

‘How My Mind has Changed: From Rational Proofs to Dark Testing’

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There is a sense in which my mind has only changed once in the course of my career as a theologian. The trouble is that this one change, once instigated, was so dramatic and transformative as to sweep everything else uncomfortably in its train. Like a subterranean explosion, the intellectual fall-out from it was initially difficult to trace to its source. It took long years to assimilate. But as I now see it, any subsequent theological changes must be seen as the direct or indirect result of this first one; and the problem is that there is no end in sight to these subsequent changes, not even, perhaps, in death. This is simply because the ‘foundations’ are no longer mine to build or control. Probably that is why I have found it so difficult even to begin to write this article.

But I must try and explain. 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, *all the way down*. What started as an adventure in personal prayer that drew me in much faster and more disconcertingly than I was ready for, has ended in a programme 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 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 analysed 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’).¹ And if one’s theology is *in via*, then there is no horizon that does not potentially involve ever further personal change.

But let me attend closely to my *Christian Century* brief. I am required to explain ‘How my mind has changed’, and to do so with special attention to the last decade or so. I am also asked to reflect on what political, religious and societal factors in those years may have formed the crucial background to these changes of mind, and how too my own disappointments, difficulties and political struggles have been implicated. This is not, in other words, an invitation to tell you about my books, my supposed academic ‘achievements’, or even any possibly innovative ideas I might have had. Instead I’m going to speak first of a certain trail of spiritual *débris* which took me somewhere I neither intended, nor wanted, to go. Unfortunately this means slightly breaking the *Christian Century* rules and probing back, first, well behind the last decade. But on the other hand it has only been in the last decade that I have been fully able to see what this all 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 foul 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 trans-Atlantic one, however, for I now teach once

¹ This is a key theme in the opening methodological sections of my forthcoming systematic theology.

more 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 backcloth of the time was crucial for how I responded to the initial crisis of prayer, as I shall try to indicate. But I must attempt first to speak honestly of that original ‘subterranean explosion’ of prayer. This will not be easy.

‘Dark Testing’ Before God: The Prayer of Silence

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 and pars.), 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 in retrospect I am sure they were exactly what was needed at the time), it was in my mid-20s 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 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 inducted into some important framework ideas from Vedanta; or else I could seek to bring whatever was happening to me into some sort of alliance with my existing 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 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 pre-modern 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 classic tradition sweated painfully out of the exigencies of a 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, however, was an extraordinary sense of spiritual and epistemic *expansion*: of being taken by the hand into a new world of glorious technicolour, in which all one’s desires were newly magnetized towards 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 out of the depths with all the force of that which the White Man cannot bear to see.² I was myself now on the margins, seeing things all a-slant. And thus 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 both 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 at the time, 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,

² This connection between Enlightenment epistemological issues and the modern question of ‘race’ only really became clear to me when I was doing prison chaplaincy work in a jail in Boston during my priestly formation: see my ‘Jail Break: Meditation as Subversive Activity’, *The Christian Century*, June 29 2004, 18-21.

with a doctorate on Ernst Troeltsch's christology ('You could write *that* on a postage stamp', remarked my Cambridge teacher in systematics, Stephen Sykes, sceptically; and 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 unconsciously than consciously, I suspect – was that of classic British 'foundationalism'.³ 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 as a young scholar. What I had thought was just a nasty set of 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 process to ordination. Three particular shifts can perhaps form my focus in this article. Of course, they did not go on without impact from the surrounding intellectual and political circumstances of the North America of 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

³ 'Foundationalism' is the philosophical doctrine that all claims to truth, to be treated as legitimate, must be 'founded' in certain basic, unassailable truths which all thinking subjects have in common (e.g., those which are direct to the senses, self-evident, or logically irrefutable).

‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’. But they seemingly fitted neither of these parties with any ease – as I must now explain.

1. *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 is 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 such interaction? Should one be surprised if the effect is literally dizzying? It took me a long while to come to terms with this fundamental problem and its implications.

Not only was this shift into practised 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 in 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’ *at once*.) It took me a while to work out that there is a seriously false dichotomy 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 speech 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 – re-entering 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 one could possibly engage in – not only buzzing with communication, but positively crowded with angels and saints, the living and the dead.

2. Sex, bodiliness and the mystery of desire

And that 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 re-ordering of desire that this prayer engendered. Anyone who has spent more than a short time on their knees in silence will know of this 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 Her sleeve to ensure that ‘ourselves, our souls and bodies’ is what we present to God, and not some pious disembodied version of such. Our capacity as Christians to try and 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.

There are huge difficulties here to be confronted, 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 post-modern gender theory has created some real points of contact in my recent theology, but also revealed deep differences of fundamental approach. What is at stake from my perspective is not so much the overturning of societal gender stereotypes *à la* Judith Butler (though the courage engendered by prayer tends to lead there quite naturally: no problem!), 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 then underlyingly there 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 contemporary 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 (*the* church issues of our age), it will perhaps be possible to see this set of ructions not as the last prurient gasp of reactionary forces, but a more general crisis of what may be called the whole ‘economy of desire’. There is an erotic maturity here which is palpably lacking in our supposedly civilized world, and which 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 thought 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 ‘bi-sexuality’

might fall into the background as contemporary distractions from this more urgent task. Any quest for integrity, truth and honesty will be suppressed here at self-defeating cost.

3. *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 focussed. 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 ploughing 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 Dilthey so presciently spoke, and with which philosophers such as MacIntyre and Taylor (and, in his different way, Plantinga) have of course struggled afresh of late with great sophistication.

My own response to this philosophical and theological crisis is one that seeks to analyse the 'dark testing' of contemplation as precisely an *epistemological* challenge. In other words, I continue to reject another false modern disjunction – this time 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 programme, 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 acknowledgement of the powerful ways in which what we prefer *not* to see dangerously affects what we *can* see. Clearly this has implications well beyond the theological camp: ‘science’ itself is not immune. You could call this project a form of ‘non-foundationalism’, but not quite of the usual sort. This is where my thought is heading in the coming years – if life and energy endure.

Conclusions

In this short article I have attempted to explain how a practice which I first took up as a young theologian in my early 20s 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

last decade, and against the backcloth of increasingly sharp tensions between post-liberal, neo-conservative, 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 – in this climate - I could be nothing but an irritant to the new régime 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 endeavours 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. And 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’.

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