

in  
GOD'S  
PRESENCE



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Theological Reflections  
on Prayer

By  
Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki



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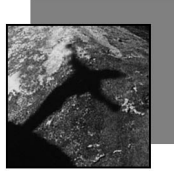


# Acknowledgments

For many years I have wanted to write this book, expressing my own personal theological reflections on the great gift of prayer. I wanted it to be a book for Christians like myself who found themselves wondering, even while maintaining a life of prayer, “how it works.” Merely pondering this question, however, does not seem to be enough. There is an urge to share one’s reflections, and to ask: “Does it seem like this to you, too?”

I am grateful to my daughter, Joan Lucas (to whom this book is lovingly dedicated) for her many helpful suggestions. If my goal of writing in laity-friendly language is achieved, it is largely due to her. My neighbor and colleague, Kathy Black, also cast her critical and liturgically sophisticated eyes over the manuscript. And my good friends and colleagues in Germany, Michael and Ulrike Welker, spent a sunny morning in August on their terrace discussing the book with me, tossing titles back and forth until they helped me to decide that this book really should be “In God’s Presence”—because that’s what the book is about.





## CHAPTER ONE

# The Question of Prayer

Sometimes I make appointments with God. God, being the God of all time and eternity, presumably has no constraints on time, but we creatures often do. And when matters of sufficient urgency press upon me that require more than ordinary work in prayer, I find it helpful to suggest something like a 2:00 a.m. session, when interruptions are not apt to occur. Such appointments seem only sensible—and I am deeply grateful for such times. But it occurs to me upon occasion that it is certainly an odd thing to be able to talk with the God of the universe, whether at 2:00 a.m. or any other time.

Have you never thought it peculiar, this matter called prayer? Have you not also wondered from time to time how such an amazing thing can be? Sometimes amazement can turn to questioning the reality of this thing called prayer. How could God pay attention to such insignifi-

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cant creatures as ourselves? On another front, what if prayer is simply a way of talking things over with oneself? How do we *know* that prayer is communication with God? Put another way, how do we know that it's God that we know when we think that we know God?

The very asking of such questions leads to one of the oldest definitions of Christian theology: faith seeking understanding. To probe the questions is to trust God in the very probing, knowing that God can handle all the questions we can devise. Questions can be a way of drawing us into deeper realms of faith, taking us from belief in our beliefs to belief in the God who is more than our beliefs can express. But if God is more than we can express, then there is freedom to think far and wide, critically exploring how we think and how we might think about the issues of faith. Faith seeks understanding.

What, then, about the question of prayer in relation to our own insignificance in the universe? Perhaps in earlier times prayer did not raise such a question. Then Christians saw Earth as the center of a universe. Then, as now, God was understood to be the God of the universe and not simply the God of this earth. Then, as now, the heavens and the earth were considered mysterious beyond comprehension. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" is God's answer to the pretentiousness of Job. But earth was the focal point, and humanity was the culmination of all God's creation. Prayer in such a universe was natural, for if the whole universe culminates in humanity, then surely it is not peculiar that humanity is bidden to be in communion with the creator.

Today we no longer live in a human-centered universe. Earth is but one planet in one solar system in one galaxy. We are dwarfed by the vastness of the universe beyond ourselves, and we no longer have the simple confidence that it was all created so that we ourselves might exist. Stars

spin in distant space, and explode, perhaps becoming condensed gravity fields so dense that not even light escapes their force, perhaps drawing other stars into each darkened vortex. Stars beyond number form myriad galaxies, vast spirals of dancing light. Comets, asteroids, nebulae, suns, moons, planets, all whirl in what seems to be an infinite creation of expanding space; how are we to consider ourselves a privileged center in a universe now seen to be so complex that it no longer has a center? And how and where is God in all this awesome space? Is God outside it? Inside it? Nowhere? Everywhere? Is the God of Genesis who creates a universe culminating in human history the same God if construed as God of this very different creation? Do we simply expand the God of biblical texts? Is prayer still applicable to a God of the universe of which we are such an infinitesimal part?

If we turn our eyes to the smaller scale of human history, do we still understand that the God of the galaxies takes an interest in our histories? Once we thought the Earth was a stage set for the drama of ourselves; now we know that millennia of actors played this stage before us, and perhaps millennia of actors will succeed us. In the short time of our human existence we have not only taken over the stage, but we seem to be doing our best to destroy the sets. Can we really believe that creatures such as our sorry selves in the littleness of our histories are invited by the creator of the universe to pray?

If the insignificance of human history is not itself seen to be such a challenge to prayer, then what of the multiple modes of human history? Once we thought that a single people was chosen by God from out of all the rest for singular communion; we Christians then saw ourselves as superseding God's original choice, but in either case, the perception was that God spoke with some, but not with all. However, just as Earth is no longer a privileged center

in the universe, neither is one history a privileged center among histories. All peoples pray. What does it do to our understanding of prayer when it ceases to be the prerogative of a single religious history?

These are some of the questions that grow from our awareness of our insignificance in the universe and within Earth's history. It can seem so improbable, given our reduced estimate of our importance, that we should have a direct line of communication to the power that brings the universe into existence. As we move away from our own centrality and discover a universe so enormous and complex, then the image of God bringing a universe into existence for the sole purpose of making us humans becomes a bit tenuous.

But notice the assumptions hidden in these questions. One is that all things cannot be equally important to God, and since we are relatively insignificant in the great scheme of things, we must be beyond the divine care. Another is that there is a fundamental separation between God and that which God creates, so that God is in no way necessarily in continuous relation with creation. But perhaps God creates not as a power over an inert matter molded into form, with a single purpose, but as a power *with* all matter, present to it, pervading it with presence, with multiple purposes.

Think of water as a different metaphor for God. Water rushes to fill all the nooks and crannies available to it; water swirls around every stone, sweeps into every crevice, touches all things in its path—and changes all things in its path. The changes are subtle, often slow, and happen through a continuous interaction with the water that affects both the water and that which the water touches. Particles of sand and sediment change the color of the water, and the water's action changes the stone, and the land, and the life that can be supported. The water doesn't exert its power by

being “single-minded” over and above these things, but simply by being pervasively present to and with all things. It does not evoke the “command” of power over its creation; it is more like a “persuasive” power with and around its creation. Its power is a power of presence.

What if God is like that? Could we not imagine a God pervasively present throughout all the universe, filling all its vast and small spaces, its greatest galaxies and its tiniest motes of stardust? If God’s power works through presence, and if God’s presence is an “omnipresence,” then one could say both that there is no center to the universe and that everything in the universe is center to all else. There is no center, for all things are “equidistant” from God, and the centeredness of God is unbounded. But, paradoxically, we can say that all things are center, for if all things are in the presence of God, then it is God who centers them. The Earth, then, is indeed privileged, and we do have a privileged history—but so is every space and every history privileged, for all are presenced and centered by God. One could as easily say that some small planet in the Andromeda Galaxy is a focus of God’s gracious work as to say that Earth is a focus of God’s gracious work. For if God is omnipresent, centering all things, then God is like the rushing water of the universe, filling all spaces, honoring all spaces, centering all spaces through the specialness of divine presence. Prayer in such a universe makes eminent sense—for God is always present. And perhaps this divine presence invites us into communion.

But the second question challenging prayer still remains—not the question of our insignificance, but the question of the limits of our knowledge. How do we know that it’s God that we know when we think that we know God? When we pray, do we *really* talk to God, or are we indulging instead in simple meditative communion with ourselves?

There was a time when we all thought that our knowledge of all things—including God—was much simpler than now appears. We thought our knowledge was a direct image of the things we knew in our world. Through our senses we received images of things, and from these images we developed knowledge. Knowledge was like a mirror of the world, duplicating physical reality with thought reality.

Even though our ideas of God were not developed out of sense perceptions, we nonetheless assumed that knowledge of God, like knowledge of the world, reflected God accurately. There was always the qualification, of course, that it is impossible to know the fullness of God—but what we *could* know of God was reliable. Some of this knowledge was mediated by our senses, for it was considered possible to read something about the creator from the works of creation. But the basic knowledge of God came not through the sense but through God's self-revelation, recorded as Scripture by our ancestors in the faith. The knowledge of the world gained through our senses was called natural knowledge, while the knowledge of God gained through revelation was called supernatural knowledge. Like natural knowledge, supernatural knowledge conferred a direct reflection of that which was known. We considered such knowledge spiritual and derived from God. Therefore, it was even more sure than natural knowledge, which related to the inferior material world. And so we confidently prayed to the God we so confidently knew.

But our contemporary understanding of knowledge takes us away from the simpler world of natural and supernatural knowledge. In doing so, it tends to uproot us from that simpler interpretation of the God to whom we pray. Now we know that *what* we know is determined as much by our human psychic and sensory structures as it is by that which we say we know.



My first introduction to the complexities of knowledge came some years ago when I happened upon a photograph of an insect's eye. Unlike ours, the insect's eye was composed of many facets, which affected the way the insect could see. An artist had then constructed an image of a tree as it would look from the insect's point of view; how different it was from the tree that I perceived! The question naturally occurred: which of us saw the tree correctly? If that insect had consciousness, would not that insect insist just as assuredly as I that the "real" tree looked thus and so? How could I be so sure that my knowledge of the tree corresponded to the "real" tree, whereas the insect's did not? For we both knew the tree through our seeing; one seeing could not be more privileged than the other, since they both depended upon the particular structure of the eye as well as upon the structure of that which was seen. What we know is the way an object is given to our senses, not the object as it exists apart from our senses. Our knowing, then, is a combination of the givenness of that which we sense, the structures imposed by our senses, and the further structures imposed by our minds.

These further structures are personal as well as physiological. We bring a cumulative history to our knowing that shapes how and what we can know. How we have been loved, how we have been educated, how and where we have been reared, all affect the interpretations that we impose on the information we receive. Our histories give us the emotional and valuational elements of knowledge, so that even in so simple a knowledge as that of a tree, what we know is more than what the senses perceive.

When I was a child, the oak tree outside my window had a particular branch that to my childish eyes was shaped like a lady; many a nighttime going-to-sleep moment was spent looking at my "lady." For me, the oak trees have never lost their mystical, "lady" aura. Now when I see an

oak tree, I see the tree, but also, even so many years later, feel my memories of what that kind of tree meant to me as a child. I “know” oak trees in a way peculiarly shaped by my history! I “see” the tree with my eyes *and* with my memories, as well as with all the knowledge about trees in general and oak trees in particular that I have accrued along the way. My knowledge of any oak tree is a complex combination of things shared with others and things private to myself.

So, then, knowledge is actually a very complex thing reflecting not simply the thing we say that we know but our sensory responses, our mental processes, our emotions, and our personal and cultural histories. We know a mixture of ourselves and the other! Today we know far better than in former times how much our own interpretive capacities are involved in all our knowing. And if this affects our knowing of things like trees, does it not affect even more radically our knowing of God, who is not given to our senses at all?

The issue is complicated because knowledge gained through our senses is grounded to some degree in that which we see, hear, touch, smell, or taste. That is, while whatever we are knowing can be interpreted in a number of ways, those ways are limited by the stubborn facticity of that which we say we know. While a tree may look one way to a human and another to the insect, the tree itself lays down the parameters within which it may be interpreted. A living tree cannot be construed accurately as if it were a cloud or a person, even though sometimes its shape might suggest such things to us. The tree itself will neither rain upon the earth nor tuck us into bed at night, no matter how much we may think that the tree is something like a cloud or a person. It “insists” upon its treeness, regardless of whoever or whatever is doing the perceiving and knowing! What we as humans know about trees can be

tested through our direct interactions with the tree, and through common knowledge about trees that we learn from and share with others in the human community.

But testing what we call our knowledge of something not given through sensory perception at all is a more difficult matter. What constrains our interpretations, keeping them within the limits of that reality we say we know? Given the complexity of knowledge, and the contribution of our own psychic histories to those things we “know,” how do we know that we are in contact with God rather than just talking to ourselves? How do we know that it’s God that we know when we think that we know God? The very complexity of knowing can challenge what we say we know, and erode our confidence in prayer.

But if God’s power is presence, think of the difference this makes to the knowing of God. God’s presence, like water, pervades the nooks and crannies of existence—what is the boundary of water? the boundary of God? A stone marks the edge of the water and its own existence; what marks the edge between our own and God’s existence? Where does our existence begin and end?—for surely we neither start nor stop with our skin. Would it be so strange to consider that the omnipresent God pervades us without at all displacing us? After all, we know quite well that we coexist with many things without this shared space diminishing or displacing our own personhood. Energy waves regularly go through us. And we know that even within us there is a host of life forms such as bacteria. But this co-occupation of space does not make us less ourselves. Why can’t the higher life form that is God also co-occupy us, flowing through and around and in us, even while remaining God, and while we remain ourselves? What if such a God affects us at the deepest levels of our being—our most subconscious psyches—as well as at our “edges” in our interaction with the rest of the world? A God of

pervasive presence would be no stranger to our psyches; perhaps our access to this God is in and through this deeper intimacy of ourselves in and through prayer. Perhaps, given the pervasiveness of God, we do not *need* sensory perception for the knowledge of God.

What saves us from our rampant imaginations, distinguishing this relational knowing from wishful and wistful delusions? To return to my metaphor of water, if stones and fish could “know,” then a stone would know water in one way, and a fish might know water in yet another, for the water interacts with each according to its kind, even while remaining water. Would not a God of presence interact with us in ways adapted to our physiological, psychological, and sociological realities? God knows how we know! And perhaps God, while immaterial, nonetheless radiates an energy that can be interpreted in only so many ways by us humans.

And yet there is also an external check on our knowledge. God is present not simply to us as individuals, but to us as communities. We can check the adequacy of our own knowing through the witness of others—and here the texts and the traditions as well as our contemporary communities play a formative role. We usually interpret God through the texts and traditions we have received from our community, and we shape our own private religious experience by what we have learned publicly. A living community of faith guides our own interpretation of our subjective experience of God.

The caveat, of course, is the living nature of the community and its traditions. A tradition is built up through its continual transformation. For example, those Christians who have been dominantly important in the formation of Western Christianity are persons such as Augustine, Gregory the Great, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Hooker, Anne

Hutchinson, John Wesley, Alexander Campbell, Aimee Semple McPherson, and a host of others. Some of these people are common in the heritage of all Western Christians; others are important to particular denominations. The point is that none of these persons simply repeated what was said before. Indeed, we study such persons precisely because they thought *differently* from those who went before! Each added to the tradition by contributing to its transformation.

Tradition is like the crest of a wave always pushing beyond itself. Faithfulness to a tradition is not gained through treading water in repetition of some aspect of the past, but through swimming with the crest into fresh interpretations of God's gracious presence with us. The tradition is a living, fluid thing. Thus to use the texts and the tradition as a formative matrix for our knowledge of God is not to find an ironclad rule that determines what we can think. Rather, it is to find commonalities that not only shape how we think about the God we experience, but that also invite the questions born of faith. We know God through God's presence to us, and we interpret this presence through categories given to us through our communities of faith. But the personalization of these categories may in fact be part of their transformation in the ongoing process of a living tradition. Thus there is necessarily a certain openness in what we dare to call our knowledge of God. It is fluid—perhaps like God's own self.

The complexity of these ways of knowing God cautions us to value deeply the ancient Christian virtue of humility. In the old ways of supernatural versus natural knowledge, we could arrogantly claim that the way *we* knew God was the way *everyone* should know God. Today we know that our knowledge of God reflects our personal and cultural histories as much if not more than it does God's own self. We know God in the humility of knowing that

others, too, whether inside or outside our own tradition, also have valid ways of knowing God. If God is pervasively present, then God works in and through many communities, each of which then “sees” God through the lens of its own tradition. One set of lenses fitted to one people does not invalidate the lenses that fit another! In the words of the apostle Paul, “now we see in a mirror, dimly,” and “now I know only in part.” We do not and cannot yet know God in God’s fullness.

But the partial and relative nature of our knowledge does not invalidate our knowing. To the contrary, all knowledge that matters is partial and relative: what we look for is a sufficient knowledge. Absolute knowledge is not and never has been required for faith, and the former supposition that we had such knowledge led to hatred and destruction toward those whose knowledge differed from our own. To be content with a sufficient rather than absolute knowledge is to accept that the God of presence is made adequately known to us even within the limitations of our knowing. God is known in the “breaking of the bread” that is ourselves within our own communities. We dare to say that it’s God that we know, mixed in with ourselves in a way that is blessed.

A God of presence renders suspect any so-called objective knowledge of God, and calls instead for an intersubjective knowledge of God. Such a knowledge will never be universal—it is too mingled with ourselves for that. And so it should be: It is the way of God’s working, and it can yield an adequate knowledge for our living. We can test its contribution to the depth and richness of human community; we can test its effectiveness in our own lives; we can test its truth for our spirits through prayer. For a God of presence, known subjectively and intersubjectively in and through ourselves, our texts, our traditions, and our communities, is a God who invites communion. How

do we know that it's God that we know when we think that we know God? The answer is finally the simple one that pervades the trajectory of our tradition: by faith, seeking understanding. And so we pray—in God's presence.