

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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ANDREW PREVOT is an associate professor of theology at Boston College. He spoke with Boisi Center interim assistant to the director Jack Nuelle before his September 25, 2018 lunch colloquium entitled, “Prayer in a Violent World.” The following conversation touches on the role of prayer in combating societal injustice, the use and misuse of prayer, and a call for a theology of ‘thinking prayer’. It has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

NUELLE: Can you give a brief description of your project?

PREVOT: Sure. The title for the presentation for today, “Prayer in a Violent World,” is closely related to the title for the second half of my first book. The book is called *Thinking Prayer*, and the second half is “Spirituality in a World of Violence.”

What I’m really trying to think about, in that part of the book and in this presentation, is the question of whether spirituality has something to contribute in the resistance – or to the resistance – against our violent context, world structures, and so on. Often we might think of it as an alternative: you can live a kind of solitary contemplative life or you can be actively engaged in the world, and you have to make a choice between the two. I view that as a false dichotomy, and I think if we look at some of the greatest social movements and activists, there is often a deep and profound spiritual, or even prayerful, component to them. That’s what I’m trying to clarify in my work, or at least in this part of my work, and offer to others.

NUELLE: Can you speak on how you would bridge that divide? Is there not an inherent conflict between living a contemplative life and translating that contemplation to loud political action?

There seems to be, at least on the surface, a disconnect between those two things.



PREVOT: To me, there are two very broad ways in which spirituality is helpful or significant in a world of violence. The first can be understood by looking at the victims -- at what they need and what they are doing and how they are speaking. In many cases, they are crying out to God in prayer. There may be psalms of lament that they’re singing or praying. There may be requests, petitions. There may even be, paradoxically, hymns of praise -- praising a God who will, perhaps, rescue them one day from their

situation. I think prayer and, more broadly, a spiritual life can provide comfort and strength to people who are in the midst of suffering. It can provide them with a language in which they can express and give voice to what they are going through, as well as an audience, a divine audience, who will listen to them and perhaps have mercy upon them.

The fact that it does not immediately solve their problems does not seem to deter many people from crying out to God in prayer. Even those who may doubt the existence of God will sometimes, because of their suffering, be brought to pray, perhaps to God or perhaps to they-know-not-whom or what. So if you look at the victims, that’s one way to understand the work that prayer is doing in a violent world.

The second thing is to think about prayer and spirituality in the process of moral formation. How do you build up a sense of a strong moral character? How do you examine yourself and your own complicity in the sinful structures of the world?

There are many traditions of self-examination that have a spiritual dimension to them, not least of which is the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, which is a very prayerful tradition. One of the examples that I’ll talk about today is Dean Brackley, S.J., who wrote a great book on the Igna-

tian spiritual tradition and its political significance in our troubled world. It's called *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*. He is a good example of someone showing the power that spirituality has to form us as more conscious, free, and morally aware subjects in the world.

NUELLE: So, the idea is that we are formed ethically and oriented to the true God through prayer, and then are able to use that new formation to enact social change?

PREVOT: Yes. That formation may mean, for instance, freeing oneself from attachments that get in the way of costly acts of solidarity that are actually demanded. If you are living your life based solely on trying to gain more wealth or power or honor, then you are not going to be very free to help those who are in need in a sustained, organized way. But if you are dedicated to live only for the justice and mercy that God demands, then that is the whole sum of your life's work. I think you cannot really reach that level of dedication unless you actually have some sort of spiritual practice sustaining that relationship. That level of dedication is what will free someone, or has the power to free someone, to give themselves completely to others.

NUELLE: We hear this refrain all the time, politicians calling for "thoughts and prayers" in reaction to horrific acts of violence, a school shooting, for instance. However, it clearly is not a bad thing to pray for victims of violence. Is it good, in itself, to pray even if maybe the direction of that prayer is misguided or obscured by political motivations? Is not the act of taking a moment to pray, even if it is only on a surface level, good?

PREVOT: If the choice is, "Do I pray in response to a tragedy or not?", I do not see why praying would be a bad thing. The problem with these kinds of appeals to "thoughts and prayers" is that they are actually meant to stifle any meaningful action. Those sentiments are being offered as a substitute for doing something at a political level or even at a interper-

sonal level about these problems. That is why they ring hollow, and that is why they seem insincere. It is really a performative contradiction, because if you really thought about and reflected on what it means to pray, you would realize that you are exposing yourself to the judgment of God. You are laying your soul bare before the source of all goodness, peace, and holiness in the world, who clearly does not want you to be prioritizing whatever campaign contributions you may be

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receiving from the NRA over the precious lives of children or of other persons.

NUELLE: It rings hollow to somehow place your community or political obligations in the same conversation as your obligations to God.

PREVOT: We should pray in solidarity with the victims of these tragic events, and be thinking through the implications of our practices of prayer. If that was what "thoughts and prayers" actually meant, then I think you could see a great transformative impact coming from that spiritual practice. But we do not often mean that when we say "thoughts and prayers," but are rather offering that statement as an alternative to doing anything else, which is the problem.

NUELLE: The way we think and talk about God now, in a secular age, seems important because we have all of these often problematic connotations attached to God. So if you have somebody praying to God without having made that thought process or thought journey to try to unencumber God from all of these constructs, it seems to me that what you

are ultimately praying to is an idol. Is that part of the issue here?

PREVOT: It is, yes. Paul famously says that we do not know how to pray as we ought, and I think that's true. In part it is because God is a mystery, and it is very difficult to distinguish the true and living God from the many idols that we might be conjuring up in our own minds, imaginations, cultures and so on. There is a need for a long process of rigorous discernment with respect to whom I am actually praying. Many of my students come in with a sense of God as a sort of bearded Gandalf-looking figure in the clouds. Typically white male, old, wanting to yell at them for whatever they did last weekend. And who may be able to, if they are nice enough, give them a small blessing here or there in life. We need to dedicate ourselves to exploring what this mystery really is in a deeper sense. This is why the title of my book, in fact, is *Thinking Prayer*. It means having a life of prayer and then having a life of the mind in order to try to understand, "What or who is the God that is worthy of such worship and devotion? What God will hear our prayers? How should we pray, given certain things that we might know about who God is and what God wants?"

NUELLE: It seems to me that you think that this is an obligation for everyone, from the academic theologian, to the churchgoer, to the kind of person who is just existing in the world.

PREVOT: Right. Theology as I understand it -- that is, as thinking prayer -- is something that anyone can do, and I take it a lot of people are doing it in small and large ways without having a professional theology degree. What the professionals can do is give people support, resources, and more information about a tradition of doing this that can help. I assume that people who are praying and thinking people are already engaged in some form of this practice. I don't want to have a condescending attitude towards that.

In many ways I think that uneducated people have taught me most what it

means to pray. The slaves who were denied education developed these practices of prayer in the hush arbor. We have this tradition of slave spirituals that comes to us from those experiences; I think about those, and it teaches me something about how to pray.

So thinking, yes, but people in the academy do not have a monopoly on thinking.

NUELLE: That seems important, because academics are defined by how they think and how well they think for their livelihood. It is easy to silo this space, because it is narrowed to people who are paid to think.

PREVOT: Right, and our best academics are actually thinking about things and not simply conforming to whatever ideas are trending at the moment. But all of us need to be called, again and again, to renew our thoughts and to renew our lives of prayer to the extent that we are open to that and have that.

NUELLE: To conclude our interview, are there specific ways you see prayer aiding in the fight against present injustices? Not that these injustices have suddenly appeared, but to focus on what tends to be dominating the news cycle or our collective consciousness, such as clerical sex abuse or racial injustice in America, gun violence, etc.

PREVOT: That is a really good question. Let me focus on the clerical sex abuse issue. One of the things that is horrifying about it is that so many people depend on the Church for their spiritual life and their prayer life. They go to Mass or they have spiritual direction with a priest -- these kinds of ecclesial practices which sustain their faith in God. This is one of the reasons why the abuse of power that we are seeing is so damaging, because you might think, "I need to turn to God to pray about this or to find some sort of solace." But the very thing that would typically mediate such an encounter has now become the threat. The stakes are extremely high for the Church in terms of changing its culture -- to really

siding with the victims and survivors, to commit itself to speaking the truth about what has been going on, and to investigating to figure out how to make a change.

I do not think Pope Francis was wrong to ask everyone in the Church to pray, to fast, in response to these events -- to perhaps find greater moral clarity from that. However, I would urge people to pray in solidarity with the victims of the sexual trauma. I would urge everyone to think about what the survivors might want to say to God, to listen to them, and then let that inform your prayer. That is absolutely crucial if the Church is going to be able to continue as a source of prayer in the world, one that resists violence and is not instrumental to violence.

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