

## Commentary on *God Sexuality and the Self*

by Viktor Aldrin on November 16, 2015

PRAYER IS ONE OF the most fascinating things to research within theology, constituting the very core of Christianity as practiced regularly by worshippers. It exists and is being practiced everywhere.<sup>1</sup> Still, the complexity of analysing prayer beyond the formalised prayers written in prayer books or books on prayer makes it difficult to study. In fact, most prayers said will never be studied, since these were said in utter privacy to God. This does, however, not render research on prayer impossible, only quite uncommon. Sarah Coakley's book *God, Sexuality and the Self*<sup>2</sup> is one of these all too rare studies where prayer is in focus from a theological perspective.<sup>3</sup>

Coakley writes in her book that her main perspective in the book is that of prayer, especially contemplative, mystical, prayer of desire (52). This is what first made me interested in her book, but with the study of prayer comes a long line of methodological issues that needs to be solved. In my mind, the first and major issue with this study, is whether or not it is possible to establish that prayer exists in terms of a mutual communication. In the age of normative secularism, this problem has raised concerns about the study of prayer from a believer's perspective.<sup>4</sup> If a mutual communication can be identified in prayer, it implies that both the sender (the human being) and the recipient (the divine) exist. In my own previous research on prayer I solved the problem by only examining the sender's part of prayer and not of the receiver, through a hermeneutic approach.<sup>5</sup> What Coakley does is much bolder—not only to examine both sender and recipient, but also to construct a theoretical standpoint in which the study of prayer cannot be undertaken unless the researcher actually knows what it is to pray (15–20, especially p. 16). This implies that Coakley has personal self-experiences of prayer. From a confessional perspective, this conclusion is, most certainly, obvious, but from an academic perspective (living in one of the world's most secularised countries, Sweden) the conclusion turns the table upside down (or in fact, turns it right again from its previous position upside down). God exists as recipient, at least from a believer's perspective, and it is from this perspective that Coakley writes her own, academic book (1–32).

If the previous statement, that of combining the confessional and academic approaches, would not have existed in the book, I would describe Coakley's main method of study as an ethnomethodological inspired attempt at constructing God through the praying person's talk of God in her prayer.<sup>6</sup> In ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (which derives from phenomenology), the talking is being analysed, and from it, a portrait is constructed where the subject of study constructs his or her reality.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the reality is constructed out of subjective perceptions, and it is these perceptions that are to be analysed and not the ontology. The person experiencing God can therefore be analysed, regardless of whether or not the experience actually occurred in terms of reality. Even this, slightly narrower, ethnomethodological approach, would be a fresh attempt at describing God through prayer. Yet, Coakley's ambition of establishing a mutual conversation between God and the human being brings the traditional ethnomethodology/phenomenology into a new light. This light is, in the author's terminology, described as the existence of God, and that God replies in prayer (16). I am, however, not convinced by her argumentation, if this bold attitude to research on prayer is fruitful for secular understandings of what academic theological research since it excludes so many ways of studying prayer (such as comparative prayer interreligious analysis and also the examination of prayers not possible to say unless the praying person has personal experiences of the situation, such as rape or the death of a child) and thereby excludes the unbeliever from participation. Still, in a post-secular age, it is perhaps time for a new approach to scholarly research where ontological approaches can be as valid as any secular constructional approach to theological and religious studies. If so, Coakley's fundamental approach to prayer, that of a participant's believing perspective, may constitute a new

wave of bold theological studies that disregard secular understandings of what can be made. This brings theology back to the believing theologians. The question is: should it be so?

The focus of Coakley's book is on God as the recipient of prayer, but she writes only vaguely regarding the praying person. It is true, that the author studies contemplative prayer, especially mystical contemplative prayer, and that the mental and physical desire of the praying person is described and analysed (2–11). Still, the praying person is, in my perspective, regarded almost as unchanging as God in terms of prayer practices. It is God who is in focus and the emotions of the praying person, but little is said on the cultural historical changes of emotions and that of the establishing of prayer practices. Coakley does not write about the ways in which Christians have prayed and changed through the two thousand years of Christianity, or at least in the first four centuries that are in particular focus in her book. Because of these changes, it is a risky business to take a single approach to what constitutes prayer and use that to examine prayer in the distant past and different geographical and social contexts. The author does, however, identify changes in prayer practices, such as the rise and decline of prayer to the Holy Spirit (100–151), but little is said of the cultural context of these changes. If prayer is about communication with the divine, this communication (at least on the human part) is shaped by many things, as all human communication is. It is true, that two persons frequently communicating inspire each other and mimic the other. In terms of prayer, this is at least considered for the human part of the prayer that, in Christian theology, is said to be influenced by God's existence in prayer (cf. *Imitatio Christi*). But still, the praying person uses his or her own communicative knowledge in prayer. Prayer can be understood as a practice, and if such, it is bound by the ways practices are established and maintained.<sup>8</sup> For example, practice can, according to studies on practice cultures, be understood as a composition of "sayings," "doings," and "relatings" that prefigure the practice before the practitioners themselves can act.<sup>9</sup> In terms of prayer, sayings would be the words, thoughts, and emotions uttered; doings are the ways in which the prayer is performed; whereas the relatings are the social aspects in which the praying person takes part. The concept of prayer was not invented, but born into by the praying individuals and reconfigured by them being praying practitioners. All of these aspects on prayer change and are contextual, implying that the practice of prayer is far more contextually bound than Coakley seems to take into consideration. Prayer practices differ not only over time but geographically and socially.<sup>10</sup> For example, in the Middle Ages, prayer practices differed greatly between different social groups and also geographically, but do show similarities to contemporary ways of praying among Christians.<sup>11</sup> What looks like similar prayer gestures or expressions of emotions during prayer is saturated with the understanding of how society is constituted and the understanding of "good" conversational manners.<sup>12</sup> In this perspective, prayer says much about the recipient, but even more about the sender. Even mystical prayer experiences are bound by these practices, since a person experiencing God needs to decide what is happening and how to interpret it. It is true, that many mystics have difficulties with explaining the mystical encounter with God; still they try, and they do so in a culturally bound language with practices of how a relation between God and a human being can be made. Even a protest against these constitutions is most often within these boundaries. I am, of course, aware that the author's ambition is not to write a book on the practices of prayer though her main source of information is prayer. But practices of prayer have a major impact on the material for any study on prayer, resulting in a more contextually bound study than she implies (19). A fruitful way to solve this dilemma of culturally bound prayer practices regarding contemplative mystical prayer could be to identify a particular mystical prayer practice that the mystic becomes part of through his or her experience. Still, this mystical practice can also be understood as culturally bound since human beings exist in a temporal world socialised into being the adult persons they are. Reading about other similar mystical experiences shapes the ways in which a mystical experience is described to others. What is beyond the preserved written texts (or pictures) of these mystics is not available for analysis since there are no words (or pictures) describing it.

If prayer is analysed without these cultural, geographical, and socially diversified practices, much of what is actually performed in prayer is, in my perspective, lost. What then can be said of God through the perspective of prayer? Coakley does investigate the cultural implications of prayer practices in her book, albeit in my perspective far too seldom, although she states in her *théologie totale* that she

intends to do so (33–65). What could have emerged was a far more diverse study of God, sexuality, and the self, but even as it is, it brings a fresh perspective to theology, putting prayer yet again at the core of Christianity.

Having read and responded to Coakley's book, a passage in her book (19) reminded me of a Bible quote from the book of Job (albeit not referred to in her book), that could act as a concluding reflection on prayer and the beholding of God: "Even after my skin has been destroyed, clothed in my flesh I will see God, whom I will see for myself. My own eyes will look at him there won't be anyone else for me! He is the culmination of my innermost desire (Job 19:26–27, ISV).

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## Prayer: A Theological Defense

by Sarah Coakley on November 16, 2015

Viktor Aldrin's review is perhaps the one in this collection where I feel most at odds with the reviewer's own methodological presumptions, since I think he clearly wants me to be writing, as he himself has done (and I may say very illuminatingly), in a genre *other than* "systematic theology." Thus it is obvious even from his opening comments that he is highly suspicious of any such endeavour as "systematic theology" in an age of "normative secularism," and can only construe "God" as a human "construction." The rhetoric is depressingly familiar to me: only the (supposedly) dispassionate and phenomenological account of the study of religion is properly "academic"; everything theological is by contrast merely "confessional" and—by implication—substandard intellectually. I cannot answer this (note, entirely dogmatically-asserted) charge at any length here, although I have done so in other writings. Suffice it to say that we are clearly at cross purposes. *GSS* is intended from the outset as a work of normative theology of a particular sort (that of *théologie totale*); it is not an apologetic *prolegomenon* in the form of an argument for the existence of God *ab initio* (although this is a *philosophical* task that I have also attempted elsewhere). Nor does it wish to partake of, indeed it deliberately eschews, that unattractive form of the academic "culture wars" between the "study of religion" and "systematic theology" that Aldrin immediately assumes is at stake. Indeed, if he had troubled to read on in somewhat less reactive a mode, he would have seen that I precisely refuse this disjunction: "theology" always stands to learn from the *methods* of the social sciences and the "study of religion," but not by capitulating to a false chimera of nonnormativity in the latter! And nothing could be more normative than Aldrin's highly normative review! For him, prayer is by definition a human, socially-constructed activity and should only be studied historically, phenomenologically, and cross-culturally—as he himself does it. All I can say in response to this is that I have no objections whatever to prayer being studied as a merely human endeavour in the context of the "study of religion," but it is not what I am up to in this unrepentantly *theological* undertaking. Nor am I essaying any sort of general theory of "contextually bound" forms of prayer (this phrase in Aldrin's text also seems to be inherently reductive in tone), although I had certainly hoped that my nuanced sociological analysis of two different communities of charismatics in ch. 4 would provide some particular new *theological* illumination. In short, to deal adequately with Aldrin's objections I would need to go back to methodological basics: I would need to start with a deeper discussion about whether there are any conditions under which he would be willing to concede the possibility of the existence of God as anything other than a "confessional" delusion. I hope an

opportunity will arise sometime in the future, and I thank him for wrestling with a text so uncongenial to his scholarly instincts.

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## Response to Sarah Coakley's comment

by Viktor Aldrin on November 16, 2015

The comments by Prof. Coakley on my reading of her book, has made me realise that I need to clarify the position of my text, and also reply to some of her comments, knowing that she has misunderstood my intentions.

The initial comment that I feel urged to make, is that, yes, we belong to two different academic traditions (Coakley's Systematic Theology, and my tradition is Practical Theology) but these two traditions are siblings and far closer than most other academic traditions. One thing in common (of many) between these two disciplines is the position that God exists, but how this position/statement can be studied differs between the disciplines. Practical Theology often focuses on how Christianity is being practiced, especially through worship (i.e. prayer), and therefore my focal point of Coakley's book is from that precise perspective of how prayer is being performed, albeit Coakley herself is doing a Systematic enquiry of the human desire towards God made through prayer.

In Coakley's initial comments, she makes a conclusion of my position that is, not true, and that, in my perspective, dyes her argumentation throughout her response:

*'Thus it is obvious even from his opening comments that he is highly suspicious of any such endeavour as "systematic theology" in an age of "normative secularism," and can only construe "God" as a human "construction." The rhetoric is depressingly familiar to me: only the (supposedly) dispassionate and phenomenological account of the study of religion is properly "academic"; everything theological is by contrast merely "confessional" and—by implication—substandard intellectually'.*

As I interpret her comment, she considers me a person believing that God is a 'human "construction"', and that I disregard other research on the divine (e.g. Systematic Theology) that is not phenomenological. Nothing could be more wrong, and my own research on prayer shows that this issue is most important to me. I believe it is possible to study theology from perspectives other than normative secular, and in fact, the secular perspective (i.e. non-believing) makes much damage to the study of religion. That would be, to hold a normative view of believing people not really believing in what they are saying in terms of prayer. For example, I once heard a Danish professor speaking about his neurological research on praying people. He examined if the brain reacted differently to prayer words from an actual prayer, prayer-like words from a faked prayer (yes, he described it in these precise words), and reading a newspaper text. He found differences, but when I asked him if he believed in a god (i.e. if prayer was something other than just words from an individual), his answer was no, and as it turned out, the experiment used a non-believer to say these words. He was

passionate about his research, I on the other hand found it merely an insult. For how can prayer be examined if the examined person praying does not believe in the supernatural aspects of prayer? It is my impression, that Coakley believes that I held such views, when reading her book. I did not. Instead my perspective was on how this prayer in desire was performed, within the human aspects of a praying person (i.e. culture, language, practices) but never disregarding the divine aspects of prayer. This means, that I consider prayer broader than just contemplative prayer, but contemplative prayer is part of this broader perspective. I never wrote such things as Coakley suggests in my text, especially since I do not believe in such ways to examine prayer. How could I, being a believer myself, hoping that God response to my prayers and my innermost desire of God, state that God is a mere construction? Still, how can it be possible, as Coakley seems to suggest, that contemplative prayer is the prayer *par excellence*. Most Christians do not have time only to pray in contemplative ways, and should their prayers be considered less than people having enough time to pray contemplative? If this holds true, in Coakley's perspective, I disagree on her understanding of Christian prayer. For me, every person's heartfelt prayer to God is equally important, to suggest otherwise would be to make a distinction between elite Christians and common Christians. That view am I unable to comply with.

When I did the research for my own book on prayer in the Middle Ages, where miracle stories constituted a major part of the sources, I was once asked by a British professor if I believed that these miracles actually had occurred. In his reading of my manuscript, he discovered that I did not take a stance against the possible reality that these miracles had occurred, and was intrigued. He, himself, did not believe in these miracles and consequently thought that the people describing these miracles did not believe in them themselves. I told him, that he had actually read my conclusions correctly, though the actual fact of God responded to their desperate prayers with a miracle is, in my point, beyond human science to prove. But we can believe, and I do (and the people examined in my research did as well). But enough of my own research, since this example was only intended to point to the fact that Coakley's presuppositions of my reading of her book is not entirely correct.

In a way, yes, there is sometimes a "culture war" between secular and confessional investigations of prayer, and I feel as depressed as Coakley of the harsh ways in which that debate is evolving. The only difference, is that Coakley and I are on the same side in terms of believing in the study and performing of Theology, but on different aspects of it: she on the Systematic aspect, and I on the Practical aspect. Still, constructing a diversion between elite Christians praying in contemplative ways, and common people praying in other ways, is not a fruitful way to construct a complex understanding of Christian prayer. That would suggest, that most Christian people are praying the wrong way, simply because they do not have enough time to pray contemplative. Perhaps it was wrong of me to write a comment from a Practical Theology perspective on a book so much devoted to the love of Systematic Theology as Coakley's book is, but as a Practical Theologian I did enjoy reading her book, and as a researcher on Christian prayer, I was much delighted in spite of the differences between our disciplines. Prayer is such a wonderful and complex thing!

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