



Feminist perspectives on liturgy, prayer and God

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Introduction: Liturgy as primary and urgent

Liturgy and prayer are primary, not secondary, arenas for theology. They are core sites where we wrestle with the nature of God and the nature of human personhood, truth and reality. It's not as if we work out our theology first and then translate it into appropriate forms of prayer. Or, if that is what happens, it is not surprising that our prayer is lifeless and flat and has no surprises within it, and that our theology is similarly dry and lacks the infusion of spiritual life. No, prayer is primary; it shapes and forms us, it is a melting pot of theology. It is the place where we discover who God is or can be, what kind of God is sayable, prayable. If our prayer is inauthentic or insufficient to the day, then our theology will be too. Prayer feeds and tests theology, just as theology nourishes and critiques prayer. One without the other makes no sense at all.

Liturgy and prayer are primary, but also urgent. We cannot wait on the theologians or philosophers to find language for us. We need to cry out to God, and to one another, daily – not only of our need for bread, but also of our hunger for truth and justice, our awareness of our complicity and half-heartedness, our longing to worship what is beyond us. As Marjorie Procter-Smith has put it, our naming of God in prayer is 'urgent and primary because liturgy is not reflection but address; an encounter is presumed'.¹ We may not know what we think or believe about God, or even that God is, yet we know our urgent need to pray – alone, and with others. At the beginning of her book, *Praying with our Eyes Open*, Procter-Smith quotes from a poem by Olga Broumas to conjure this urgency:

like amnesiacs

in a ward on fire, we must
find words

or burnⁱⁱ

The attempt to find the right words for prayer, the most authentic means of addressing the holy, is like the search for the word for fire, in a burning room, Procter-Smith suggests. In the light of the devastating Grenfell Tower fire, this metaphor takes on a shocking, even perhaps offensive, tone.

The different discourses of liturgy

Liturgy, of course, is more than words, and sometimes the words are the least important aspect of our prayer. It is the spaces between and behind the words that speak; it is the silence of listening and unknowing, which may or may not beget words, that is our most true prayer. And verbal discourse is only one of a number of discourses that operate in public liturgy. Procter-Smith points to the centrality of visual and spatial discourse – the way our buildings and public spaces speak, what they embody, what they make possible (or impossible) to embody or enact; the visual images, symbols and narratives that are portrayed in stained glass, mural, altar frontal and so on and what they depict or suggest about the holy; the physical discourse of bodies in prayer, the way our bodily postures and gestures evoke an entire theology, whether of obedience (through kneeling, bowing and so on) or self-possession, of isolated individualism or corporate accountability and relationality, whether of static passivity (who moves in a church building and who remains in the pews) or of dynamic movement and flow. And then there is the aural discourse of sound – closely related to words, but not the same. The way words sound in liturgy may be as important as what they say: the semiotic function of language (to soothe or empower, to create connection and ground emotion) has deeper roots in us than the symbolic (the communicative, cognitive dimensions of speech). We croon and babble to babies long before they learn to talk. And music is another vital aural component of the language of liturgy that both expresses and evokes our prayer, carrying the words and expanding and multiplying their meanings and resonances. We know that the words of hymns and songs learnt in childhood are some of the last things to go in people with dementia, the musical pathways in the brain surviving long after other meanings have gone.

All these discourses are essential to the way in which liturgy functions, yet liturgical scholarship has tended to ignore them, focusing on the meaning of words alone and reducing liturgy to liturgical texts.

Feminist critique and principles of liturgy

When we think of feminist approaches to liturgy, we are apt to think, too, of the critique of patriarchal language first – and that is hugely important, but it is not the only issue. Feminists have critiqued all the discourses of prayer – spatial, visual, physical and aural as well as verbal. Particular attention has been paid to the bodily postures traditionally adopted in prayer, many of which have been declared

unsuitable and unhelpful for women, and other marginalised groups. Thus, it may not be safe for women to close their eyes in prayer, and it may suggest that only by turning inwards can one encounter God (rather than in the external world and through the senses). Thus Procter-Smith and others advocate 'Praying with eyes open'. Similarly, traditional postures for prayer such as kneeling, bowing or prostrating are rejected by many feminists, in favour of more resistant, attentive and alert postures. The first Christians were Jews and prayed in the 'orans' posture, standing with arms raised aloft (a posture that churches have tended to limit to the president of the eucharist but which some are now reclaiming for the whole assembly). Feminists advocate prayer that cherishes as well as disciplines the body, connecting the sexual and sacred.

We might name a number of principles that tend to guide feminist liturgy, particularly in relation to the physical, spatial and visual elements. The circle has replaced the line or the hierarchical pyramid or rectangle as the basic shape for the gathered assembly. The circle is inclusive and dynamic; there is space for everyone and no-one 'leads' a circle. All are equal within the circle. Liturgy is conducted 'on the level', with no one person lording it over another and power diffused and owned by the whole gathered assembly. Liturgy is also 'face to face', affirming the horizontal dimension as much as the vertical. We do not meet God by turning away from the human neighbour, but precisely in the face to face encounter with the other who manifests the divine. Much feminist liturgy takes place in the home, rather than the public building of the church, reclaiming the ancient Jewish tradition of female prayer at the table and within the domestic sphere; Celtic as well as Catholic practices of the home shrine are adopted by many, using symbols from everyday life and the natural world – flowers, candles, feathers, stones, photographs of loved ones (including the dead), and so on, affirming the mundane and the domestic as the realm of spirituality (although there can be a danger of romanticizing the domestic realm which we know can also be dangerous for women and children). In all this, the body is the primary site of feminist liturgy, and embodiment a core theme and practice. Whereas traditional male stream liturgy has stolen women's bodily experience from them (in birthing and feeding offspring) and then excluded women from the very rites based on their own bodily experience (baptism as a rite of birthing and eucharist as a rite of maternal feeding), feminist liturgy is rooted in the body and seeks to value and mark both ordinarily bodily experience and those traumatic, limit situations and rites of passage for which the mainstream church has nothing to offer – such as the onset of menstruation and menopause, abortion as well as childbirth, rape and violence against women and so on.ⁱⁱⁱ

Verbal discourse: words for God, towards God

Coming back to words, it is vital that we bring to our analysis of language an appropriate awareness of the multivalency of language, its many rich and interconnected dimensions (cognitive, affective, symbolic, semiotic and so on), as well as an acute awareness of the ways in which verbal and textual language work alongside other kinds of discourse – visual, spatial, aural – to create meaning. Words

on a page, recited by a congregation or enunciated by a worship leader, can be interpreted – supported, enhanced and clarified, but also contradicted or relativized – by what is acted or sung or gestured. Bombastic, monarchical language in a hymn, for example, can be tempered or ameliorated by a tune that is gentle or folksy. Texts of terror read from the pulpit can be critiqued, not only by the preacher, but also by groups of worshippers wrestling with the texts in small discussion circles. Patriarchal language in prayers can be challenged, not only by the replacement of such language with other terms, but also by the ways in which clergy and worship leaders refuse to enact authoritarian, hierarchical postures and positions in the liturgy. Worshippers in grief or need may take away little sense of what was said in an act of worship, but the sense of presence, care and community into which they are (or are not) welcomed will make a huge and lasting impression.

Nevertheless, words matter. Feminists have long critiqued the inadequacy – more, the harmfulness – of much Christian God-language, for its paternalism, androcentrism, hierarchical nature and so on.

As Elizabeth Johnson suggests, the God-symbol functions – for good or for ill, for the creation of justice, mutuality and right relation or their opposites. The symbol of God functions at many levels: psychologically, to shape the self-image and self-worth (negatively or positively); sociologically, to bolster and endorse particular sociological arrangements (the model of Father legitimizing and endorsing the patriarchal family, for instance; or the model of God as King upholding monarchy); theologically, to shape how we experience, understand and relate to the holy.

All this is familiar to us. Rather than rehearse these arguments, what I want to do is consider the nature of liturgical/prayer language and the context(s) from which it is generated in order to suggest how prayer and liturgy can become the place for birthing new theologies, new language for God, dynamic new encounters with God. In this, I am deeply indebted to the work of Walter Brueggemann, particularly his analysis of the language of the psalms in his little book, *Praying the Psalms*. From there, I want to go on to take one core liturgical text, the text of the Lord's Prayer, and to explore some ways in which that prayer might be prayed authentically.

The nature of authentic prayer

Brueggemann analyses the Hebrew psalms as an embodiment of authentic prayer, an expression of language working at the limits, a series of speech acts which evoke something quite new in the relation between God and Israel, God and the pray-er. He shows how the psalms are profoundly dialogic texts, rooted in the relationship between God and Israel. This covenantal relationship is foundational and primary, even when the psalms seem to challenge it most severely. Perhaps the beginning of psalm 22 is the most obvious expression of such a posture: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' These words, cried by Jesus from the cross, at one and the same time challenge and affirm the absence and presence of God in the life of the

believer: a God who must be addressed even in the most profound experience of abandonment.

Brueggeman describes the language of the psalms as 'strident, subversive and intense', born out of the rawness rather than the smoothness of life. The psalms are not uttered from the settled place of equilibrium, but out of profound disequilibrium and the search for new orientation. Whether cries of lament, complaint or vengeance on enemies, or of ecstatic praise and thanksgiving for deliverance, the psalms are uttered at the limits of life. 'It is the experiences of life that lie beyond our conventional copings that make us eloquent and passionate and drive us to address ourselves to the Holy One' (p. 6). I think many of us will recognize how our own most authentic prayer is born out of such urgency and need. Feminist liturgy, like the liturgies of other groups seeking liberation and empowerment, emerged in the late 1960s and 70s out of just such limit situations: out of anger and rage at women's erasure and invisibility, out of acute pain and lament at the losses suffered not only by individual women through abuse and oppression but by entire generations of women whose history and traditions have been erased. Feminist liturgy was born out of protest and resistance, but also out of a claiming of agency and power, an assertion of the need and right to name what had never been named. A very real question for me and other feminists within the church is how we can pray now, within the confused and shifting currents of third and fourth wave feminism, when some of that original urgency and rage has been dissipated by the achievements of feminism but also by fatigue and boredom.

Of course, we don't live our lives entirely in the liminal places of desperation or ecstasy (although some people perhaps do, something we should never forget), and we cannot always pray out of such places. We need forms of daily prayer that can serve in the ordinariness, the mundaneness and, yes, the equilibrium of settled life. But such prayer must never lose touch with the liminal, unsettled and unsettling edges of raw terror, need and intensity. Perhaps this is one reason – the main reason – why we need to pray the psalms, and why the psalms have become the bedrock for daily liturgical prayer in the churches. The daily praying of the psalms is a way of keeping us closely in touch with the places of liminal urgency out of which they come, and a way of praying faithfully with those who live on the edges – such as, presently, all those people displaced from Grenfell Tower and many thousands of others displaced from their homes around the globe. Then, as Brueggeman suggests, the challenge for those of us praying the liminal prayers of the psalms – and the countless other such prayers the psalms have generated down the generations – who are not, ourselves, inhabiting the liminal places, is to pray them in such a way that we do not evacuate them of their rawness and rough edges. If our prayer life – including the public prayer life of the church – is 'conventional, routinized', born out of 'habit, fatigue or numbness', Brueggemann suggests, the Psalms will not release their power and 'our own experience may be left untapped, inarticulate and therefore not liberated' (p. 8).

Brueggeman regards the language of the Psalms as the language of poetry that works through metaphor rather than reportage or description. With Ricoeur and

other linguistic philosophers, he regards metaphor as far from a mere ornament of speech or solely as an expression of emotion. Rather, metaphor and symbol, as Ricoeur suggests, give birth to thought, and are primary forms of cognition. Brueggeman contrast the positivist language of contemporary culture – concerned with reporting and describing, tending to be conservative, restrictive and limiting – with the bold, symbolic and evocative language of the Psalms and poetry, which ‘evokes into being what does not exist until it has been spoken’, which is ‘profoundly creative, and is itself an exercise in freedom’ (p. 18). Such language ‘is not only for candor but for the articulation of that which is known both by God and by human persons only when articulated’ (xi).

Brueggemann envisages something quite extraordinary here in the dialogue between God and humans in the Psalms. This is a genuine, reciprocal encounter in which both parties are changed by the exchange. Both God and the pray-er are brought into new relationship by the prayers of those at the limits. God is summoned to respond to the urgency of Israel’s situation – one of oppression and near-annihilation – through the force of complaint and lament. The character of God in the psalms, he suggests, is ‘supple and open, exposed to risk and placed in jeopardy’ (xvi), just as the one who prays in the limit situation is also exposed to risk and jeopardy’.

This analysis of the psalms seems to me enormously suggestive and helpful. It provides some clues into the nature of authentic liturgy and prayer and suggests the ways in which our prayer can change us, but may also evoke or bring to birth an encounter with God which we cannot predict before or know outside the praying, which is embodied in the prayer itself. This rings true to my own experience, in which I find myself less and less sure about what I believe about the nature and reality of God (am I a realist, of the critical variety, an agnostic or a non-realist?) and find my earlier experiential sense of the presence of God more and more displaced by the sense of God’s absence (although I suspect this may be partly a reflection of my absorption in a very busy working life, my lack of presence to my own life – if I can’t be present to myself, how on earth do I expect God to be?). And yet, the need and impulse to pray, to address the absent, unknown, mysterious source of my life and of all life, both in words and in large amounts of silence, alone and with others, is as strong as it has ever been. And in and around the prayer, there are unexpected glimpses of transcendence, a sense of being grasped/addressed by the Holy One, intimations of otherness, the gifting of new insight and awareness.

Perhaps the best way I can describe this is by analogy with what happens when words are given in the writing of a poem. What prompts one to write in the first place? This is mysterious and often arises unbidden, although poetry like prayer is a discipline, a craft as well as something given. What often feels like something sacred, miraculous, gracious and gratuitous, is the way that the poem unfolds new knowing that, before the writing of the poem, I did not know I knew. The poem births words and images that birth knowledge, awareness, insight – a glimpse into the depths of things. I often say that my poems know far more than I do, that it can take my brain and body years to catch up with the knowing of the poem: perhaps

because such knowing comes out of the subconscious, similar to the knowledge that is birthed in dreams. And both are similar to the knowing – which may often be as much of an unknowing – that is birthed in genuine liturgy and prayer.

In authentic worship, something new is birthed and enacted, something – or perhaps we should say, *someone* – that we did not and could not know before or outside the ritual. Through the mixture of words that ring true and express our deepest needs and longings, music that comes from the depths of our bodies and souls, scripture and preaching that address our present political reality, visual symbolism and spatial choreography that create community and evoke the sense of the sacred in our midst – in and through all these ways and more, we sense the reality of God and our own reality meeting and mingling, if only for an instant; and we are changed by the encounter: enlivened, comforted, strengthened, our cynicism or despair eased, our fatigue consoled. Like the new knowing of a poem, this is soul-food that nourishes us deeply and we receive it from the hand of God, even the God we hardly believe in or know. We discover again that, whilst our many images and ideas about God are flat, lifeless idols, irrelevancies, the reality of God is something different: beyond our comprehension yet graspable, haveable in the only way we can know and have it – in the present moment, in the lived reality of prayer.

A case-study: praying the Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is a central scriptural/liturgical text which, like the eucharist, Jesus commanded his disciples to pray. It is shared by all Christian traditions, prayed by Christians around the globe daily – one of the few liturgical texts we hold in common. But how do we pray this prayer, in public as well as private, in ways that do not reinforce what Gail Ramshaw names 'the myth of the crown' ^{iv} which feminists see as imbuing the prayer and much else in Christian tradition? The 'myth of the crown' depicts the divine in metaphors and language of powerful males – in the case of the Lord's Prayer, in both fatherhood and kingdom imagery – in a way that reinforces male power and implicitly places women, children and other marginalized people at the base of a hierarchical pyramid.

Problems of the Lord's Prayer

The address – 'our Father in heaven'. Even if Jesus did envisage his relationship to God in terms of fatherhood, to call God 'Father' without qualification for many of us is hugely problematic, reinforcing patriarchy, the rule of the fathers. Many alternatives have been suggested: 'Beloved', 'Father and Mother', 'Earth-maker, pain-bearer, life-giver' (Jim Cotter). I myself am increasingly using 'Abba/amma'. Jesus' term for God was 'abba', the Aramaic for the intimate child relationship to its parent (either male or female), and has entirely different resonances than 'father', undercutting and subverting the power dynamics of patriarchal fatherhood.

'Our father *in heaven*' – a remote, inaccessible place beyond the sky which most modern people don't believe in and seems to make of God a distant, irrelevant ruling monarch somewhere far, far away from human life and concerns.

'Hallowed be your name'. 'Hallowed' sounds antiquarian and quaint. The 'name' has none of the deep biblical significance/resonance for contemporary pray-ears. If it speaks of anything, it might refer to the way in which names denote status, privilege and power.

'Your kingdom come' – problematic monarchical language which reinforces the myth of the crown. Could be translated in more accessible terms as 'realm' or 'rule' of God.

'Your will be done' – alongside the patriarchal and monarchical language, this can reinforce notions of passive obedience, and encourage the abdication of the fragile or underdeveloped egos/selfhood of those with little power.

'Give us today our daily bread' – whilst this petition can be a helpful reminder of our common dependence on God and on the earth to produce our bread, and may be a powerful one for those who do not know where their next meal is coming from, it can seem redundant for those of us whose bellies are satiated and who provide our own abundant tables.

'Forgive us our sins...' The whole language of sin is hugely problematic, as feminists have been pointing out for decades, critiquing theologies of sin which see sin as pride, dominance, will to power and so.^v

'Lead us not into temptation' – why on earth would God tempt us?

'But deliver us from evil' – how do we name/envisage evil? We may feel this implies a dualistic worldview of good/evil, God/devil which is part of the pre-modern worldview out of which this prayer comes. What is an authentic and resonant language for evil that speaks to our own capacity for choosing the demonic and the destructive?

Sharing some of my own prayers within and around the Lord's Prayer

I have found myself, almost by accident, writing a sequence of prayers responding to and wrestling with, the Lord's Prayer. They are not intended, mostly, for public prayer, although one or two of them might be suitable for the public assembly. Rather, they are dialogues, laments, cries to the Abba-Amma God of Jesus from my own life and context and situation. They all begin with the address 'Abba Amma' or one or other of these two parental forms. Many of them are working with my own specific inheritance of my relationship to my own human parents: it is impossible to pray the Lord's prayer without drawing deeply on our own relationships to our parents, whether knowingly or not. In addressing God as 'Abba amma', I am also

drawing on the early desert tradition of the abbas and ammas who left the cities in protest at their corruption and sought remote desert places to live out lives of solitariness and ascetism, yet in community. The desert fathers and mothers laid the foundations for the monastic tradition which has sourced and fuelled Christian prayer for centuries, and shaped public liturgical prayer profoundly. This tradition itself – the desert tradition and monasticism – is by no means unproblematic for a feminist, enshrining dangerous and dualistic theologies of the body, sexuality and femininity itself. So in praying to the ‘Abba Amma’ God of the desert fathers and mothers, I am wrestling with this inheritance as well as honouring and blessing it.

I would like to read a few of my reworkings (I don’t call them versions) of the Lord’s prayer – not so much as examples of what can be prayed in public, but more as an expression of the search for authentic prayer about which I’ve been talking. No one version of this, or any, prayer, is likely to be adequate for public or even private use: no one prayer is complete, or perfect. In the praying of it, it may well become redundant. But every prayer we make, however inadequate, is an opening, an invitation, a summons to the divine and to our own best selves; a voting with our lips and our lives for wholeness and justice and mercy and forgiveness which we know we desperately need. It creates a space within which what we pray for can become more of a reality – if only marginally – than it was before. I’m sharing a few of my own prayers in that spirit, so that, in sharing them, we may together pray towards the God we struggle to name and believe in, who is always drawing nearer to us in love and mercy as well as judgement.

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ⁱ Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Praying with Our Eyes Open* (Abingdon, 1995):

ⁱⁱ In *Beginning with O* (Yale University Press, 1977)

ⁱⁱⁱ Rosemary Rayford Ruether’s *Woman-church: Theology and Practice* (Harper & Row, 1984) is a good example of many such rites, which still are largely unknown outside feminist circles.

^{iv} Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender* (Fortress, 1995).

^v Valerie Saiving’s 1960 article ‘The Human Situation: A Feminine View’ (widely available on the web) is sometimes regarded as marking the birth of feminist theology in the modern era.