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SILENCE, PRAYER, AND DESIRE IN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES:
A CONVERSATION WITH SARAH COAKLEY

Tamsin Jones: In an article in *Christian Century*¹ you speak of spiritual practices, and in particular, the practice of silent prayer, as “epistemically expansive,” and as having “the power to change one’s perception of the theological task.” Similarly, in an earlier essay, which considers some of these themes specifically within the educational context, you bemoan the split between “theoretical exposition” and “ascetic practice.”² It is clear how such practice has been transformative in your own writing, but can you say whether such practices also constitute part of your own preparation to teach? To put it another way, do spiritual practices, such as silent prayer, inform how you teach in the classroom, as well as how you teach through your writing?

Sarah Coakley: This is a very perceptive question (from one who knows me well, warts and all!). Yes, such ascetic preparation for any important task of attention, assistance to others, or communication in teaching is potentially hugely transforming—if only we can find time to do it. (Not that we can manipulate it—we simply make space, gently, for a Gift that comes from elsewhere.) It is a feature of our obsessive culture of busyness and overwork, however, that almost anything will get in the way of such a commitment. I find I can only cling on by my fingertips by making regular dates with others to keep silence together (for 15 years a weekly

¹ Sarah Coakley, “Prayer as Crucible: How my mind has changed,” *Christian Century* 128, no. 6 (March 2011).

² Sarah Coakley, “Shaping the Field: A Transatlantic Perspective,” ed. David F. Ford, Ben Quash, Janet Soskice in *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52.

silent prayer group at Harvard; now an equivalent weekly event at Westcott House with the ordinands in Cambridge); and by being accountable also to my own rule of life as a priest to say my office, pray for others and keep some small element of silence in my life every day (I now do this on the train between Ely and Cambridge: if you choose the right trains it's a blessed space of uncontaminated silence). I have to say, though, that this is a continual uphill struggle, every day, and I often fail miserably and utterly. I also don't normally talk about it very much: it's frankly better not blazoned about. Having said that, the people close to me always know when I'm failing in this area, because I then manifestly crash in my sensitivity to others' needs and concerns. Every day we start again.

TJ: *Would you ever consider asking your students to engage in "spiritual exercises" (to use Hadot's term), or include it in the requirements of a course? What would such practices look like? For example, you have written a great deal about prayer as a "practiced loss of control" – an expansion or transformation of noetic, affective, and erotic boundaries. How might this play out in the lecture hall, seminar room, or during office hours?*

SC: Again, this is a very subtle question. Much depends on the institutional and political context as to how one responds. In my own career I have taught, at various times, in a secular Religious Studies department (at Lancaster University), in a fairly old-fashioned Theology faculty (at Oxford), at Harvard Divinity School in the midst of major ideological disputes about 'the study of religion' and 'theology,' and at Cambridge in a Theology and Religious Studies programme in which both sides happily learn from each other. Each context has been different and each has called forth different sorts of responses from me. However, I remain wary about making a "spiritual exercise" any sort of *requirement* for a course. I know that this is done in certain seminaries and denominational colleges (e.g., my friend Martin Laird OSA can be seen on [Youtube](#) conducting a class in silent prayer in the context of a course on prayer at Villanova, and clearly doing it excellently); but personally I would always be wary of requiring such practice as an element in a course which is *graded*. What I did at HDS for many years was to teach courses, which discussed texts on meditation and contemplation (including a big survey course on "Christian Spirituality"), and simultaneously I quietly ran a silent prayer group each week. But I never made that a requirement for any course, and it was entirely voluntary. It was of course also entirely proper that prayer should have been going on in a Divinity School training people for the ministry! But the Spirit blows where it wills; and only when and if students were inspired to take up the practice element from their own volition did it work to talk informally about how such a practice also changed everything—in their work, their life, their approach to intellectual questions. Each person has to find this out for herself. No one should be bludgeoned or hurried. In practice people tend to be drawn to it because they sense it as a sort of magnetic attraction in others' lives; they think: "*That's what I want to be like.*"

TJ: *When you put forth an understanding of theology as always being a theology "in via" – or a "theology on the road," does this impact the role of the theology professor as the "expert" in the room?*

SC: I like to distinguish between ‘theology’ (proper: talking about God) and what Joep van Beeck, SJ, once called “theologology” – i.e., talking about talking about God. The latter is what we induct our students into under the rubric of ‘theology’; but actually we are for the most part teaching them how to make clever comments on other people’s views about God, not how to write about God directly in the way that the great theologians have done (think of Origen, Augustine, Luther). But of course none of us can become Origen, Augustine, or Luther overnight; and if we encourage students to try and express their own views about God too quickly we are likely to get some embarrassingly unformed—not to say uninformed—extravaganzas. So here’s the way I try to steer through this dilemma: first, I try to help students see how important decisions are made in theological thinking (how criteria of truth and authority are deployed, how starting points in systematic thinking affect the whole, how prayer, practice and theological thinking interrelate); then I try to encourage them to ‘cut their teeth’ theologically by comparing and critiquing these different theological styles; while this is happening one can hope (but not command) that a process of deepening of wisdom is occurring simultaneously through their own prayer, life experience, and pastoral and political response. But none of this can be hurried or compelled. The great theologian is always the one who presses to integrate all these factors, who is affected by the dictum that “to be perfect is to have changed often.” But we should not berate ourselves that, in the formative stages of training, “theologology” is what we’re mainly likely to get. One can nonetheless still hold the vision of something more profound to aim at before the student body. Insofar as the professor is the “expert” she is only ever issuing a *vade mecum*: students will ultimately vote with their feet and follow the theological trends that most excite and compel them.

TJ: *Relatedly, how important is the spiritual “transparency” or “opacity” of the professor in the classroom? What is the difference in pedagogical practice between a kind of performed neutrality versus an explicit discussion of one’s faith commitments and spiritual practices (or lack thereof)?*

SC: In my view this is a bit of a false disjunction—arising from the current star-wars between the supposedly “neutral” study of religion, and the supposedly confessional (and anti-intellectual?) theological confessionalism. The whole idea of such a disjunction rests on an outmoded neo-Kantian division of “fact” and “value.” In practice, the professor will always convey (explicitly or implicitly) certain values, commitments or ideologies, even while claiming to be entirely neutral or “objective.” Some of the most dogmatic views about religion are thereby conveyed—with the explicit opportunity for critique!

My own way through this is always to present a range of systematic theological options as sympathetically as possible in each case; but then to make it quite clear why it is that I am arguing for one over others, at the same time giving students explicit permission to disagree (and be well graded by disagreeing!). This is an entirely rational procedure (rather in the spirit of Alasdair MacIntyre’s Giffords); it is neither a performed neutrality nor a lurch into irrational preferentialism. It maintains the insistence on the possibility of public rational discussion even about religious matters, which can become extremely emotive.

TJ: While you agree with the increasingly pervasive challenge to the tired polemical distinction between the “study of religion” and “theology”—whether through a recognition of the hidden theological underpinnings of the concept of “religion,” or through a critique of the false disjunction between commitment and critical judgment—you have argued, nonetheless, that it is important not to dissolve these two discourses into one. Indeed, you have said that there is a “dialectical frisson”³ between the two that is intellectually generative and important to maintain. Does it follow from this that a professor of, for instance, the history of Christianity (or Buddhist thought, or Islamic law), should have different pedagogical practices depending on whether they are teaching in a religious studies department, a divinity school attached to a university, or a seminary?

SC: Yes, as I’ve said above, I do think there is a subtle difference in how one appropriately speaks and positions oneself in these different contexts. But it’s not a matter of being specious or gagged or (alternatively) overtly proselytizing in the different contexts. It’s more a matter of sensitivity to the ethos and goals of the institution and its context, whilst maintaining the commitment to rational exposition and open discussion just mentioned. But having said that, when ideology takes over and (say) it is announced in the context of a school historically dedicated to the training of Protestant ministers that theological discussion must be repressed, and prayer and praise disallowed or relegated to the realm of the “anti-intellectual,” then something is awry and a challenge has to be uttered.

TJ: *I recall being in the audience when George Steiner gave his Norton Lectures (since published as Lessons of the Masters) and witnessing the nervous reaction of the Harvard audience to his claims about the role of erotic attraction in the art of persuasion that constitutes teaching. (To give one example: “Eroticism, covert or declared, fantasized or enacted, is in-woven in teaching, in the phenomenology of mastery and discipleship.”⁴) As someone who has given sustained attention to the force of the erotic that can emerge within spiritual practices, as well as the “messy entanglement” of questions of gender and sexuality with doctrine, what do you think is the role of desire in our pedagogical practices? Ought it to be cultivated, suppressed, ignored, or acknowledged and controlled?*

SC: Acknowledged, certainly. But this is an area of our lives in which we have the most profound capacity for self-delusion: here be dragons! Educators need to be trained to know the signs of misuse of such desire in themselves and in others. In practice, however, things often go way off the rails before anyone blows a whistle. But, on the other side, desire can also be appropriately, and most subtly and beautifully, directed towards its proper object in theological teaching. If, by chance, students “catch the halo” of holiness by reading a patristic text, or are inspired in some inadvertent way by the life and witness of one of their own teachers, then this is itself enlivening and life-changing: in practice, the great teachers do this all the time, but their students rarely tell them (if at all) until many, many years later. The oddest thing I have found in my own life in relation to some people who greatly influenced me is that such life-changing teaching can sometimes be done by people who are neither the greatest scholars nor the most

³ Coakley, “Shaping the field: a transatlantic perspective,” 54.

⁴ George Steiner, *Lessons of the Masters* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 26.

saintly life exemplars. Again, the Spirit blows where it wills; and again, we fortunately cannot manipulate this sort of influence merely at will.

In sum, we have to be strongly aware of the sort of power we wield over our students, for good and ill: alas, they often imitate us. That is why, if we teach well we are always gesturing away from ourselves to the proper source of Truth. But self-aggrandizement is ever on offer, always an insidious temptation which students too are glad enough to imitate!

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