

How Katherine Sonderegger finds delight in a humble God

## Theology as a love letter to God

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [January 15, 2020](#) issue



Courtesy of Virginia Theological Seminary

Friends and former students of theologian Katherine Sonderegger combine affectionate diminutives and terms of great forcefulness when describing her. Erika Takacs calls her former teacher at Virginia Theological Seminary “a perfectly darling little leprechaun.” Fleming Rutledge, a fellow Episcopal priest, says Sonderegger is “almost like a nun in her total devotion to prayer and study,” with “the mind of a steel trap, but the manner of a somewhat shy, retiring, grandmotherly type.”

Former student Benson Shelton describes her as a “Yoda figure,” a professor who would turn up late to class because she’d stopped at a petting zoo or saw a perfect flowering bush. Yet Shelton also remembers how Sonderegger eviscerated a visiting theologian with whom she disagreed: “She might as well have cut his legs off and handed them to him.” Rutledge says she is not sure how to reconcile the darling saintliness and the daring, merciless mind: “She is a curious person.”

Margaret Adams Parker, an artist who collaborated with Sonderegger on the just published book *Praying the Stations of the Cross*, reconciles these disparate qualities by citing an observation by another former student, who called Sonderegger's systematic theology "a love letter to God." Sonderegger is tender about her subject—God—and fiercely protective when God is poorly described.

Many theologians dream of releasing a multivolume work but, burdened by the obligations of teaching, pastoring, or life, never get around to it. In divinity school I often heard tales of this or that scholar who was "greater than Barth" but "couldn't ever get it down on paper." Sonderegger, who taught at Bangor Theological Seminary and Middlebury College before arriving at VTS in 2002, had in mind writing a systematic theology from early in her career.

"I knew I wanted to write a systematics as early as graduate school," she said. "But I found it very difficult to discover the proper voice. . . . I continued to write—hundreds of pages of draft, but threw them away. They were not ready, I was not ready. It took this long for me to think and read enough, to pray enough, to even begin a task like this."

Sonderegger's PhD adviser at Brown University was Wendell Dietrich, who had studied with Hans Frei at Yale. Sonderegger praises Dietrich for giving her space to develop her own voice—one whose maturity the church is now enjoying. Her dissertation on Barth's view of Israel, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew: Karl Barth's "Doctrine of Israel,"* was published in 1992, and she produced weighty articles and lectures, but nothing prepared readers for *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Fortress, 2015; volume 2 is due out this spring). Luminaries from across the globe and the ecclesial spectrum lined up to offer praise.

The book reveals her intense focus on scripture, which began early in her life. In *Praying the Stations* she thanks preachers from her home Presbyterian church in Michigan, her chaplain at Smith College, and chaplains at Yale for showing her "the marks of strong biblical preaching." Those marks appear in her theological work as well.

Sonderegger joins a lively group of contemporary theologians (including Sarah Coakley and the late John Webster) who have attempted multivolume systematic treatments of the faith. Though the tenets of postmodernism may declare that theology in our time is necessarily piecemeal, ad hoc, and wary of grand

metanarratives, these systematic theologians remain confident. They are not unaware of the concern that theological systems can be hegemonic or oppressive, but they boldly proceed to proclamation. They have something to say.

What Sonderegger has to say is primarily this: God is one, and the one God is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. The radical affirmation of God's oneness is surprising, because Christian theologians for two generations have been so obsessed with describing the three persons of the Godhead that divine unity almost disappears. Whereas the Western Christian theological tradition typically began with the one God and only then moved to describing the Trinity, that order is now commonly reversed.

The modern emphasis on so-called social trinitarianism suggests that the triune God is a community, or a democracy—or any number of other things modern egalitarians can easily love. It then follows that our human communities should imitate the community that God is. In a common expansion of an ancient theological reference to the three persons of God as a *perichoresis*, from a Greek word that means “dancing around,” some theologians tell us that God is a dance and we should dance too. Theologians have also spent much time exploring how the immanent Trinity (who God eternally is) relates to the economic Trinity (what God does).

Sonderegger names such projections as idolatry. Not that there is no truth in them. She often stops and gives thanks for a false theological move before annihilating it. But the key thing to be said about God is that God is one, and this divine unicity undoes all human projections.

Sonderegger organizes volume 1 around theology's classic “omni” terms—omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience. This is yet another unpopular topic in contemporary theology. The omnis are often criticized as deriving from a pagan Greek view of God in which God is static—and that view collapses, so the argument goes, if one takes seriously God's incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth and God's choosing of Israel.

For Sonderegger, the omnis do not suggest an abstract deity, removed from human life. They describe the “almighty Lord of Horeb,” God with a name and an address, the One disclosed in the burning bush and the resurrection, who can only be truly known in prayer: “always, Divine Oneness is contemplated on bended knee.”

An opening section on divine omnipresence reveals Sonderegger's approach. It is at heart a scripturally attentive act of marveling at God: "God's Attributes are fundamentally diffusive, overspreading, lavish, and communicative in character," she writes. (Multiple capitalizations seem to be par for the course for a theologian who likes Plato.) The one God longs to be known—and this is not only a trinitarian statement (Trinity and Christology are the core topics for volume 2). It is a statement about the One God.

God's omnipresence is often hidden. In one of many Barth-like scriptural asides, she draws on 2 Kings 6, where Gehazi cannot see the army of the Lord Sabaoth, though Elisha can. God is usually pleased to be present but unseen. He is that humble. Christianity has made its contribution even to atheism as it has denounced idols and taught antireligious people how to tear down human projections of God. God also meets us in "waste places, jackal dens, the temples, the mangers, the leper colonies, the prisons and the tombs, where the Lord God is pleased to dwell." Sonderegger's focus on divine unicity also insists that God is supremely present, and supremely hidden, on the cross.

Sonderegger's key theological commitment is to what she calls divine "compatibilism." God and creatures do not compete over shared space. God can be present fully without displacing material creation. God can work in history without overriding human freedom. The key example for her is the burning bush of Horeb. Divine fire does not annihilate or destroy. It is modest, lowly, hidden to most eyes, appearing in a mere desert shrub. God is humble enough to be unseen.

Divine compatibilism is a common theme in other theologians, such as Coakley and Kathryn Tanner. It declares a noncompetitive relation between a genuinely transcendent God and creatures. The new note I detect in Sonderegger is the emphasis on God's joy in all this. The One God is pleased to be hidden, this is his "particular and glorious epiphany—to be the Unseen, Utterly Unique, Invisible One, hidden in the midst of his people."

Omnipotence would seem a harder divine attribute to sell. Theopassionism, the notion that God suffers, is "almost modern day dogma," she notes, acknowledging the influence of German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, best known for his book *The Crucified God*. But Moltmann must be wrong, Sonderegger argues—Christology cannot be the sole measure of divine omnipotence.

Sonderegger prefers the vision of onetime archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, who pictures divine self-emptying on the cross not as an abdication of power but as a different version of power, a “condescension inconceivably tender.” Sonderegger is blistering in her rejection of modernist objections to divine intervention in the world: there must be some divine agency at work in defeating Pharaoh and in Jesus on the cross, she says, or else there is nothing for human beings to bow down to.

Assertions of divine omnipotence often run aground on the shoals of theodicy. Why didn't God prevent this catastrophe? Sonderegger is not hesitant to reply: the biblical God is a judge who tastes his own death, who comes close to our suffering, who is *inside* the problem of pain. And this God really is life: “Dynamic Being flames out of every page of Holy Scripture.” God is present in our suffering. God *cannot* merely stand by. He commands: arise. Divine consolation promises that God has taken darkness for his own. He dwells there with us, granting life even there.

This section includes some of Sonderegger's boldest biblical interpretation. She considers how the story of Balaam's ass in the book of Numbers offers an assertion of divine attributes: “God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind” (Num. 23:19). Balaam is not an Israelite, therefore Balaam's oracles come from outside Israel. Yet the book of Numbers speaks of them as trustworthy words about God. In other words, it is a biblical thing to borrow words God gives us through outsiders.

Classical theism is not an alien construction of faith but deeply scriptural. Biblical tradition is always taking in “alien” traditions and making them its own: “the God so scorned as pagan and alien to the songs of Zion [is] yet present, alive, vivid within the Torah itself.”

So God is immutable, as Balaam declares. Yet God is also passionate, liberating slaves, sending prophets like Moses and Paul, who seek to take damnation on themselves so the people might be saved (Exod. 32:32 and Rom. 9:3). God's very nature is disposed to incarnation—God always stoops down and bends low. In a phrase reminiscent of St. Cyril of Alexandria, Sonderegger speaks of God's “immutable mutability.” God is always going to be for us. God couldn't not create, not for any external reason but because it's just God's nature to give life.

The concept of divine omniscience runs into this modern objection: If God foreknows what will happen, why doesn't God stop evil things from happening? Being a sort of

Calvinist and Barthian does incline one toward determinism, Sonderegger admits. But God doesn't just know things. God is knowledge itself, wisdom even, that leads all philosophers and theologians by the hand. Sonderegger acknowledges our discomfort with God's allowance of suffering, but she defers to a more ancient fear—that God knows our *sin*, not just our suffering. In response to sin, Christ *became* the damned. That's divine omniscience: to know hell. God knows human experience personally, "embedded in my sinews," dwelling among us without our knowing it. Yet God is not imprisoned there; God remains the Lord, the Living Subject. And God can grant us a sort of freedom despite being knowledge itself.

God, like Moses, can turn away and veil his eyes. God is no tyrant or crushing power in his knowledge. Divine knowledge is not a distancing knowledge. God "lays hold of blood rich flesh" to make us and then has an eternal readiness for embodiment. God is the Near One who is yet always beyond. And here is how humble God is: God appears to the prophets in awesome splendor, yet asks that the prophets' gaze be turned toward the needy neighbor and the stranger, whom we are commanded to love.

"Our Lord is that humble" is a common refrain in the book. God is known in "searing events"—the temple destroyed, the veil torn, the seer's vision. Yet the world is not destroyed but elevated at God's coming: "He is that lowly."

"'Method' is a fatal disease in dogmatics," Sonderegger writes, yet she does offer some methodological observations in the conclusion. There is no proper knowledge of God without the scar of love, she insists. Scripture wishes us to "pant" after God. It is not just a christological or creational observation that God is love. God is predisposed to love without even an object in mind to love. God is love without object, and so is gloriously free. The simple observation at the heart of her theology is that God is real, the fiery presence in earthen vessels such as us, who are not destroyed but ennobled by God's presence. All is God's own fiery presence, which does not destroy us but gifts us, turning us outward toward the neighbor in love.

Anyone who has read this far will have questions. For one thing, Sonderegger not only uses a lot of capitalizations, she also uses a lot of male pronouns. For mainline Protestants all the male pronouns for God are jarring. In a symposium in the *Anglican Theological Review*, Sonderegger (nondefensively) defended herself. The argument that language shapes reality has some truth to it, she wrote, but it is not altogether correct. The larger reality is that language itself is shaped by reality,

namely, the reality of God revealed in Christ, the terms of which she is not eager to revise. “In my wing of feminism, words do not oppress; people and states do.”

Sonderegger’s prose pulses with life. Taking away pronouns would be like taking colors away from a master painter’s palette. She is undoubtedly old school on this issue, but not retrograde: “That this world may become God’s Realm: this is the most radical demand that can be made in this sorry earth. Feminism, I say, belongs there, in this radical City of God.” Belongs there rather than in the relatively small-ball arguments over pronouns.

Another noteworthy feature is her reading of Israel’s scripture. It is hard to think of another contemporary Christian theologian who reads large chunks of the Torah or the prophets with such evident delight. I heard her give a paper that will form part of volume 2, and it was almost entirely a reading of Leviticus on the nature of sacrifice. Sonderegger has progressed far past scolding Christians for neglecting the Old Testament or hand-wringing about how the church can use Old Testament texts. She simply reads the text closely, and at length, and learns from what it says about God. Just as she sees God as the humble present one, who need not be noticed, she does not feel the need to see Jesus in every Old Testament text. God is like Jonathan, present, in friendship and selfless self-giving, requiring no recompense from David in turn. “Jonathan looks on David with love, without merit or preparation or initiative on his part. How much more the Lord of love.”

I’ll never again think of the themes of divine hiddenness or humility without her proclamations in my ears. Modern theologians have thundered against many of the notions Sonderegger quietly champions. A God who is unchanging, all-knowing, and all-powerful defies our understanding, experience, and categories. Sonderegger reasserts them, arguing—along with the overwhelming preponderance of the Christian tradition—that we must hold those doctrines because they reveal the God who is altogether love.

It is theologically appropriate that there is little to relate about Sonderegger’s personal life. She is transfixed by the One on whom she gazes. Vladimir Lossky described the Holy Spirit as the shy person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit keeps pointing us to Jesus. Sonderegger is in that sense a shy theologian: she leads us to staring anew at God.

Sonderegger's former student Takacs, now a parish priest in Chicago, tells of a readings course at VTS in which several women would go to Sonderegger's house for lunch. A theologian who studiously avoids references to her own life in her writings couldn't help but reveal some of her life in these lunchtime conversations. The students discovered, for one thing, that Sonderegger is an enthusiastic fan of the Green Bay Packers.

Sonderegger also told of an experience as an intern that has shaped her since. Her pastoral supervisor criticized her for making herself vulnerable to a homeless person by giving the man a ride in her car. Sonderegger appreciated the supervisor's concern but disagreed, asking, Aren't there more important things to a Christian imagination than staying alive? Like, say, being faithful?

"Kate never said 'here's how this doctrine will help you be a priest,'" Takacs recalled. "But in a way, everything she taught could have said that." The same could be said about her work of systematic theology.

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