Prayer as the “Lifeline of Theology”

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The thesis of this essay is that—before writing—theologians should get to know their subject matter. Prayer is the lifeline of theology, because God is the subject matter of theology and prayer is our way of being in the world with God. Developing this idea first with human family and partnership models brings out how multifaceted prayer is, and how it is a way of being in the world not only for individuals but for Christian communities. Applying these observations to the task of theology, the essay attempts to clarify the thesis by answering the charge that it makes theology perniciously subjective.

Canon Professors?

For a number of years, I was a canon professor of theology at Oxford. My job was two-sided: on the one hand, it carried the duties of academic research and teaching; on the other, it included the responsibilities of a residiency canon to preach and conduct services in Christ Church Cathedral. For centuries, canon professors were required to be ordained clergy of the Church of England. Some professorships have been decoupled from the canonries. Others have been laicized and adjustments have been made for the professor to fill the role of canon without being ordained. While I was there, secular dons were indignant that any professorships were still tied to canonries. They demanded to know why theology should be taught in the university at all. They took theology to be dogmatic and confessional. The fact that the jobs of key professors involved leading worship services reinforced this impression. What place do theology and canon professors have in liberal institutions such as contemporary universities have come to be?

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My (to them, unreassuring) counter-questions were these. First, don’t universities exist to study the nature of reality from as many angles as possible? God is the *ens realissimum*, Reality with a capital “R.” More than anything else, God—who God is, what God does, and how God loves—ought to be studied in the university in a disciplined way.

As for *canon* professors of theology, well, aren’t professors meant to *know* their subject? Even if theology as a discipline is a product of human culture, *God* is the subject of theology. Theology professors need to get to know their subject. It is not enough for professors of aesthetics to read about art and music in books. University departments would not dream of hiring people who did not know art or music *by acquaintance*. They would not even consider people whose *experience* had not brought them to a deep and subtle appreciation of a wide range of artistic and/or musical expression. Faculties would be right to conclude that—however vast their book-learning—such applicants did not really know what they were talking about. The same is true in theology. Professors of theology need to become acquainted with God, to get to “know the Lord” in the biblical sense. “Prayer is”—as George S. Hendry said—“the lifeline of theology” because it is the way all believers get to know God as constant friend and companion. Canon professors of theology are apt because it is their job to pray as much as it is to study and profess.

*Prayer as Lifestyle*

The older I get, the more I settle down to the conclusion that *prayer is simply a way of being in the world with God*. In its *formative rootedness*, it is something like the relation of a child to its parents or of an adult with her/his life partner. Babies are born bundles of potential. The loving personal presence of adults draws them out of the booming buzzing confusion of the infantile psyche into self-consciousness, through a process in which they come to recognize themselves and others as personal. Children learn how to be human by imitating the adults around them. When things go well, parents and teachers coach children toward becoming all that they can be, first fostering their merely human capacities and then nurturing their distinctive personal endowments. This long childrearing process involves years of inequality, but it aims at peer-adults with whom the parents hope they can still be friends.

Life partners share intimately, body, mind, and spirit. They shape each other’s routines of daily living, and usually become so habituated
to each other that values and preferences rub off on each other. In healthy matches, partners do not fuse (except episodically in moments of ecstasy). Each has an integrity of her/his own, and their personalities may be strikingly different from each other. Nevertheless, however similar or unlike, partners are “there” for each other for better for worse, spur each other to become all that they can be, and support each other’s creative adventures.

Experience shows, parents, children, and partners so root and entangle themselves that differentiation is difficult. Adolescence is bumpy, often borderline chaotic. Divorce—even when it is for the best—is a kind of death that rips us apart. “Breaking up” shatters one identity, even when it is in the interest of giving birth to another.

So also and all the more so with God. God is our omnipresent creator. Necessarily, nothing other than God could exist without God. Where God is not, nothing else could be. Necessarily, God is essentially involved in all our actions. God creates us with powers to act and be acted upon. But no one could do anything without divine cooperation. For infants, to be is to be in the world with their parents, even before they are conscious of anything and whether they are conscious of it or not. Likewise, for us creatures, to be is to be in the world with God, whether or not we know about God (as rocks and streams never will) and whether we like it or not! This is so, not because God is nosey or micro-managerial. It is a matter of metaphysical necessity. It is a function of what creatures are and what God is.

Prayer takes us beyond metaphysical necessity into personal connection. God is really present to and causally operative in rocks and rills that shine with divine glory. But unless they have souls with certain advanced capacities, they do not pray. Being in the world with God person-to-person is just as multifaceted as children’s growing up in their parents’ home and life partners’ sharing a household. Here below, togetherness sometimes takes the form of wordless presence (as with mother and child, or lovers staring into one another’s eyes) and carnal knowledge (as with a mother nursing her baby or the lover’s invasive and enfolding touch). Other times, the medium of exchange is articulate speech—from greetings and compliments to trading information (what needs to be fetched from the store, which parts of the house or car need repair), from vigorous debates and deliberative conversations and angry quarrels to make-up apologies. Still other times, life together takes the form of joint activities: digging the garden and planting the flowers, raking leaves and cleaning the gutters, hiking in the woods, throwing a party, organizing with others for
political action. Life together builds a history of shared memories that constitute the narrative of who we are.

Likewise, personal presence with God is not always felt as intimate any more than life partners in the midst of daily routines always experience one another the way they do in a tête-a-tête candlelight dinner or alone together in bed. Just as parents and life partners affect us at unconscious as well as conscious levels, so also we are everywhere and always unconsciously or consciously interacting with God. But just as parents look forward to the day when their child has grown up enough to have some independent initiative, enough to choose to share with them how the world looks from a child’s eye view, to trust them enough as significant others to share puzzlements and vulnerabilities, to want and value input from the parental side: so God aims for divine-human friendship in which there is finally enough to us psychologically and spiritually to take the initiative, consciously and deliberately to enter into reciprocity, to choose life together.

“Size-Gap” Complications

The “size-gap” between God and creatures makes person-to-person connection with God more challenging. As I like to say: God is very, very big, and we are very, very small. St. Anselm declares that in comparison with God, we are almost nothing. Julian of Norwich sees the whole world as a hazelnut, and explains that in comparison to God’s, even our most developed adult personal capacities cannot make us God’s peers. At best, God is the mother and we are the toddlers, more likely babes in arms. For all the analogies, the size-gap makes for at least two dramatic differences between the way we live together with parents or life partners and the manner of our being in the world with God.

The first concerns God’s relationship goal. Healthy parent-child relationships aim for such differentiation and development on the child’s side as will eventually allow parent and child to meet as peers, adult-to-adult. Life-partnerships thrive on equality, for all of the relating and entangling identities—on mutual respect for the other as a distinct human person. Friendship with God does not target the metaphysical impossibility of making us peers, but requires something different and equally radical. When the infant becomes self-conscious by differentiating herself from others, she is launched on the long course of development in which the “ego” acquires skills and successively tries on and discards different strategies for organizing the child’s
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personality and managing her interactions with the world. God’s call to friendship signals that the autonomous ego with adult competences is not the goal of that process. God’s design-plan for human beings indicates that a further transformation is needed for optimal functioning: one in which friendship with God becomes the functional core of who we are. God has created us for such intimate life together, such constant give-and-take, such common purpose and agreed strategy, that eventually—like Jesus in John’s Gospel—all that we do and say will be an expression of the love that we share. Just as infants cannot thrive without adult caretakers with whom they become temporarily psychologically entangled, so human adults cannot become all that we were meant to be without consciously and deliberately consenting to allow our adult selves to be restructured, to tangle us up with the divine life, so that our functional core is not a “solo” (the isolated ego) but a duet or—considering that God is a Trinity—a quartet.

The second points to an obstacle. Cradle-to-grave, we suffer from a perception disorder that usually keeps us from consciously experiencing the world as it really is: God-infested. God is omnipresent, and God is personal. But we have difficulty perceiving our surround as personal. We have trouble learning to read divine intentions or coming to recognize God’s hand at work in our lives. Even for many who believe that God exists, God is more like a theoretical entity posited to explain why there is something rather than nothing. So far as conscious experience is concerned, God seems at best someone known “by the hearing of the ear” second- or third-hand. My own hypothesis is that the size-gap explains divine hiddenness. Our cognitive and affective capacities have evolved to deal with the material world, and are already activated at some point in fetal development. By contrast, our capacity to perceive God is latent, and—in the material world in which we live—is awakened only with difficulty. If our being in the world with God is going to be anything like what God was hoping for, our perception disorder will have to be at least partially overcome.

Prayer Practices

Omnipresent Godhead is always working with us, nudging us, but—precisely because our perception disorder blindsides us to divine presence—we need to be taught by others how to pay attention and catch the cues. Churches exist, among other things, to be centers of religious re-formation, gymnasiums where trainers put us through exercises that correct our perception disorder, at least enabling us to work
around it, to recognize divine overtures and make friendly gestures in God’s direction. When we speak of taking up prayer practices, this corresponds to the ways in which infants and children work at learning how to recognize and reach out to other persons. Thus, we are taught as children to say our prayers. We have to learn from others distinctive prayer etiquettes: how polite to be and how to be polite; where and when candor is permitted and appropriate as well as just how much candor the relationship can stand. We memorize various rote prayers. We participate in corporate liturgies. We may also naturally fall into or be introduced into techniques of contemplative or centering prayer.

We call them disciplines and practices because, like infants and children, like partners and family members learning to nurture one another, we need to practice, to learn by doing. We learn how to relate to others by trying to relate to others. Like infants and children, we have to keep at it constantly—as St. Paul says, to “pray without ceasing.” The “sweet hour of prayer” celebrated by the evangelical hymn or (for Anglicans and Roman Catholics) saying the daily office begins as a necessary way of learning to reach out to God as personal, but continues as an accustomed part of the personal relationship, like hugs for children and partners, like quality time and real attention for those we love. The same goes for our whole repertoire of practices: wordless presence and articulate chatter; praying through scripture not only by chewing and swallowing but by questioning and disputing God’s Word; public worship with hymn singing and scripted prayers. Consciously and unconsciously, intentionally engaging in them opens us up to God’s presence. They become ways of being in the world with God, ways of knowing and being known by God, even when we aren’t wowed by visions, don’t hear voices, or can’t say that our hearts have been “strangely warmed.” As with children and life partners, just sitting together without any electric sense of connection is still part of what it is (in a good sense) to get used to each other. Even without special effects, especially through the boredom of routines, the sense of familiarity grows on us, the way Henry Higgins finds in My Fair Lady that he has become accustomed to Eliza’s face.

Caricature or Fair Likeness?

My portrait of prayer—as a way of being in the world with God—is a bit “Cubist” in trying to represent prayer from two angles at once: from the one side, I compare prayer with inter-active personal models;
from the other, I acknowledge that human personal capacities are utterly outclassed by the Divine. I have attempted to hold the two perspectives together under the rubric of lop-sided partnership. Others, while agreeing that spiritual maturity involves core-restructuring of personality, give greater weight to the size-gap in characterizing what such transformation involves. Some draw on Pauline soteriological language—that in conversion, the Christian is crucified with Christ, dies daily to ego-centered living, to the flesh with all of its desires—to characterize spiritual maturity in terms of the “annihilation” or “erasure” of the individual self. Others speak of “possession.” To be sure, they do not mean spirit-possession that takes over the individual’s body while shoving the individual’s own personal agency entirely aside. But they do see believers as belonging to God the way slaves or servants belong to their owners—a relationship in which the agency of the former is rightfully subordinated in obedience to the latter. Still others attempt to extend the reach of developmental psychology, by drawing on the mystical writers to chart the stages of spiritual development culminating in mystical union. Focusing on Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, they suggest that such transitions require—in relation to God—an unravelling of those adult competencies; that such transitions issue in pure passivity, embeddedness, and fusion, a mirror-image of reversing the child’s growth out of infantile fusion and embeddedness toward differentiation from its mother. None of these authors really thinks that spiritual exercises and prayer practices aim to reduce autonomous adults to infantile functioning or ciphers. The examples of Mahatma Gandhi, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the Dalai Lama would contradict any such analysis. But the images evoked by talk of “annihilation,” “possession,” and “subservience” intensify the polar opposite worry that intimacy across the size-gap is sure to set the human partner up for abuse.

Happily, Pauline soteriological language can be given a less ominous interpretation. It is easy to see dying and rising as built into human nature. Every developmental stage ends in a kind of death: we die to childhood and rise to adolescence; die to our teenage years and rise as young adults; die yuppies and rise middle-aged; die to our prime and rise into our seniority. Dying to ego-centered self-sufficiency does not have to mean annihilation. Rather, I suggest, like all of the other developmental transitions, it involves reorganization and re-centering. One rises not to an alien take-over, but into a partnership that promises the richest possible life. Likewise, moments of
mystical fusion convince us of our grounding in God, of the security of our relationship, and so put us back into the world with the courage and clarity that saints and heroes typically manifest.

Reading the Hebrew Bible with the hermeneutics of suspicion or even with the benefit of social anthropology, one has to admit that God seems at times to be modeled on abusive Bedouin husbands (compare YHWH’s threats about what he will do to his unfaithful wife). Certainly, in theophany call-stories, God appears demanding and insistent, confronting Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah with opportunities too bad not to refuse, yet refusing to take “no” for an answer. The call of God is irrevocable and—for Moses, Jesus, and the major prophets—in the end irresistible. But even the narratives hint that call-stories condense career-long struggles and heated conversations. The Synoptic Jesus wrestles for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. He wrestles again in Gethsemane. In Luke’s Gospel, his retreats into prayer are frequent. “You are my beloved Son” is not an explicit game-plan. Jesus struggles to discern the shape of his ministry, beginning, middle, and end. Likewise, the burning bush story plays out the challenge and riposte in which God overrides all of Moses’ objections. Yet, the wilderness narratives show how God persuades Moses by stages, by provoking him into actions the doing of which brought Moses closer to God’s point of view, until Moses was such a friend of God and so identified with God’s people that he put everything he had into mediating the relationship between them. The Bible catches Job and Jeremiah in the midst of bitter quarrels with God, conflicts in which both men show considerable chutzpah: Job, in charging God with betrayal of friendship; Jeremiah, with seduction by false promises. John’s Jesus calls the disciples friends, where a hallmark of friendship is two-sided communication. Jesus has taken them into his confidence and shared the divine agenda. In the future, disciples will be able to ask anything in Jesus’ name, to bring their points of view before the Father directly. Overall, if Bible story leaders are supposed to model being in the world with God, what they model is interaction in which their complaints and protests are heard, in which their preferences help shape the plan, and in which they grow into junior partners in a family business.

Holy Contagions

In the Holiness Code, purity is fragile and dirty is catching. A Holy God cannot dwell with an unholy people. Because God is allergic to sin-induced pollution, the holy of holies has to get its annual Yom Kippur cleaning, if Israel wants God to stay. The Synoptic
Gospels reverse the contagion: holiness is catching. Purity is more powerful than defilement. The touch of Jesus makes lepers and bleeding women clean. Partnership with God makes us, our souls and bodies, the temple of live-in Godhead. Prayer as cohabitation with God reshapes us toward holiness.

First, prayer corrects our sense of proportion. Constant trafficking across the size-gap eventually convinces us that God is infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Conscious and unconscious familiarity with live-in Godhead also impresses on us—to borrow Julian of Norwich’s phrase—“the littleness of creation.” Experiencing the bigness of Divine Goodness, the growing conviction that the bigness of the Goodness is on our side, robs created evils of their power to intimidate and created goods of their power to seduce. Prayer builds up courage to face, name, confront, and oppose evil, no matter what the consequences, even if those include breaking with forebears who taught us to pray in the first place. Prayer fosters clarity insofar as life together with God little by little weeds out compromising motives, brings us more and more to love God above all and for God’s own sake and our neighbors as ourselves.

Second, prayer awakens our spiritual senses. Consciously and unconsciously opening to God drops our defenses and makes us vulnerable to sympathetic vibration with God’s own passions: with divine delight in Truth and Beauty, with God’s hunger and thirst for joyful life together with all created persons, with God’s blessed rage for justice, with God’s apoplectic intolerance of human cruelty and degradation. Sharing God’s passions and allergies puts us in the world with heightened empathetic alertness, not only with eyes and ears but also with hearts to perceive both what God is doing in the world and how the powers of darkness are at work to subvert it. Prayer keeps compassion raw, making us vulnerable to recognize how bad things are by taking the feelings and experiences of suffering and degraded human beings into our own bodies. Moreover, there are feedback loops: our allergic reactions to the world as we know it propel us into praying with importunity, demanding God to show cause why God does not act, why we should not act to change the predicaments that God’s own allergies have made intolerable to us in the first place.

Theology as an Experimental Science

Like all academic disciplines, theology has a canon—scripture and tradition—to which theologians worth their salt must put themselves to school. Texts, historical developments, institutions, and their
pronouncements are studied with a variety of methods, a sufficient number of which any professional theologian must master. As with any field, the canon is essential, because it furnishes a grounding perspective. The methods of analysis and inquiry are the key to rigor. But theology is not an abstract science like mathematics. Theoretical theories have to meet the test of experience. They have to answer to the facts. Prayer is the lifeline of theology because it is how we get in touch with those facts. Prayer as a way of being in the world with God gives us our best experiential access to who God is, what God does, and how God loves. Unbelievers can learn lots of things about texts, institutions, and their histories. But in every age, constructive theology must be worked out in dialogue with lived religion, with what people of prayer—people who live in the world with God as their functional eternal life partner—take themselves to be learning about God. That is why constructive theologians need to be people of prayer, and why—in a place like Oxford—canon professors are just the thing!

Like prophets and preachers, constructive theologians are called to be participatory observers, where participation remains primary and observation is in the service of enriching shared life. Constructive theologians accept God’s invitation to turn their very selves into laboratories where God is at work, at once to participate in life together, and to step back to take a perspective, to attempt to articulate what is going on and what it reveals about who God is, what God does, and how God loves. They are not content to gather data from their own case. Rather, constructive theologians live together with other Christians in small groups as well as in larger congregations and ecclesial bodies. They engage with others who live in functional partnership with God and learn from their experience. Because God’s aims are social, the Spirit of God blows through prayerful assemblies to mold them into distinctive communities. Like prophets and preachers, theologians not only participate, but may be called to discern and make explicit “what the Spirit of God is saying to God’s people.”

This was Martin Luther’s modus operandi. Luther persistently prayed his own anxious struggle with his sense of sin and his terror of divine justice through the lens of scripture, until the Spirit of God figure-ground shifted his perspective: in relation to sinners, the justice of God works to justify, not to condemn. Fervent and candid prayer opened him up to God’s holiness, sensitized him to institutional corruption that perverted the gospel and held sinners hostage by putting God’s mercy up for sale. Luther articulated what he learned and
publicized what he saw. Acquaintance with the size-gap fueled his courage: “Here I stand. I can do no other!” Luther did not intend to launch the Protestant reformation with all of its theological and institutional experiments. But that was the fruit of Luther’s prayer—of his way of being in the world with God.

Incurably Subjective?

I can hear my erstwhile colleagues’ protest: “You have proved our point! Your view makes theology perniciously subjective. To qualify as a constructive theologian, an individual has to allow her/his subjectivity to be restructured, the better to perceive putative realities that are not cognitively accessible to everyone.” My first response is “tu quoque!” Every academic field requires investigators to submit to modifications of their subjectivity, insofar as every field requires professionals to have mastered its canon and to have acquired relevant methodological skills. Graduate schools exist to house and foster those transformations that put experts in a position to recognize and discover things that never entered the minds of hoi polloi. To be sure, in the hard sciences, such expertise is publicly available in the sense that many people have the native endowments that would enable them to acquire it if they took the trouble. There are, however, other fields where expertise goes beyond book-learning and methodological skills literally to require life experience that it would not be possible for just anyone to get. Universities would not and should not fill all of an African American Studies department with white professors, not merely out of political correctness, but for the good and sufficient reason that white professors do not bring lived experience of being African American in white America and so—to that extent—would not know (in the biblical sense) what they were talking about. When it comes to public accessibility, the subjective restructuring required for constructive theology lies somewhere in between.

Nevertheless, because the charge of subjectivity is difficult to dispel, let me be more explicit about what I do not mean to say. First, I am not imagining that doing theology is like naively conceived biblical inspiration, where the Holy Spirit whispers the right answers and the theologian or evangelist takes dictation. Like other academic fields, theology is a discipline with both canon and methods. Formulating and tackling theological problems involves real hard work on the theologians’ part as she tries to reconcile givens with experience.
in coherent formulations. As in other fields, repeated engagement of
the problem is interrupted with “aha” insights, which then must be
worked through and put to the tests that canon and method require.
We can see this process explicitly at work in Anselm’s *Proslogion*.

Second, *I am not suggesting that because constructive theologians
are people of prayer, what they say is infallible*. I am a liberal
“three-legged stool” Anglican, where the stool’s three legs are scripture,
tradition, and reason-experience. *Liberal* Anglicans are strongly
convinced of human fallibility. Moreover, since scripture and tradi-
tion record the human reception of what God is trying to say, script-
ture and tradition also participate in the fallibility of human cultural
products. Not only is what we hear bent by our individual distortions.
Scripture and tradition are culturally conditioned by the societies of
their human authors, and so bear the marks of the systemic evils (for
example, tribalism, racism, sexism, homophobia) which they spawn.
The deliverances of each and all are fallible, and so ripe for critique
with the most rigorous methods humanly available. Just as a three-
legged stool cannot stand on any one or pair of its legs, so all three—
scripture, tradition, and reason-experience—are necessary to stabilize
doctrine and practice. Likewise, the three-legged stool signifies that
the relation among scripture, tradition, and reason-experience is not
hierarchical. The three sources interact in formulating doctrine and
practice. No one or pair enjoys any *general* entitlement to trump the
other(s). Liberal Anglicans do not contend that “Scripture says so,
and that settles it!” or “Tradition has everywhere and always held
this, and that settles it!” Liberals cultivate an allergy to human degrada-
tion, and so would be more apt to say: “Reason-experience show
that this institution or practice or situation degrades human beings
made in God’s image. And that settles it!” But liberals do not take
their own experience to be infallible in general, and would therefore
recognize an obligation to listen “across the divide” to opposing oth-
ers. The liberal default is that none of scripture, tradition, and reason-
experience is infallible. On a given occasion, one or a pair may well
override the other(s).

Liberal three-legged stool Anglican that I am, *my contention that
prayer is the lifeline of theology is not intended to put theologians
above and beyond criticism from unbelievers*. Reason-experience is
one of the stool’s three legs. The Spirit blows where it wills, and theo-
logians should be teachable, open to hearing the truth whatever its
source. Theologians have an obligation to wrestle with challenges to
the rational coherence of their theories and arguments. Because Truth is one, theologians need to take notice when the findings of other disciplines seem to run counter to traditional beliefs (for example, evolution and the six-day creation story; findings of the historical-critical method regarding biblical texts). Likewise, because the Gospels show how the very entrenchment of religious convictions can blind believers to what is taking place before their eyes, theologians must be prepared to listen to the testimony of unbelievers’ experience (for example, to the holiness of life found in same-sex partnerships, to the cruelty of stoning a married woman because she was raped by her brother-in-law).

Third, in maintaining that prayer is the lifeline of theology, I am not contending that Christians alone are acquainted with deep spiritual truths. When we try to identify individuals who have left egocentric living behind, whose way of being in the world has a self-transcendent focus, not only Archbishop Tutu, but also Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama come to mind. The Spirit blows where it will and deploys many pedagogical maneuvers, starting points, and methods. Evidently it is not necessary to believe that God is personal to allow one’s personality to be restructured, to live in the world in a way that sees and acts from a perspective that transcends survival instincts to secure me and mine. Self-transcendent openness, however arrived at and with whichever of a variety of belief elements, exposes one to divine passions—to sympathetic vibration with divine delight in truth and beauty and God’s blessed rage for justice, to breaking out with God’s allergy to human degradation. Perhaps this is merely to acknowledge that—in my language—there are many paths of prayer, many ways of—wittingly and unwittingly—being in the world with God.