



RESEARCH ARTICLE

When prayer goes wrong: A negative theology of prayer

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Abstract

Prayer is often taken to be the solution to all manner of things. But what happens when prayer is not so much the solution to the injustices of the world as part of the problem? In this article, I present Karl Barth's idea of the 'shadow-side' of creation as a way of querying the prayer-as-the-solution-to-everything trope and encouraging more disciplined thinking about prayer – one that is self-critical, alert to and realistic about the dangers of prayer and yet not without hope in the promise of prayer's remaking. I call this way of thinking about prayer a 'negative' theology of prayer.

Keywords: Karl Barth; prayer; *Schattenseite*; Lauren Winner

In this article I want to think through a particularly problematic problem in the theology of prayer. Problems in the theology of prayer usually have to do with agency questions (namely, the relation between divine and human agency), the effects of prayer (on God, the pray-er, both or none) and pastoral difficulties in the practice of prayer itself. When it is not the problem, prayer is often seen as the solution to all manner of things – as I will show below. The particular problem I want to explore in this article, however, is more fundamental than the usual problems in prayer discourse and focuses specifically on the need for a more realistic theory of prayer than one that views prayer as the solution to everything. What I am alluding to has been recently theorised as not only a problem, but a 'danger': the ever-present danger of prayer going wrong, and so inflicting damage and distress.¹ After a description of some of the ways prayer has been judged to be dangerous, I turn to the writings on prayer by Karl Barth as representative of the prayer-as-the-solution-to-everything trope and show that the prayer-sections in the *Church Dogmatics* are especially vulnerable to the dangers problem. Then, I reach beyond these prayer-sections to present Barth's idea of the *Schattenseite* ('shadow-side') of creation as a way of encouraging more disciplined thinking about prayer – one that is self-critical, alert to and realistic about the dangers of prayer and yet not without hope in the promise of prayer's remaking. I call this way of thinking about prayer a 'negative' theology of prayer.

¹Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

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When prayer goes wrong

The prayer-as-the-solution-to-everything trope is a strong feature in much of contemporary Anglophone theology. Whether it is George Lindbeck's magisterial turn to practices as bearers of truth, Stanley Hauerwas' urge to find in the practices of the church the supra-reliable and distinctive means of ethical decision-making, James K. A. Smith's confidence in the doxological practices of the church to reverse the 'cultural liturgies' of the world and their counter-formative dynamics, Luke Bretherton's finding in the Lord's Prayer an account of what a duty of care to refugees should involve, Sarah Coakley's insistence on the impossibility of the study of theology without prayer, or the contemplative turn currently under way within ecological theology and educational theory, prayer is worked hard in contemporary theological discourse.² Finding in the dynamics of prayer these sorts of positive possibilities is not itself a problem. Christian theologians have often turned to prayer as a means of grace and site of formation. The problem is not, then, looking to practices such as prayer for solutions to problems but, as Lauren F. Winner puts it, the unintended failure to 'acknowledge, let alone account for or respond to, the sin entailed by those practices'.³

In *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, a self-confessed extended quarrel with Hauerwas, Winner reaches for 'another way of talking about practices'.⁴ Against those who assume that the Christian practice of prayer is inherently and reliably good, Winner calls 'the church to be on the lookout for the ways good Christian practices may, and inevitably sometimes will, do the very opposite of what those practices were made, in their goodness (in God's goodness, and in God's good hopes for the church), to do'.⁵ Christian practices, she concludes, 'carry with them their own deformations'.⁶ Winner's exposé of the dangers of Christian prayer draws mostly from the mid-nineteenth-century diaries of Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard, a widow and owner of two plantations near Columbia, South Carolina. In these diaries, and other historical documents from roughly the same period, Winner uncovers some of the dangerously sophisticated ways prayer was used to service slavery. For example, we read of the way Keziah Brevard 'articulated her relationship with her slaves, and the work of managing a household that ran on slave labor, in the idiom of prayer'.⁷ We hear how she prayed about slavery (for her patience and her slaves' obedience, and to

²See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984); Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, 'Christian Ethics as Informed Prayer', in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 3–12; James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013); James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017); Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 126–74; Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013); Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: OUP, 2013); and Holly J. Hughes, Jean MacGregor and Marie Eaton (eds), *Contemplative Approaches to Sustainability in Higher Education: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016).

³Winner, *Dangers of Christian Practice*, p. 167.

⁴Ibid., p. 180.

⁵Ibid., p. 3.

⁶Ibid., p. 180.

⁷Ibid., p. 58.

petition God for good servants). And how 'family worship' was a particularly effective tool within the 'managerial repertoire' because it would

teach ... slaves ... an orderly and decent behavior; reclaim the roughness and fierceness of their nature; form their minds to modesty and mildness, and increase their love and respect to us, in a proportion as they advance in reverence and veneration towards Almighty God. In other words, this 'worship' had as its chief goal not, in fact, worship of God. Its chief goal was to teach those praying about their lot in life.⁸

Far from the formative means through which pray-ers are made fully alive, prayer here is dehumanising, destructive, dangerous and damaging – more means of sin than means of grace.

While Winner develops her dangers argument along historical lines, the idea that prayer is part of the problem rather than the solution to the injustices of the world remains evident in contemporary theology and practice. Think of the use of prayer in various contexts of spiritual abuse (e.g. so-called conversion therapy, healing ministries and purity culture); the damaging effect of male-dominated patterns of praying (in word and posture) as discussed by feminist theologians; prayer's complicity in coloniality and how it has suppressed opposition to and liberation from colonial Christianity; the way prayer can make traumatic experiences of reproductive loss all the more traumatic; and more still.⁹ Moreover, as Karen O'Donnell argues in her work on traumatic prayer, it is not only that prayer can be dangerous, but 'deadly'.¹⁰ These historical and contemporary examples show that a liturgy of violence can be perpetuated precisely by and through prayer and in a way that reinscribes the dynamics of oppression prayer should seek to oppose. Against such examples, the overwhelmingly positive embrace of prayer in contemporary theology feels naïvely optimistic: in practice, practice does not make perfect.

As Winner and others insist, the work of documenting and then accounting for sin in Christian practices must form part of systematic theological reflections on prayer. The embrace of empirical research methodologies by systematic theologians of the sort readily encountered in, for example, practical theology could help with that work.¹¹ Borrowing

⁸Ibid., pp. 62, 67. On the use of prayer in the service of slavery, see also Andrew Prevot, 'Christian Prayer in Black and Blue', in Ashley Cocksworth and John C. McDowell (eds), *The T&T Clark Handbook to Christian Prayer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 667–84. For further historical investigation into the deformative dimensions of prayer, see Lauren F. Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith: Anglican Religious Practice in the Elite Households of Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁹For example, see Bernadette Barton, *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* (New York: NYU Press, 2012); Brian Brock, *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), pp. 29–62; Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Praying with our Eyes Open: Engendering Feminist Liturgical Prayer* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995); Nancy Pereira Cardoso, 'De-Evangelization of the Knees: Epistemology, Osteoporosis, and Affliction', in Cláudio Carvalhaes (ed.), *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives: Only One Is Holy* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 119–23; Musa W. Dube Shomanah, 'Praying the Lord's Prayer in a Global Economic Era', *The Ecumenical Review* 49/4 (1997), pp. 439–50; and Karen O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb: Re-Conceiving Theology through Reproductive Loss* (London: SCM Press, 2022), pp. 77–109.

¹⁰O'Donnell, *Dark Womb*, p. 79.

¹¹To a certain extent, Coakley has embraced the empirical in the chapter on charismatic community life in her systematics. See Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, pp. 152–89. However, as Mary Catherine Hilker argues, there are questions as to whether the same optimistic conclusions of prayer could have

tools from practical theology could encourage better vigilance against prayer's problems as well as disclose new levels of complexity to prayer as the experiences of those damaged by prayer can more directly shape discourse on prayer. The work of accounting for sin in prayer also requires developing a Christian theology of prayer in a more self-critical mode: one that is, aware of its failings, realistic about prayer's dangers and alert to its precarity. My argument in what follows is that a negative theology of prayer can play a role in accounting for and responding to the sin entailed by prayer, but first I want to turn to Barth's ostensibly positive account of prayer.¹²

Karl Barth's positive account of prayer

I am focusing on Barth's theory of prayer for a set of reasons. He works prayer especially hard in critical sections of his *Church Dogmatics*, he generally assumes prayer to be a reliably positive means of Christian formation, he does not offer enough awareness of the lived reality that prayer can and does go wrong and he can be seen as a sort of prototype of the turns to prayer mentioned above that are currently trending in contemporary theology.

Prayer is positioned prominently in Barth's doctrine of the Christian life.¹³ In two ethical sections of his doctrine of creation, prayer is the culmination of his conception of what it means to be a creature before God.¹⁴ So, in *Church Dogmatics* III/3, the creature gains its creatureliness in faith, obedience and prayer – with prayer, as the chief exercise of faith, becoming the means through which the whole self is obediently gathered before God.¹⁵ And then, in *Church Dogmatics* III/4, Barth characterises human freedom in terms of Sabbath, confession and prayer – with prayer, again, functioning integratively and cumulatively.¹⁶ Finally, all this doxological attention culminates in the unfinished ethics of reconciliation which is structured explicitly around the petitions

been reached had Coakley's research site shifted into a more complex spiritual environment (e.g. a context of spiritual abuse). On this, see Mary Catherine Hilbert, 'Desire, Gender, and God-Talk: Sarah Coakley's Feminist Contemplative Theology', *Modern Theology* 30/4 (2014), pp. 575–81; and Ashley Cocksworth, 'On Prayer in Anglican Systematic Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22/3 (2020), pp. 383–411. I have more in mind what might happen when systematic theologians embrace the empirical as Natalie Wigg-Stevenson does in *Transgressive Devotion: Theology as Performance Art* (London: SCM Press, 2021) and as Clare Watkins models in *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020). In other words, I am interested in the sort of ecclesiological ethnography that focuses 'theological attention more readily upon the church's actual rather than theoretical identity' along the lines Nicholas Healy proposes in *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 3.

¹²By 'positive' I do not mean the opposite of negative. I mean more the assumption that prayer reliably and always forms pray-ers in positive (and not negative) ways, which I define later as close to the way the negative has been framed within the apophatic turn in political theology.

¹³For secondary literature on Barth, see Ashley Cocksworth, *Karl Barth on Prayer* (London: T&T Clark, 2015); and Cocksworth, 'Karl Barth's Very Theological Theology of Prayer', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Prayer*, pp. 447–67; John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995); Eberhard Jüngel, 'Invocation of God as the Ethical Ground of Christian Action: Introductory Remarks on the Posthumous Fragments of Karl Barth's Ethics of the Doctrine of Reconciliation', in *Theological Essays I* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), pp. 154–72.

¹⁴All references are to Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75) – hereafter, *CD* followed by volume, part and page number.

¹⁵Barth, *CD* III/3, pp. 265–88.

¹⁶Barth, *CD* III/4, pp. 87–115.

of the Lord's Prayer and thematically around the part-volume's ever-generative *leitmotif*, the invocation of God.¹⁷

The mood across and beyond these sections is emphatically positive and optimistic. For Barth, ecclesial practices are the primary drivers of doctrinal, ethical, spiritual and political formation. Hence in the ethics of reconciliation, he looks to the very churchy practices of baptism, prayer and the Lord's Supper to structure his most mature deliberations on the Christian life. Here and elsewhere, prayer comes to bear a heavy load in terms of 'ordering and cleansing ... desire',¹⁸ countering sin, gathering the church in its ministry and mission, revolting against the disorder of the world and actively anticipating the doxological end of all things. For Barth, the community is first gathered in prayer (CD IV/1), then built up by it (CD IV/2) and finally sent out into the world (CD IV/3) in prayerful action and witness.

In other words, prayer is understood to be the grace-propelled corrective to things gone wrong, countering the deformative dynamics of sin with an alternative way of being in the world. This counter-formative dynamic is emphatically at the heart of James K. A. Smith's cultural liturgies project, but it is there in Barth too. If we look at the architectonics of the fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth puts enormous faith in the countering logic of prayer. Countering the overreaching sin of pride (the sin of CD IV/1) is the movement of petitionary prayer whereby the pray-er is formed into a posture of absolute dependency on God, unlearning the habits of autonomy that are negatively characterised by Barth as 'self-help'. Countering the downward drag of sloth (the sin of CD IV/2) is the movement of the *sursum corda* whereby the pray-er's heart is lifted in the active invocation of God. And countering the sin of falsehood (the sin of CD IV/3) is 'true prayer' whereby the pray-er learns the truth of the glory of God and the hope of the Holy Spirit. Christians are formed by the things they do in church, which then ripples out, as it were, as the Christian community is sent into the world (§72) in faithful witness. This is the 'flow' of Barth's ecclesial imagination and the framework in which his conception of prayer sits. It works inside (from the church) out (to the world).¹⁹ And the unidirectionality of this 'flow' means that the general thrust of Barth's spirituality is centrifugal – it is active (rather than contemplative), vocal (rather than silent), moving outwards (rather than flowing inwards), always reordering disorder (rather than needing reordering itself).

A good example of what I mean by the idea that prayer mostly reorders disorder rather than needing reordering itself is Barth's demythologised demonology of the lordless powers in the ethics of reconciliation (§78.2). Whereas elsewhere in Barth's ethical writings some have encountered a frustrating level of abstraction – seen in, for example, the lack of case-studies or stories to flesh out the content of the Christian life – by the time Barth reaches his most mature ethical deliberations he offers an abundantly descriptive and profusely specific account of the lordless powers variously at work in the world around him, invading and implicating every aspect of life.²⁰ When he

¹⁷Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4 – Lecture Fragments* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981) - hereafter, *Chrl*.

¹⁸Barth, CD III/4, p. 101.

¹⁹I am borrowing here, and implying, the critique of 'flow' developed in Al Barrett, *Interrupting the Church's Flow: A Radically Receptive Political Theology in the Urban Margins* (London: SCM Press, 2020).

²⁰See Stanley Hauerwas, 'On Honour: By Way of a Comparison of Barth and Trollope', in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth's Birth* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), pp. 145–69. For charges of ecclesiological abstraction in relation to Barth's doctrine of

looks around the world, his world, he sees all sorts of disorder: from the transportation system that promises efficiency but delivers congestion, to the way slogans and advertisements promise ends they cannot possibly deliver, to the football frenzy that gripped the world at the time of his writing.²¹ The solution to these lordless powers and others is revolt. And Barth insists that 'the decisive action of their revolt against disorder ... is their calling upon God' in prayer, thanksgiving and praise.²² You can see why this side of Barth is so appealing to that propensity within ecclesial ethics to turn to the practices of the church to address any number of malformations in the cultural liturgies of the 'world'.²³

However, it is striking that, for all Barth says about the lordless powers in the ethics of reconciliation, for all that rich descriptiveness, for everything he says about the diverse ways the disorder of the world is lordlessly enacted and for all those calls to stand up to injustice and revolt against disorder in and through prayer, it does not seem to occur to him that the church and its practices might also be implicated, however subtly and unobviously, in the lordless danger he encounters everywhere but the church.²⁴ Revolt here is a one-way street: prayer revolts *against* things that operate lordlessly outside the walls of the church rather than itself needing to be revolted against.

An arresting example of revolting against prayer is the 'Pussy Riot prayer'. In February 2012, five young women in trademark colourful costume of the feminist post-punk collective, the Pussy Riot, entered Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which was reconsecrated in 2000 when Vladimir Putin took the presidency. When they entered the sanctuary, they did what many have done before them and prayed and sung songs. But this was a gathering of bodies to act in rebellious ways. They did not kneel, but stood; they did not close their eyes, but kept them open; they did not clasp their hands, but waved them high; they were not ordained, but lay; they were not men, but women. This was a prayer of protest. It was directed at the church's support for Putin during his election campaign. Although masked, this was an act of subversive unmasking of the lordless powers that operate precisely within the church and are disseminated through its practices. As quickly as the church was condemning the performance as 'blasphemous', others were seeing in this gathering of rebellious bodies a liturgical performance of its own kind. Although it broke liturgical rules, it remained 'liturgically literate' – seeking as it did to subvert liturgically the liturgy.²⁵ Indeed, as Nicola Slee says, 'to resist and protest against what is inadequate or

the church, see Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 207.

²¹Barth, *ChrL*, pp. 213–33. Overall, there are two groups of lordless power. The first group, the 'spiritual forces', include political (Leviathan), economic (Mammon) and ideological absolutism (especially political propaganda). The second group, 'chthonic forces', include technology, fashion, sports, pleasure and transportation.

²²Barth, *ChrL*, p. 212.

²³Whether Barth could be aligned fully with the ecclesial turn in Christian ethics is a matter of debate. See Joseph L. Mangina, 'The Stranger as Sacrament: Karl Barth and the Ethics of Ecclesial Practice', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1/3 (2002), pp. 322–39.

²⁴The closest Barth gets can be found in his discussion of propaganda (which is a lordless power of the ideological sort) where he admits that, 'If only we could say of the church that it does not engage in propaganda' (Barth, *ChrL*, p. 227). Apart from this brief admission, which is not developed further, the overall framing of the section remains the powers at work beyond the life of the church.

²⁵Graham McGeoch, 'Pussies Rioting and Indecent Praying: Transforming Orthodoxy in the Company of Marcella Althaus-Reid', *Feminist Theology* 26/3 (2018), p. 303.

oppressive is already to pave the way towards fresh and more adequate forms of faith' and sustainable theological discourses about prayer.²⁶ It became known as 'punk prayer', a form of 'indecent praying'; praying against prayer.²⁷ And it did what prayer, if we take Barth at his word, should do: that is, revolt against unjust structures of power wherever they might operate, even if they operate in the church and through its core practices. There are occasions, then, when the most doxological thing Christians can do is to refuse to pray as they ought and so refuse to collude with and extend the damage enacted in the name of prayer.

The shadow-side of prayer

I have, so far, highlighted the generally positive nature of Barth's account of prayer. While the general 'mood' (on this, more later) in nearly everything Barth has to say about prayer is positive, in this section I want to identify some shadowy inflections within the dynamics of prayer in order to clear space for a more textured, less 'rosy' theorisation of prayer.²⁸ Put differently, I want to explore the possibility of a negative theology of prayer. By 'negative' I do not mean the spiritual category of 'darkness' associated with, for example, John of the Cross' night of the soul (that is, a darkness that is nevertheless revelatory). Nor do I mean the way the term gets framed within the psychology of prayer as having to do with prayer's negative effects on the well-being of those who pray; though it is important to note that prayer-science does not assume that only good things come of prayer.²⁹ Nor finally do I mean the phenomenon of imprecatory prayer and the sort of prayer that is practised with the intent to cause harm.³⁰ Instead, I am reaching for something closer to the way the negative gets theorised in political theology.³¹ More explicitly, I am following the way the negative has been applied to Christian practices by Brandy Daniels by taking up, via Barth and in relation to prayer, Daniels' challenge 'to embrace ... a negative, critical, turn to practices'.³²

There are some resources within the formal prayer-sections of the *Church Dogmatics* to enable a more critical turn to prayer. One example is when Barth warns that 'the whole of human egoism, the whole of human anxiety, cupidity, desire and passion, or at least the whole of human short-sightedness, unreasonableness and stupidity, might flow into prayer (and that by divine commandment!), as the effluent from the chemical factories of Basel is discharged into the Rhine'.³³ Elsewhere he says similarly that prayer is 'made with all the imperfection and perversion and impotence of all

²⁶Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 79.

²⁷See McGeoch, 'Pussies Rioting'; see also the special issue of *Religion and Gender* 4/2 (2014) devoted to Pussy Riot's punk protest; and Nicola Slee, *Fragments for Fractured Times: What Feminist Practical Theology Brings to the Table* (London: SCM Press, 2020), pp. 60–78.

²⁸Winner, *Dangers of Christian Practice*, p. 167.

²⁹See Brandon L. Whittington and Steven J. Scher, 'Prayer and Subjective Well-Being: An Examination of Six Different Types of Prayer', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 20/1 (2010), pp. 59–68.

³⁰John F. Rossiter-Thornton, 'Case Reports: Prayer in Psychotherapy', *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 6/1 (2000), pp. 125–8.

³¹See David Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019).

³²Brandy Daniels, 'Abolition Theology? Or, the Abolition of Theology? Towards a Negative Theology of Practice', *Religions* 10/3 (2019), p. 192.

³³Barth, *CD* III/4, pp. 100–1.

things human'.³⁴ What flows into prayer is not pristine and rosy, but full of the murky discharges of sin. Another example is when Barth develops his extensive criteria of what counts as 'true prayer'.³⁵ Although he does not fill out the implications of prayer's negative side or develop corresponding criteria to judge what counts as 'false prayer', there is an assumption that such a side to prayer exists. Further, it is structurally significant that two of Barth's principal treatments of prayer are situated in the doctrinal context of creation and therefore amidst, not immune from, the ineradicable fragility of creaturely existence. It is a condition of creaturely occurrence that everything is bound to sin – and prayer is no exception. A final example drawn from the prayer-sections could be the role of confession. While petition takes prioritisation across Barth's writings, the prioritisation is a sort of *primus inter pares* in the sense of never to the detriment of other forms of prayer. 'Christian prayer is inevitably a confession of his own weakness and inability and unworthiness, of the whole lost condition in which he is discovered in the sight of God. ... To pray in the Christian sense means fully and unreservedly to admit and confess to God all our wretchedness.'³⁶ That prayer must be embedded with in community life and benchmarked against the petitions of the Lord's Prayer are further checks and balances Barth introduces to mitigate against the possibility of prayer going wrong, which again carries the assumption that prayer *can* go wrong.

However, as fast as effluent flows into prayer, at every turn Barth's optimism pulls him back to resolve the dangers of prayer internally within prayer's own salvific logics before they can cause real damage in the world. Although Barth may retain space for the confession of sins in prayer, the logic is still one of prayer fixing prayer without sufficient acknowledgement that sin can reach into the practice of confession itself. And, as Jonathan Teubner warns of Augustine, the idea that the corporate dimensions of prayer can protect against the dangers 'has its limits, for there is nothing guaranteeing that the community as a whole is not deformed in some fundamental way. In short, community-tested prayer cannot save us any more than our own desire-led prayer can.'³⁷ Ultimately, any danger in prayer is neutralised by Jesus Christ who 'is properly and really the One who prays'.³⁸ In Christ, our petitions 'become holy petitions'.³⁹ 'And this means that although what we do is in itself very unholy, even when we pray, it will not fail to be sanctified. There may indeed be an influx of that which is human, perverted and limited into our petitions. We shall come as we are, and God knows well what we are. But as our asking follows His command and is addressed to Him, it is necessarily ordered and purified.'⁴⁰ The strong christology of prayer, in the wrong hands, can hide all manner of injustice, even fabricating – to borrow imagery from Barth's doctrine of evil – 'a kind of alibi' under which the deformative dynamics of wickedness 'cannot be recognised and can thus pursue its dangerous and disruptive ways the more unfeared and unhampered'.⁴¹

³⁴Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 277.

³⁵Barth, *CD* III/4, pp. 91–115.

³⁶Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 267.

³⁷See Jonathan D. Teubner, 'Augustine on Prayer: Sin, Desire and the Form of Life', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Prayer*, p. 304.

³⁸Barth, *CD* III/4, p. 94.

³⁹Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 281.

⁴⁰Barth, *CD* III/4, p. 101.

⁴¹Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 299. As Barth does christologically, Paul (in Rom 8:26) does pneumatologically. That God the Spirit for Paul (or God the Son for Barth) is the one who prays resolves the paradox of prayer only so far as it accentuates the dangers. How do we account for malformations of prayer if it is God who

Outside of the prayer-sections, Barth's critique of religion, articulated with some force earlier in the *Church Dogmatics* (§17), can offer ways of thinking critically about religious practice.⁴² Part of the novelty of Barth's account of religion is that he does not think Christianity should try to sidestep the critiques of religion made by its modern despisers but instead embrace them. In fact, the critiques of Marx, Feuerbach and others apply first and foremost to the Christian religion: the principal target in Barth's critique of religion becomes Christianity in all its pious, doxological and liturgical attempts at religious self-justification before God. By such a logic, if God is 'against' religion, God is against prayer. As Matthew Myer Boulton argues, because prayer stands at the height of religious piety it comes closest to the judgement of God.⁴³ The more prayer presents as pious, the more it is judged by God as religious. Boulton even understands the fall as a 'fall to our knees, a fall into prayer', implying that prayer is not so much the solution to sin as its occasion.⁴⁴ However, the final word in Barth's critique is not religion's annihilation, but the promise of its remaking. Following a form of the greater the sinner, the greater the saint argument, the more Barth accentuates the disastrous misdirection of religion and its core practices, the more amazing is the grace that comes from religion's remaking as religion gets sublated, again via a christological dynamic, into the 'true religion' (or 'true prayer', when transposed into Barth's lexicon of prayer). The sin is made good, the damage healed, the danger avoided.

The example of the lordless powers above suggests that Barth underplays his critical hand in his mature writings on prayer in which the manifold sins and wickedness of the church are conspicuous by their absence from his great litany of the powers of lordlessness. Had Barth returned to the ruthlessness of his earlier critique of religion later in life, he might have turned his critical gaze to consider with as much descriptive detail the operation of lordlessness in the life of the church as well outside the church, countering the liturgical optimism of the ethics of reconciliation and initiating something a revolt against the disorder of prayer. It feels as though Barth becomes progressively entrapped by an ecclesial logic in ways of which the early Barth – and his radical revolt against the church – might have been a good deal more suspicious.

While the prayer-sections and the section on religion start to articulate a more textured understanding of prayer, the overwhelming dynamic in Barth's account of prayer remains, then, generally positive. Barth cannot resist the inclination to pull prayer out of the danger zone and cast it in the best possible light. However, there is one further strand of his thinking worth exploring which might push closer to a negative theology of prayer: Barth's idea of the 'shadow-side' (*Schattenseite*).

In an architectonical move echoing something of Calvin's swift shifting from prayer to double predestination in book three of the *Institutes*, in volume three of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth slips from the joy of prayer (§49.3) into the depths of disorder in his treatment of evil as Nothingness (§50). From the highs of prayer, through which pray-ers find themselves 'at the very seat of government, at the very heart of the mystery and purpose of all occurrence', Barth turns immediately to the lows of the 'opposition

prays? Does Paul risk providing a sort of pneumatological alibi under which prayer can pursue dangerous paths all the more unhampered?

⁴²Barth, *CD* I/2, pp. 280–361.

⁴³See Matthew Myer Boulton, *God Against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology through Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008).

⁴⁴Boulton, *God Against Religion*, pp. 41, 167.

and resistance to God's world-dominion'.⁴⁵ This curious textual juxtaposition renders prayer never far from evil in Barth's theological imagination. Arguably the strangest and most contradictory element in Barth's doctrine of evil is the short section on *Schattenseite* (§50.2), which has sustained a level of confusion and frustration among Barth's interpreters disproportionate to its length.⁴⁶ At his clearest, Barth wants to insist that the shadow-side is not Nothingness, and neither is it nothing. While Nothingness is 'that which God does not will' and as such is to be banished from creation, the shadow-side is more the 'negative aspect of creation and creaturely occurrence' undertaken in the goodness of creation.⁴⁷ Nothingness, for Barth, is evil in the strongest possible sense, as 'opposition and resistance' to God.⁴⁸ The *Schattenseite*, however, is less clear cut. It tends to sit awkwardly between good and evil, expressing itself in shadowy things like darkness, suffering, decay and death that are not evil in the proper sense (as privations of the good) yet do not really belong to the good either (as goods themselves).

It is true that in creation there is not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity; not only progress and continuation but also impediment and limitation; not only growth but also decay; not only opulence but also indigence; not only beauty but also ashes; not only value but also worthlessness. It is true that in creaturely existence, and especially in the existence of man, there are hours, days and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, youth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death.⁴⁹

The shadow-side has frustrated, perplexed and seemingly even annoyed several of Barth's interpreters. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, finds the *Schattenseite* 'the most difficult problem in Barth's treatment of evil', and a somewhat exasperated R. Scott Rodin concludes that 'there is simply no evidence for a shadowy side of creation, and its inclusion is a most troublesome and unfortunate feature of Barth's doctrine of evil'.⁵⁰

In what follows, I take the ambivalence that perplexes readers of Barth's *Schattenseite* as an advantage. The ambivalence is intentional, I think, and performs something of Barth's stated aim to disorientate the possibility of speaking about the nature of evil with much clarity or certainty. Given what evil is, Barth cautions that discourse on

⁴⁵Barth, *CD III/3*, pp. 288, 289.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 295–302.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 352, 295.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁴⁹Barth, *CD III/3*, pp. 296–7.

⁵⁰Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Left Hand of God in the Theology of Karl Barth: Karl Barth as a Mythopoeic Theologian', *Journal of Religious Thought* 25/1 (1968–9), p. 14; and R. Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 195. This position is supported by Wolf Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Philip G. Ziegler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005), p. 43; Günter Thomas, 'Sin and Evil', in Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth* (Oxford: OUP, 2019), p. 336; and Matthias D. Wüthrich, 'An Entirely Different "Theodicy": Karl Barth's Interpretation of Human Suffering in the Context of his Doctrine of *das Nichtige*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23/4 (2021), pp. 593–616. To add to the confusion, the shadow-side section in §50.2 sits at odds with its foreshadowing in §42.3.

evil can proceed only through 'broken thoughts and utterances'.⁵¹ I suggest this ambivalence, present in his writings on evil, needs to be carried over to discourse on prayer to initiate the sort of critical turn to practice suggested by a negative theology of prayer. Although Barth does not reference prayer in the *Schattenseite* section, he admits elsewhere that we 'are not in a position altogether to elude the shadow which is also characteristic of existence. Sooner or later, in one way or another, we shall have to give ear to this sad voice.'⁵² Indeed, as Ruether notes, 'the basic struggle between creation and chaos' is a tension 'which runs through and underlies every doctrine' of Barth's – and I am proposing to extend this observation into the practical domain.⁵³

On a fundamental level, then, Barth's *Schattenseite* makes the claim that creation – and so all creaturely occurrence – 'has not only a positive but also a negative side'.⁵⁴ The shadow impresses a 'remnant of chaos', 'an instability – a permanent endangerment of creation as such'.⁵⁵ For Barth, 'the negative aspect of creation is a reminder of this ... corruption'.⁵⁶ No better inoculated against the threat of chaos than any other creaturely occurrence, prayer balances precariously on the cusp of Nothingness, always 'on the verge of collapsing back into non-existence'.⁵⁷ Seen from the shadows, then, prayer is much more muddled and contradictory than simply and reliably either 'true' or 'false', pure or impure. Against the assumption of *Schattenseite*, attending only to the positive possibilities of prayer feels overly optimistic of a stability that is evident more in theory than practice and descriptively limited too, even distorted, by failing to do sufficient justice to the full – and that means contested – reality of prayer.

It would be convenient if evil somehow emerged as the solution to the problem of prayer, but this is not quite the case for several reasons. The spatial imagery Barth invokes throughout the *Schattenseite* section (sides, edges, boundaries, frontiers, verges) is not fully helpful. A negative theology of prayer needs to lean deeper into the shadowy ambiguities of creaturely occurrence to understand prayer as not simply something positive with potentially (and sometimes actually) dodgy edges, but *ipso facto* a site of inherent contestation. The place of prayer is a place of conflict. As well as leaning deeper into the shadows, a negative theology stays there for longer too. There are moments in Barth's discussion of *Schattenseite* when he sustains the tension of the shadow-side as caught awkwardly and unresolvedly between good and evil, but other times the tension proves too much. These are the occasions when, in a rush toward some sort of resolution, Barth comes to understand the shadow as an essential and necessary aspect of God's good creation. He wants too quickly to 'abandon the obvious prejudice against the negative aspect of creation and confess that God has planned and made all things well, even on the negative side'.⁵⁸ This is why Barth is compelled to fold into the shadow-side discussion his famed eulogy to Mozart to make the point that even discordant notes can be resolved by the grace of God into the praise of God; praise in minor key, but doxology nonetheless.⁵⁹

⁵¹Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 294.

⁵²Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 372.

⁵³Ruether, 'Left Hand of God', p. 4.

⁵⁴Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 296.

⁵⁵Thomas, 'Sin and Evil', p. 363.

⁵⁶Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 296.

⁵⁷The phrase is from John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd edn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985), p. 129.

⁵⁸Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 301.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 297–9.

That the shadows are not strictly evil but necessary limitations and imperfections, and could even praise God in their own ways, might make sense of physical death 'as a natural limitation', but the sort of dangers identified earlier in this article claim no cause for rejoicing.⁶⁰ The spatial distinction between Nothingness and the shadow no longer holds: these shadows have manifestly crossed the frontier into evil as radically opposed to the will of God. A negative theology of prayer needs, then, to go further than Barth. It needs to dwell deeper in the *Schattenseite* and for longer, refusing the rush to make positive the negative. It means dwelling deeper than even Winner who concludes that Christian practices ultimately remain gifts from God, albeit damaged in the reception of those gifts.⁶¹

In addition to sustaining the tension of prayer's inherent problematic, a negative theology of prayer encourages something like the sort of disciplined practices of alertness recommended in Ephesians.⁶² 'Pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert' (Eph 6:18; see also Col 4:2), and be especially alert to the ways prayer, and theological accounts of prayer, can 'perpetuate and produce harm'.⁶³ If prayer is never without a shadow, a negative theology of prayer demands a heightened awareness of dangers, self-critique and the assumption that there is always another side to the story of prayer to be told. Indeed, communities of pray-ers cannot disavow their connection to prayer's history of violence. If pray-ers share in the positive possibilities of prayer, they share too in its legacy of dangers, damages and malformations. As such, Winner even wonders whether anthologies of Christian prayer should include material drawn from and informed by its uncomfortable history as a way of disturbing prayer's piety with a permanent reminder of its violent past. This negative side of prayer is assumed by Pauline material elsewhere in the New Testament. The significance of Romans 8 to a negative theology of prayer is not so much its pneumatological resolution to the problem of prayer's failure, as it is often taken to be, but its stated paradox that prayer – no matter how hard we try – is inherently conflicted. Christians are called to a life they cannot live as they ought. Instead of trying to resolve the sort of aporia suggested by Paul's failure to pray, a negative theology of prayer accepts it and when it ceases trying to resolve it, it is most receptive to the subjunctive possibilities presented by the tension. To think negatively about prayer requires cultivating a 'spiritual discipline of suspended uncertainty',⁶⁴ recognising shadowiness, facing up to failure, being alert to the 'negative outcomes and/or by-products of Christian practices', revolting against them and resisting the urge to make too much theological sense of the inherent paradox of prayer.⁶⁵

Why doesn't Barth tread a more critical path in his theology of prayer? This has something to do with the 'mood' of his writings on prayer.⁶⁶ As mentioned above, Barth generally writes and is read in the indicative and imperative moods. The strong

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 74.

⁶¹Winner, *Dangers of Christian Practice*, p. 157.

⁶²This strengthens my earlier case for an empirical turn within systematic theology in order to bring systematic theological reflection on prayer closer to the lived experiences of those who actually pray.

⁶³Daniels, 'Abolition Theology?', p. 3.

⁶⁴Catherine Keller, 'The Cloud of the Impossible: Embodiment and Apophasis', in Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (eds), *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 39.

⁶⁵Daniels, 'Abolition Theology?', p. 6.

⁶⁶For the 'moods of faith', see David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 45–51.

presence of the imperative mood is shown in Barth's linking of prayer with divine command and human obedience. The fundamental imperative of prayer is Jesus' instruction: 'pray, then, like this' (Matt 6:9). Prayer is indicative because it is invested with formative significance. It gives shape to human lives and bears a heavy load in terms of the sorts of (positive) formation discussed above. To drive a critical turn means, then, switching moods into one that Barth does not readily inhabit: the interrogative, which encourages ongoing testing, questioning, critique and thus heightened alertness to the possibility of prayer going wrong. A negative theology of prayer is a theology of prayer in the interrogative in the way it faces doubts, critiques and radical suspicion.⁶⁷ However, a theology of prayer cannot live in the interrogative mood alone. A fuller theology of prayer gathers up the moods and weaves them together in such a way that makes them fully alive, fully integrated and intensified and balanced. Such an account needs to retain the critical stance of the interrogative (and its alertness to danger without needing to over-resolve the conflicts inherent in prayer) alongside the imperative (to keep praying), the indicative (to pray 'like this' and not like that), the optative (the desire for prayer's eschatological healing) and the subjunctive (the 'what if', to expand the repertoire of prayer from within and beyond ecclesial life to encounter the Spirit in new and unfamiliar ways).⁶⁸ So for all the hesitancy of the negative, I am not suggesting endless negation. Prayer is hope, after all. There will be an end to all this. It is not that prayer will end (as Boutlon imagines),⁶⁹ but the dangers that come from praying on earth rather than in heaven will cease. We live in the hope that the liability for prayer to go wrong will one day end – that we can finally pray as we ought, free from prayer's damage and damaging of others. In the meantime, a negative theology of prayer integrates suspicion of any form of praying that promises too much and a fundamental concern to open new theological imaginaries from the broken fragments of prayer's multiple failures.

Conclusion

We know prayer can do great things; we know from Winner and others that the worst things can also be performed in the name of prayer. A negative theology of prayer does not present a neat resolution to the danger problem, and part of the discipline of a

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 50.

⁶⁸To begin to pray as we ought might require unlearning how we have been taught to pray in order to discover new forms of praying. For examples of prayer in the subjunctive, see O'Donnell's experimentation with new forms of prayer in *The Dark Womb*, pp. 162–85. Further examples include Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the End of the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020) and Nicola Slee, *Praying like a Woman* (London: SPCK, 2004); and Slee, *Abba, Amma: Improvisations on the Lord's Prayer* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2022). Winner includes examples of 'praying against prayer' in the subjunctive mood, such as when 'Slaves prayed "Set us free" – and, once the War came, "oh Lord, please send the Yankees on and let them set us free," a prayer that Minnie Davis recalled her mother praying inwardly, every time she had to listen to a preacher preaching obedience' (Winner, *Dangers of Christian Practice*, p. 70). Also, Daniels' provocation 'to consider and attend to practices that are not typically considered Christian' encourages doxological discoveries in the subjective mood beyond the life of the church (see Daniels, 'Abolition Theology?', p. 14). For a persuasive argument that ethical formation does and should take place both inside and outside the church, see Jenny Leith, 'Radical Democratic Discipleship: Encountering the Spirit in Civic Life', *Political Theology* 22/6 (2021), pp. 510–26.

⁶⁹Barth's work points to the idea that ... [the liturgy] will end. Prayer and praise and thanksgiving will end. Inasmuch as God promises not only to reconcile but also to redeem humankind, the work of reconciliation will, in the end, pass away – and so will worship.' See Boulton, *God Against Religion*, p. 184.

negative theology of prayer might be about avoiding the temptation to find one. Theological discourse needs to be alert to the dangers of prayer and to avoid thinking of practices such as prayer as oddly inerrant or immune from the messy realities of being human. I have suggested that the shadow-side in §50.2 of the *Church Dogmatics* offers some conceptual resources to provide a more realistic account of the inherently conflicted nature of prayer: a reminder that all things, even the best of things, are never far from evil. So long as we cannot pray as we ought, prayer will always be dangerous – really if not potentially. This is not enough of a reason to stop praying altogether, but it is enough of a reason to develop interrogative discourses in order to approach prayer with a disciplined alertness to its shadowy nature and inherent conflictedness. I have suggested that a negative theology of prayer attempts to model some of the possible contours of what form this sort of critical turn in prayer-discourse might take.⁷⁰

⁷⁰An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2018 Annual Karl Barth Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary. I am grateful to conference participants for conversation and feedback. Likewise, I owe thanks to James Butler, Matthias Grebe, Andrew Hayes, Karen O'Donnell and Gabby Thomas for reading and providing vital feedback on later drafts.

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