Marilyn McCord Adams: How a Theologian Works

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Philosophy in Theology?

Marilyn McCord Adams had just been appointed Horace Tracy Pitkin Professor of Historical Theology at Yale Divinity School in 1993. The work for which she was known was a two-volume study of William Ockham, the fourteenth-century nominalist philosopher. This work changed the way that philosophers understood Ockham's innovations. It would also change the way that theologians at Yale and beyond would regard the importance of philosophy for theology. Since the late nineteenth century, Protestant theologians had policed the boundary between philosophy and theology. "No metaphysics, no mysticism in theology," the German theologian Albrecht Ritschl had pronounced. For one hundred years, theologians insisted on protecting theology from philosophical danger. Theology's truths were based on revelation and scripture. Philosophy was based on human reason. Any encroachment by philosophy onto theological terrain called theology into question. Marilyn McCord Adams introduced medieval philosophy into Protestant theology. The results were transformative for her students and for the field.

When McCord Adams arrived at Yale, she had been recently ordained an Episcopal priest. Her office was at Seabury, the dormitory at YDS for female divinity students. It was in that context, as a graduate student in Yale's Department of Religious Studies, that I first got to know her. At our first meeting she told me that she had been lecturing

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on Luther and Calvin as part of the history of theology sequence. This sequence was innovative in Protestant theological education because it connected medieval theology to the early modern reformers in one course. McCord Adams showed me her copy of Dillenberger's anthology of Martin Luther's works, which included an excerpt of Luther's 1525 text, *De servo arbitrio* ("On the Unfree Will"). "Luther's philosophy," she said, "is incoherent. I don't appreciate this about Luther, but am willing to learn more about him." My research question at the time had been how to connect Luther to Ockham. Luther as a student at the University of Erfurt had been educated in the *via moderna*, or modern way of philosophy innovated by Ockham. Philip Melanchthon, Luther's colleague in Wittenberg, once reported that Luther could cite passages from Ockham verbatim. Luther scholars, however, particularly those trained in Germany, had taken Ritschl's prohibition against philosophy in theology at face value. According to German Luther scholars, Luther was to be regarded as a Protestant theologian who had vigorously resisted any philosophical tainting of Christian faith. Either simple faith in Christ or the slippery philosophical slope into false and dangerous teaching.

My perception of Luther changed through those tutorials with Professor McCord Adams. Seeing Luther through her eyes, the magisterial reformer was transformed into a late medieval Catholic theologian, who made constructive use of philosophical-theological categories to better understand the mysteries of Christian faith. Luther was a preacher of the word, yet he was also a theological dialectician. He had some of the deepest insights of any theologian in the history of Christianity into the divine mercy on the cross, yet was also remarkably sophisticated in his use of logic in trinitarian and christological syllogisms. Luther insisted that every doctor of theology continue to steep herself in the basic truths of faith and preoccupy herself with obeying the Ten Commandments; yet he was also a philosophical theologian who, in spite of some flamboyant rhetoric against Aristotle and sophistries, perceived with great acumen the necessity for adapting philosophical tools of language and metaphysics in order to make truth claims about the Trinity, the incarnation, and the real presence of Christ in the eucharist.

A new picture of a philosophically astute Luther emerged from those tutorials in Seabury Hall. From early modern antiphilosophical reformer Luther became a philosophically fascinating figure, one who stood in a long line of medieval theologians who made use of

philosophy to inquire into the truth of Christian doctrine. Luther's discussions of doctrine and Bible began to appear in a new light that illumined underlying philosophical commitments. Luther, like Ockham before him, appropriated and transformed inherited philosophical categories and logic. Sometimes Luther stretched them to the point of rupture, as only this remarkable reformer could, but did so by remaining true to medieval inheritances regarding the dialectical pursuit of truth, the recognition of authorities in this inquiry, and in negotiating philosophy to best suit the theological subject matter.

McCord Adams taught Protestant theologians that philosophy is an ally, not an enemy. Philosophy can help theologians make better arguments. Protestants trained in the continental-theological tradition of German Idealism can benefit from medieval doctrinal insights and paradigms. Anselm of Canterbury should be consulted alongside the seminary's required readings in Hegel and Moltmann. Theologians must be honest about the philosophical commitments they inadvertently smuggle into their theological work. Even if he could not admit it, Barth made use of philosophical resources from Hegel's metaphysics and Kierkegaard's existentialism. Philosophy has always been part of the theologian's métier. Why not reflect seriously on this inevitable connection?

Who Is Responsible?

Philosophy is the handmaiden, not enemy, of theology. This presupposition informed McCord Adams's theological work. While on the surface it could seem as if her scholarly interest was historical theology, her intention was to work out a generative theology for today. She focused her constructive theology on two themes that were Luther's as well: evil and the cross, or in other words, sin and grace. Her theological analysis of the world began where Luther's did too: the incapacity of free will to achieve its salvation.

Can free will explain evil? This question strikes at the heart of the "problem of evil" that has been a philosophical topic since Leibniz articulated it in the early eighteenth century. The question concerns how to reconcile God's will for maximal goodness in creation with the empirical dominance of evil. If God wills the good for creation, why does evil appear to have the upper hand?

Free will has been promoted in recent philosophical discussion. God created humans with free will to exercise in moral decision

making. Humans have the freedom to choose to obey the moral law, or not. Freedom is God's wonderful gift to human creatures. Free will sets humans apart from animals, distinguishing them from other created beings who do not have the freedom to choose the good. Humans are free to disobey the divine prohibition. If they do, they are accountable for this decision. Unfortunately, at their origins and in all successive generations of the human race, persons have chosen evil over the good. Given the divine respect for the created good of free will, God does not intervene to rescue humans from their bad choices. Yet God watches as humans struggle with the consequences of disobedience. Humans are guilty, and thus must endure punishment (*poena* in Latin) for sin. Punishment is both personal, as the bearing of the consequences of individual bad choices, and corporate, as the unleashing of evil in a broader social and environmental context. The term *horrendous evils* would become McCord Adams's phrase analyzing the human condition.

McCord Adams had experienced evil firsthand. As an ordained priest McCord Adams ministered to young people dying of AIDS: suddenly, alone, rejected. In Los Angeles in the 1980s, persons with AIDS were denounced by homophobic Christian preaching. McCord Adams discerned her ministry of advocacy on behalf of LGBTQ people there in L.A., a commitment that endured throughout her life.

Amid the dying, McCord Adams's critique of free will was born. How could individual free will explain the preponderance of evil in the world? She describes the evil in the world as inexplicable, cruel, and tragic, listing examples that are so "horrendous" that they exert a visceral shock when reading them: rape, torture, incest, death by starvation, and the Nazi death camps.[1] The focus of her concern is evil that destroys personhood; her interest lies with the individual. Evil works its way into the individual psyche so that a person no longer can regard his or her life as a good to him or her. While the philosophical argument here is more complex, the main point is that evil is not an abstract category that affects the masses, but it is deeply personal; it destroys the individual. McCord Adams is concerned with the cause—the fact that individuals who perpetuate evil on others cannot in most cases fathom the extent of suffering they inflict on others. She is also concerned with the effect—that the magnitude of suffering

[1] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 26–27.

in many cases exceeds the personal capacity to integrate the trauma into psychic coherence. Sometimes no meaning can be assigned to suffering.

If human free will cannot explain why horrendous evils exist, then who is responsible? When posed in this way, there is only one answer: the one who created this world, God. In the Christian theological tradition, a few theologians have dared to assign responsibility to God by arguing against free will. Luther, with his idea of double predestination, assigned responsibility of both damnation and salvation to the divine eternal will. Friedrich Schleiermacher too insisted on the claim that God is responsible for sin. While this runs the risk of misunderstanding God as capricious or cruel, this claim has a deeper theological point that McCord Adams makes clear for today. God does not watch as humans take their own lives in acts of desperation. Rather, the God who created a world in which horrendous evils exist is ultimately the one who must "make good" on creation. This argument is Anselm of Canterbury's, one of McCord Adams's beloved medievals, who claimed that God is obligated to see the divine project succeed. God is responsible for creating a world "such as this"; God who is greater than anything that can be conceived—another of Anselm's phrases—is the hope for individuals and world.

Who Can Save?

The problem of evil is much worse than what free will can explain. On this point McCord Adams is part of a chorus of theologians who insist that free will is too thin a reed to bear responsibility for personal blessedness, let alone the world's. Luther too contested free will's capacity to make a decision about eternal destiny. If the soul is made for eternity, then its salvation is ultimately God's business.

A major building block in McCord Adams's account of salvation is philosophical. The question "how can God save?" presupposes the question, "what does God save?" Her response is to explain the metaphysical structure of reality, specifically human reality. The "stuff" of which humans are made is the same "stuff" that God saves. The relation between matter and spirit makes up the structure of reality. The human condition is a function of this relation. In this regard McCord Adams reveals her commitment to an ancient philosophical account about the relation between soul and body that informs medieval theology. The Greek philosopher Aristotle thought that the soul informs

matter, or in other words, souls exist as embodied individuals. Precisely this relation between soul and body is "non-optimal," as McCord Adams claims.[2] Humans are vulnerable to horrors because soul and body are joined in an unstable relation. This instability is best illustrated in psychological terms. Healthy psychological development requires specific steps, from a mother's nurturing love to social relations that convey the mutual recognition necessary for the healthy integration of life events into a unified consciousness. Yet life events are not optimally engineered for psychic well-being. Families and societies inflict trauma on individuals that disrupt and harm development. When evil becomes too much for integration, then psychic collapse ensues.

What is set up as the human condition is what God has to do something about. McCord Adams constructs a specific theological order to a theology of salvation: first the job description, then the one who fits the job description. If human vulnerability to horrors is a function of the mismatch between body and soul, then the divine promise of salvation requires a person, uniting body and soul, in a way that both succumbs to the human condition and reconstitutes it in a new way. Medieval theology inspires McCord Adams's commitment to a particular Christology. Christ is the one who bridges both sides of the divide, spirit and matter, divinity and humanity. Christ is composed of two natures, divine and human, that are fitted together into one person. McCord Adams uses historical sources in her constructive theological ideas about Christ's person as participating in the mismatch between soul and body and reorienting it. The reorientation occurs by virtue of divinity working in the person of Christ. God in Christ orders body and soul in such a way as to heal and save, and finally to overcome horrors forever in the life to come.

There are three stages of what McCord Adams calls "horror defeat" by Christ. The first stage is the incarnation, God's personal way of uniting the divine self to humanity in Jesus. McCord Adams is committed to historical reality here, attested in the Bible and subject of Christian preaching. The second stage is the way in which Christ becomes present to individuals in order to reshape individual personhood. The goal is psychic harmony between body and soul and integration of life events into a coherent consciousness. McCord

[2] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

Adams insists that Christ's real presence has this contagious effect. Communicating Christ's presence is the task of the church. Through its ministry of the care of souls and distribution of the body of Christ for eating, the church makes Christ present. The third stage of horror defeat is eschatological. In the new creation, there will be no tears.

McCord Adams directs her theological attention to the individual and God who in Christ follows the human path of embodiment's susceptibility to horrors. With this interest in the individual, she takes up Luther's insistence that the gospel is intensely personal. The gift of Christ is *pro te*, for you. Both the created reality of the individual and the christological claim about the person of Christ have to do with the concern for the individual. Here McCord Adams turns the individual into a bearer of a theological truth. The individual is "infinitely valuable" in both a created and a redemptive sense. Christ's defeat of horrors begins with the cross. It ends with the redemption of all of creation.

The constructive theology that McCord Adams articulates is remarkably in line with Luther's. Luther maximizes sin in order to maximize grace. When theological description takes human and cosmic lostness seriously, then there is only one who can take up the challenge to save. McCord Adams, like Luther, looks squarely at the reality of the human condition, and dares to believe that God is greater and more generous, capacious, merciful, and just than can be conceived. The God who is responsible will do what it takes to realize the final cause of goodness for all. The creation project will succeed because God has underwritten it with the divine life.

How Do Theologians Work?

Academic work requires a subject matter. A subject becomes an object of study when it is measured, categorized, and interpreted. Whether a chemical reaction or a text, a subject becomes an object to be investigated. Content has to do with what is studied. How content is approached is the question of knowledge. Academic inquiry has to do with both aspects, subject matter and form. How one comes to know something about an object of inquiry is related to the question of what is actually studied.

Of all the disciplines in the academic universe (university!), theology in the contemporary era poses a distinctive challenge. Theology's subject matter is God; the Greek terms, *theos*, for God, and *logos* for

rationality, make up the word *theology*. The resulting term *theology*, the study of God, expresses both content and approach: God is the content of this academic discipline, and rational inquiry is the way in which God is rendered as subject of study.

This minimal circumscription of theology, however, is merely the beginning of a centuries-long discussion regarding the special nature of theology in view of its distinctive subject matter. God cannot be studied as an object alongside other finite objects. God is the *ens realissimum*, the most real being, the ground and creator of beings. As creator of all that exists, God transcends human categorization. How then can God be studied?

McCord Adams insists on theology as a necessary discipline in the contemporary university. If the different disciplines in the university are designed to study the realities that make up the world, then theology must take up its rightful place among the disciplines. God as most real being must be studied in relation to the other realities, material and spiritual, that make up the world. The metaphysical question regarding what kind of being God has is one that philosophers can ask. Even if philosophy has its location in a secular institution, such as the departments McCord Adams taught in throughout her career, including UCLA, the University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill, and Rutgers University, this discipline cannot bracket the study of God. The history of Western philosophy is inextricably interwoven with metaphysical and theological questions about the ground of being. The hermeneutical question regarding God concerns the biblical and textual study that is part of a theological curriculum. Words have referents; stories are about characters. The Bible is about God in relation to particular characters who have warts and character flaws. God too has character development along plot lines. The diversity of texts might not add up to a completely coherent view; in fact diversity of texts is a bonus—more material for different preaching. Yet these texts refer in partial and fragmentary ways to a reality that exists outside the text. Their study requires hermeneutics, the application of historical, grammatical, and literary tools to better understand how divine reality enters the world and people's lives.

Philosophical analysis and hermeneutical study are necessary to theology, even more so if theology is to be taken seriously as an academic discipline in the contemporary university. Theology was the "queen of the sciences" in the Middle Ages. Today, however, theology's

academic legitimacy is contested. Suspicions abound regarding theology's alleged confessional tainting of knowledge, its universalizing of Christian categories for the study of religion, and its emphasis on faith that precludes intellectual integrity. Academic theologians today are united in their efforts to clarify the academic commitments of their discipline. As one of the oldest fields of study in the West, having informed education in the West for almost a millennium, theology is currently on the defensive. Arguments on behalf of theology's legitimacy insist on its academic responsibility to adhere to standards befitting all disciplines in the university. Intellectual rigor, historical awareness, and argumentative clarity are the rules that theologians, just like any academic, assent to following.

Yet theologians cannot be restricted by these rules, particularly if the rules have become metaphysically narrow-minded and methodologically flat. McCord Adams was never satisfied with a defensive posture. Rather, theology today can contribute a unique perspective to academic study because it has God as its subject matter. While defense of theology's legitimacy is important, arguments for theology's contributions to the academy are perhaps even more so. Human reason has specific modes of analysis and reflection. Yet McCord Adams insists that epistemological tools are too limited, in her words "too small," to approach the God who is infinitely bigger than what a puny and finite mind can conceive. Not only are academic theologians committed to the intellectual rigor prescribed by participation in the university, but they can offer new ways of appreciating and approaching aspects of reality that are occluded or even prohibited by academic methodologies taken as consensus. Her work on eleventh-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury is an example of this position. The proof for God's existence that Anselm provides in his *Proslogion* is not merely an exercise in human reason. This proof requires support, that of prayer. Anselm begins his argument with a prayer addressed to the subject outside of human reason. Prayer is the first step in theological method. One cannot speak about God in the third person without first being in communication with God. First-to-second-person speech is integral to theological method. A human person cannot say anything about God without divine assistance. The study of God presupposes an invitation that God first draw near.

In an essay on prayer published in the *Anglican Theological Review* in 2016, McCord Adams reflects on prayer as necessary to

theological method.[3] She knows that theology's presence in the secular academy is contested. Yet theology, like other academic disciplines, presupposes subjective acknowledgment that one's subject matter is worthy of study. Yet theology is unlike other disciplines because its subject matter outclasses all other objects; theologians inquire into divinity, the cause and source of all that exists. Because this research subject transcends the human capacity to know, it requires a special approach. Mind and soul must be attuned by a distinctive subjective disposition to this particular reality. Prayer is this approach.

The *discipline* of theology requires the *discipline* of prayer. Third-person discourse about God presupposes first-to-second-person speech that constitutes a relation. McCord Adams notes the relational dimension of prayer. Prayer sets person and community into relation with a God whose companionship never fails, a relationship that goes through bumps and crises and questioning, and a connection that effects change in the personality of the one praying. Theological method includes a salvific dimension. As the person who prays grows and develops in relation to the ground and goal of her being, she experiences the effects of the God who draws near in prayer. God's presence in prayer is the promise of holding together individual fragmented and disjointed parts and knitting them together as the unfolding of the divine plan for the soul's harmony. Prayer expands a common academic notion that objective study of one's subject matter precludes experience of it. With prayer, relationship is part of the method. Theologians speak and write about their subject matter because they are already wrestling with and grasping ideas in the life of prayer.

A theologian is a "participant observer," to use anthropologist Clifford Geertz's term. Theology is constructed from a life with God. Theologians, McCord Adams writes, "accept God's invitation to turn their very selves into laboratories where God is at work."[4] Theology is also observation. Theologians are aware that a life with God has informed the perspectives of theologians in the past. Anselm's ontological proof for God's existence cannot be understood without taking his prayer into account as constitutive of his claims. An adequate hermeneutic is sensitive to strategies that theologians in the past have used

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[3] Marilyn McCord Adams, "Prayer as the 'Lifeline of Theology,'" *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 2 (Spring, 2016): 271–283.

[4] McCord Adams, "Prayer," 280.

to approach their subject matter. Their ideas cannot be abstracted from their religious practices, lives, and historical communities. In this regard, the theological insight on being a "participant observer" can contribute an imaginative perspective to discussions of method in the university. Philosophers have for some time paid attention to the inevitable subjective shaping of research. While Kant developed a modern epistemology based on the categories for perceiving the world of appearances, contemporary feminist philosophers insist that bias, ideology, experience, and culture play significant roles in how a subject matter is viewed and studied. Participant observers are asked to be aware of their subjective positions, while leaving open theoretical spaces for observation and analysis. As scholars continue to reflect on their epistemologies, they should be inspired by theologians, who have been honest about their participative observations for centuries.

Theological practices are necessary for the life of a theologian. Theology's content demands this. McCord Adams takes God seriously as theology's subject, the divine promise of wholeness in a world characterized by fragments, including those in the theologian's own soul. Doctrinal themes of evil and grace, cross and redemption emerge from one's existence. The theologian's existence attests to doctrine's truth about sin and evil. Brokenness as the result of acts by others, the incapacity to hear and respond, and one's own inability to be attuned to divine presence are entanglements of the human created condition. Proximity to the holy, as McCord Adams insists, heals, integrates, and facilitates attunement. Salvation begins in the soul, the result of divine presence communicated in the church. Feeding on the body of Christ, hearing the gospel, and praying for peace are ways the society of Christians shares the light of the gospel that edifies the soul. McCord Adams was particularly fascinated by the doctrine of the real presence of Christ. Her monograph on the metaphysics of the eucharist attests to the intellectual wrestling with the philosophical commitments attuned to make sense of the redemptive effects of body and blood in bread and wine.[5] Holiness is catching; redemption is contagious. Getting as close to the real thing as possible, even by taking it up into one's own digestive system, is a theological practice that sustains body, soul, and mind.

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[5] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories of the Eucharist: Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Duns Scotus, and William Ockham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

How Is Theology Constructed?

The theological project preoccupying Marilyn McCord Adams was to build stronger connections between academic and ecclesial institutions. She was aware of the challenges of academic legitimacy facing theology in secular institutions. She was committed to the idea that Christian divinity schools needed to improve their intellectual game in order to be taken seriously in the university. She knew that the churches need robust theologies in order to communicate the gospel with intellectual and spiritual integrity as well as to make just church-political decisions.

As she worked to connect philosophy and theology, academy and church, McCord Adams's theological aim was constructive. She based her constructive theology on the central Christian doctrines of sin and grace, focusing them on the contemporary reality of horrendous evils and the theological reality of Christ's work in overcoming them. Her theological focus was on God, whose act of creating material reality obliges God to guarantee its success. Humans can catch glimpses of divinity carrying out this plan by participation in prayer and the eucharist. They can participate in the ongoing wrestling with God for answers by seeking to formulate better questions. Her constructive theology attests to these commitments, seeking and questioning, articulating and preaching, all the while holding onto the hope that God will make good on all that God has made.