early evening when what I can only call a seismic shift of seemingly unspeakable proportions began to afflict me. Whatever was going on here was not only "transcendental" but severely *real*. Clearly I was going to have to make some metaphysical choices, and fast. Either I could buy (literally) the next set of courses with the TM folk and be introduced to some important framework ideas from Vedanta, or I could seek to bring whatever was happening to me into some sort of alliance with my Christian faith. I chose the latter option.

Had movements such as "centering prayer" been operative at that time, my path would have been a great deal easier and I would have known that what was happening to me was nothing special at all but part and parcel of any sustained commitment to silence. As it was, I was blundering along in the dark, and even my first attempt at seeking proper spiritual direction (which I certainly needed) ended in a painful and crushing rebuff.

Yet it was strangely impossible to step off the spiritual roller coaster which was now in full swing. I recall finding a letter of Basil the Great in which he describes the adventure of prayer as like getting into a boat with the decks constantly shifting under one; this was some comfort, as was the discovery of Bernard of Clairvaux's many meditations on the "fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom," fear marking the necessary cracking open of the heart before God if prayer is to develop and

deepen. Since the ground was (literally and fearfully) heaving for me too, I had urgent recourse to whatever patristic, medieval and early modern treatises on prayer I could lay hands on. Little was I to know at the time that this was to lead me to a complete rethinking of doctrinal development in the early church and beyond.

For as I rapidly discovered, when one came at that history without the forced modern distinction between "spiritual" and "dogmatic" texts, a whole new world lay before one: spiritual growth and doctrinal truth hung newly together. The history of doctrine became likewise the entangled history of spiritual and political struggle—including intense struggles over questions of gender and authority. But this did not reduce doctrinal questions to (secularized) issues of sex and power, as was becoming a fashionable mode of analysis in the wake of Michel Foucault. On the contrary, the commitment to prayer strung one on the rack of the painful internalization of divine truth. For me, this change of approach heralded no nostalgic or romantic return to a premodern era, as was—at the other end of the spectrum from the Foucauldians —also becoming popular in various forms of neo-conservatism. Here the slogan was: "Down with the Enlightenment and back to the Fathers and medievals!" No, for me it was a retrieval of a classic tradition sweated painfully out of the exigencies of prayer encountered primarily as darkness and disturbance.

But I must not leave the impression that this adventure in prayer was all anxiety-making, although its initial impact on my sense of self as a young theologian was certainly that. Underneath was an extraordinary sense of spiritual and epistemic expansion—of being taken by the hand into a new world of glorious technicolor, in which all one's desires were newly magnetized toward God, all beauty sharpened and intensified. Yet simultaneously all poverty, deprivation and injustice were equally and painfully impressed with new force on my consciousness.

It was as if the darkness of fear, which had been newly hypostatized as "race" at the Enlightenment (perhaps because the awesome "God" in Godself was now off limits, epistemologically, according to Kant), had been firmly placed out of sight in my privileged academic education and was now hitting me from out of the depths with all the force of that which the White Man cannot bear to see. This connection between Enlightenment epistemological issues and the modern question of race really became clear to me only when I was doing prison chaplaincy work in a jail in Boston during my priestly formation. (See my article "[Jail break: Meditation as subversive activity](#)," *Christian Century*, June 29, 2004.)

I was myself now on the margins, seeing things all aslant. I was forced to reconsider the very nature of the human intellect, its goals and its tasks, its relations to affect and especially to what the Christian tradition has called spiritual sensation.

Lest this seem like a claim to some special supernatural encounter, I hasten to add that the daily practice of silence itself was usually more like the tedious quotidian discipline of brushing one's teeth than anything else. It was the effects outside prayer—including, of course, the effects on other normal Christian or academic duties (hearing the Word, participating in the sacraments, attending to students in difficulties, writing lectures and so on)—that were initially hard to quantify and yet palpably transforming of all my previous theological assumptions.

I had been trained at Cambridge in an era of benign but somewhat vapid biblical liberalism, which irritated me not because it was liberal (that was more the complaint of my fellow student Rowan Williams, I think) but because for the most part it failed to probe the philosophical assumptions it was making about the relation between scriptural texts, historical verifiability and theological truth. Propelled by these historiographical concerns, I followed up my initial degree, after a brief spell at Harvard, with a dissertation focused on Ernst Troeltsch's Christology. ("You could write *that* on a postage stamp," remarked Stephen Sykes, my Cambridge teacher in systematics; I set out with the arrogance of youth to prove him wrong.) I was driven by a desire to pinpoint the precise philosophical conditions under which incarnational claims for Christ would seem probative; my mind-set—more unconscious than conscious, I suspect—was that of classic British foundationalism (the philosophical doctrine that says all legitimate claims to truth must be "founded" in certain basic, unassailable truths which all thinking subjects have in common—e.g., those which are known directly by the senses or are self-evident or logically irrefutable). I must have imbibed Locke with my mother's milk, for at Cambridge I mainly read Hume and Kant (under the eccentric tutelage of Donald MacKinnon), followed by my beloved Troeltsch, whom I sought to reinstate after Barth's savage critique.

Round about the time I was finishing the doctoral thesis, however, the bottom fell out of those fundamental philosophical assumptions which I had simply taken for granted. What I had thought were just some nasty bumps in the area of my spiritual life was impinging with force on my entire philosophical agenda.

It took me many years to bring these changes in my theological picture to full fruition and to have the courage to express them explicitly and boldly. But in recent years I can say that this has at last happened, urged on by the necessary integration of pastoral and theological tasks occasioned by my ordination process.

Three particular shifts can perhaps form my focus in this article. Of course, they did not occur without impact from the surrounding intellectual and political circumstances of North America in the same decade, as I shall try to clarify. One might say that they arose in a sort of tense contrapuntal relation to the new theological disjunctions of the time, both liberal and conservative. But they seemingly fitted neither of these parties with any ease.

Control and loss of control: "powers and submissions"

At the heart of the prayer of silence is a simple surrendering of control to God. Instead of a busy setting of one's own agendas, prayer becomes pared down to wanting God alone—"with the sharp darts of longing love," as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* memorably puts it. This is not to say that petition or intercession are abandoned—far from it. But they are now set in the context of an underlying submission to the divine: as Paul has it, this ceding of place is to the Spirit, who prays in us and for us (and others), with sighs too deep for words.

The discipline of learning this particular submission to the unique source of one's being is initially disturbing and even weird, especially for anyone who has been trained to "master" material and to put her chosen mark on it. "The intellect faces a blank and the will follows it," as Dom John Chapman aptly described this curious way of "wasting time" before God. But then should one not expect an intentional noetic interaction with God to be unlike any other interaction? Should one be surprised if the effect is dizzying? It took me a long while to come to terms with this fundamental problem and its implications.

Not only was this shift into practiced loss of control intrinsically anxiety-making, it also brought with it for me a taxing feminist paradox. Was not lack of control, lack of autonomy, precisely the problem that women were countering with feminism? Was not vulnerability an ill to be avoided rather than a precious state to be inculcated? Was not this, in other words, a dangerous invitation to sexist discrimination, even abuse? (I recall Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, at the time of my appointment to Harvard in 1991, insisting that I stop talking and writing about vulnerability.)

It took me a while to work out that a seriously false dichotomy was at work here, and that submission to God and silence before God—being unlike any other submission or any other silence—was that which empowered one to speak against injustice and abuse and was the ground of true freedom (in God) rather than its suppression. (Of course, this set me against much American liberal feminism and womanism of the time, to my distress.)

It also took patience to grasp—through the deeper engagement with scripture and tradition that this practice was also drawing me into—that my whole concept of the bounds of selfhood was undergoing change. The meaning of the "body of Christ" in Paul sprang alive for the first time, and with that a mysterious sense of our deep mutual implication in each other's lives as members of that body. And if this was what Christ meant for the here and now, then surely it must signal that my previous assumptions about a past, extrinsic "life of Jesus" as the only basis for Christology was wildly awry and fatally restricted (sorry, Troeltsch). The resurrection had reappeared—reentering triumphantly by stealth through the back door of my consciousness. Moreover, what had started as a frighteningly lonely journey of prayer now seemed to be the least lonely activity that one could possibly engage in—not only buzzing with communication, but positively crowded with angels and saints, the living and the dead.

Sex, bodiliness and the mystery of desire

This brings me to my second point of dramatic change. No less disturbing than the loss of noetic control in prayer and all that followed from that was the arousal, intensification and reordering of desire that this praying engendered. Anyone who has spent more than a short time on her or his knees in silence will know of the almost farcical raid that the unconscious makes on us in the sexual arena in such prayer, as if this is a sort of joke that God has up God's sleeve to ensure that "ourselves, our souls and bodies" are what we present to God and not some pious disembodied version of such. Our capacity as Christians to try to keep sex and God in different boxes is seemingly limitless, but the integrative force of silent prayer simply will not allow this, or not for very long.

Huge difficulties need to be confronted here, and I do not think they can be faced quickly or without real pain and danger. Moreover, trying to make sense of all this in the face of currently fashionable postmodern gender theory has created some real points of contact in my recent theology, but also revealed deep differences in

fundamental approach.

What is at stake from my perspective is not so much the overturning of societal gender stereotypes à la philosopher Judith Butler (though the courage engendered by prayer tends to lead there quite naturally) but rather the urgent question of how all our desires—not just for sex, but for money, power, fame and immortality—may be thrown by prayer into the purifying crucible of divine desire. There is our own primary desire for God, of course, which we strive in prayer to put first; but underlying that is God's unique and unchangeable desire for us, without which all our own striving is fruitless. As John of the Cross acknowledges so wonderfully in "The Living Flame," at the end of his own long journey of desire: once all our desires are sorted and purged (not, note, repressed or obliterated) we enter a realm of infinite delight-in-God.

In other words, what prayer teaches, but only painfully and over time, is the ascetical task of acknowledging—and then adjudicating between—competing desires jostling within us, both good and ill. The acid test is the conformity to divine will (a matter on which we are often not best able to judge for ourselves—confession, direction and the help of our friends-in-Christ is crucial). But torn as we are now between the false modern alternatives of liberal libertinism and conservative repression, this precious third, ascetical alternative is seemingly a lost art in the affluent world of the West. The trouble is, it cannot in any case be our art to own and control: there is no escaping the hard graft of painful self-knowledge, patience—and prayer. God does the work in us if we allow it.

When future historians look back at this extraordinary period of ecclesiastical schisms over sex and gender, it will perhaps be possible to see this set of ructions not as the last prurient gasp of reactionary forces but as a more general crisis of what may be called the economy of desire. An erotic maturity is palpably lacking in our supposedly civilized world, and it cannot be commodified or hastened. It is an ascetic task for each one of us. While liberals say that we should stop worrying about sexual continence and start feeding the poor or saving the planet, conservatives rejoin that the whole planet is cosmically disordered in the first place if sexual desire is out of place. What if, again, both these alternatives are false ones, and sexual desire has to be dealt with alongside all these other desires, so that their "orientation" is finally ordered to God? On such a view, the wholly modern (intrinsically secular?) categorization of hetero-, homo- and bisexuality might fall into the background as distractions from this more urgent task. Any quest for integrity,

truth and honesty will be suppressed here at self-defeating cost.

Rationality and its expansion: variations on post-foundationalism

The third area in which my mind has been changed is importantly related to the first two, but takes me into the realm of philosophy of religion, in which field my current post at Cambridge is focused. In a period when there has been a remarkable set of attacks on classical foundationalism by both philosophers and theologians, I have again felt myself to be plowing a subtly different course as a result of the prayer perspective I have tried to outline above. For the danger of the various theological critiques of such foundationalism (whether Thomist, Calvinist, Wittgensteinian or Barthian in inspiration) is that they can jump on a current secular philosophical bandwagon—the fashionable raging against the Enlightenment—without supplying any very effective account of how theology can continue to engage philosophically with secular thought and still truly challenge it. Rhetorical fiat alone will not do the trick. For theologies in this environment all too easily become a series of loudly announced but basically unargued sectarian assertions. This is the "anarchy of values" of which Wilhelm Dilthey so presciently spoke and with which philosophers such as John McIntyre and Charles Taylor (and, in his different way, Alvin Plantinga) have struggled afresh of late with great sophistication.

My own response to this philosophical and theological crisis is one that seeks to analyze the dark testing of contemplation as precisely an epistemological challenge. In other words, I continue to reject another false modern disjunction—that between spirituality and philosophy. It is not that contemplation affords just another sectarian theological perspective, which one can take or leave as one wills. Rather, its painful and often dark expansion of consciousness, its integration of thought and affect and its ethical sensitizing to what is otherwise neglected (including, of course, the poor "who are always with us") all demand that one give an account of how philosophy, and science and politics too, cannot ultimately afford to ignore the apprehensions that contemplation invites.

Clearly this is a hugely ambitious philosophical program, and one that I am only now beginning to work out. The move from old-style rational proofs for God's existence to dark, contemplative testing is emphatically not just a matter of adding prayer experience and stirring. There is an expansion of reason's remit here, a

reconsideration of the place of affect, of epistemic training and of responsive integration (with interesting points of contact with the best recent turns in feminist epistemology), and an acknowledgment of the powerful ways in which what we prefer not to see dangerously affects what we *can* see. This has implications well beyond the theological camp: science itself is not immune. You could call this project a form of nonfoundationalism, but not quite of the usual sort. This is where my thought is heading in the coming years—if life and energy endure.

I have attempted to explain how a practice which I first took up as a young theologian in my early twenties has disconcertingly changed my mind about almost everything—God, theology, philosophy, politics, race and feminism—and in ways I could scarcely even have imagined at the outset of the adventure. But particularly in the past decade, and against the backdrop of increasingly sharp tensions between postliberal, neoconservative and late-liberal schools of theology, I have come to see what it all might mean for me as a theologian and a priest. As the ecclesiastical world fractures over sex, and the academic world drives an increasingly false wedge between "the study of religion" and "Christian theology," I find myself deeply uneasy with these particular battles and their presumptions. Yet, as I have been writing this essay (a task not itself without its own pain and difficulty), I have become freshly aware how obvious it was that I could be nothing but an irritant to the new regime of mandatory secularism (in the name of the "academic study of religion") that came in at Harvard under President Larry Summers and has continued on today. The students themselves were perplexed by these disjunctions, of course; many of them had come to Harvard, after all, precisely to train as scholar-ministers and to integrate a calling to the church with the highest endeavors in theological learning.

In the coming decade we may perhaps hope to see some resolution of these current theological impasses. I am full of such hope. In the meantime I can only rejoice that Cambridge has welcomed me home and provided the ideal environment for me to continue having my mind changed. I have to say that I do not find the ground any firmer than it ever was in this strange, enticing journey into God.