

Turning points

by [Paul J. Griffiths](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue



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It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined.

Changes of mind aren't superficial or easy things. Mine have usually come as forced exits from the comfort of myself to somewhere more painful. I have had to learn to be beside myself.

In the late autumn of 1976, in the ground-floor reading room of the University of Oxford's New Bodleian Library, I decide that I need to be baptized. I'm 20. It's a

sunny day, I've just had my morning coffee in the King's Arms across the street, and I've been reading Athanasius in preparation for a tutorial on the Arian heresy. The tableau—the sun across the blond wood reading tables, the soft smells of damp wool and old paper, the feel of sandals on my feet as I walk up and down beside the tall stacks of shelves—is clear to me still. Baptism is one decision among several: I also decide which languages I need to learn to read, or to read better (French, German, Latin, Greek), and which thinkers I need more intimate acquaintance with (Augustine, Heidegger, Wittgenstein).

I go, a few days later, to speak with my college chaplain, Trevor Williams, about being baptized. He treats me with kindness and undertakes to instruct me in preparation for baptism the following Easter. He is Anglican, and so I am baptized into the Anglican Communion. I consider no other. I am English, after all, and this is Oxford. I am hazily aware that there are other churches, other communions; but I give almost no consideration to their differences, and likewise none to Anglican specificities. I think, with some justice, that I already know more theology than most Anglicans, and that what I need is simply the sacrament. Six months later or so, at Easter in 1977 at the church of St. Mary Magdalene in Oxford, I am baptized and subsequently become a regular communicant and occasional petitioner of God for this and that.

I was then—it seems to me now, more than three decades later—as profoundly self-centered as most people of that age. And the reception of the sacraments had no transformative effect upon the fabric of my experience or upon my intellectual passions—none, at least, then discernible to me. I would not have wanted them to. But in fact, I now think, the reception of the sacraments was efficacious: it began gradually to set me aside, to place me beside myself, and, equally slowly, to make of my studies less an instrument for self-gratification and the domination of others and more an ecstasy of response to God.

Five years after my baptism, in the late spring of 1982 on a cold, bright day by Lake Mendota in Madison, Wisconsin, I find myself again beside myself, this time with anger and frustration. I am 26. I have been for some time studying Indian Buddhist thought and am at the moment receiving instruction from Geshe Lhundup Sopa in the technicalities of Buddhist metaphysics. He is a monk and a scholastic, then perhaps in his fifties, trained in the systematic thought of the Tibetan Gelug school. He is teaching a graduate seminar at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where I am a student in a doctoral program in Buddhist studies. He is my adviser and has

been teaching me for close on a year, especially in the *Abhidharmakosa*, a fourth-century Sanskrit summa of Buddhist thought; but I am angry with his teaching methods and with him and want to find a way out.

There is a long distance between Oxford and Madison and, in a different way, between the study of theology in the former place and that of Buddhist metaphysics in the latter. I have traversed those distances theologically. My Oxford studies and my baptism have raised for me the theological question of what Christians should think and teach about long-lived traditions of religious thought and practice other than their own. I had decided, with the absurd confidence of youth and still as an Oxford undergraduate, that I would answer this question, and that in order to do so I must gain substantive expertise in an alien tradition by learning to speak it as a second first language—to handle its lexicon and syntax as if I were a native speaker. I chose, for local and contingent reasons, to do this with Indian Buddhism, which involves the study of Sanskrit and, eventually, Tibetan, and after beginning those studies at Oxford I moved to Wisconsin to pursue them in greater depth. That is what has led me to the study of the *Abhidharmakosa* under the tutelage of Geshe Sopa.

Sopa teaches as a scholastic and as one thoroughly textualized. He has memorized the texts from which he teaches—the Tibetans like to say that if you have your learning in a book on the shelf at home, then of course you don't really have it; it needs to be in your head, ready to go—and he teaches and thinks in deep conversation with his texts. Each class begins with a chant of the verses memorized for that day and proceeds to oral exposition of the text. Sopa has no interest in the questions that concern me—questions about textual transmission, about versions, about whether there are good reasons to think that the central claims of the texts he expounds are true, and about the relations between Buddhism and Christianity; he simply teaches, calmly. If he does not find a question interesting or thinks it irrelevant to the matter at hand, he smiles and nods and leaves it aside by returning to the text. He embodies his text and gives voice to it.

I want other things. I want to be given the skills that will provide me an academic career. I want my questions answered. I want him to argue with me. I do not want to submit to his text, and certainly not to him. My anger is about all those things. I vent it, take another adviser, finish my work with dispatch—a 600-page dissertation on Indian Buddhist meditation-theory, arduously typed and retyped—find a job at the University of Chicago and begin, with rapidity and ambition, to claw my way up the

academic ladder.

Geshe Sopa placed me beside myself with anger. He also showed me, though I was not then remotely ready to see it, what it might be like to set oneself aside in favor of a textual tradition, to permit oneself to be overwritten by it and made its creature. His lessons in this I can now see for what they were, and I am grateful for them. I learned from him what I had not learned from my Christian teachers, which is how to read. It took me a decade or so to begin to make sense of the lesson and to begin to use it as a reader of the Christian text. That is a practice in which I am still engaged and will be until death and beyond.

Spring at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana is a gorgeous time: the campus is especially beautiful. Mary, golden atop the dome that can be seen from almost everywhere on campus, smiles, and the world is as it should be. But in the spring of 1988, five years after I've received my doctorate, I find myself angry once again, angry enough that I am ready to resign from an academic career then in its early stages. I am 32. The occasion for this anger is a seminar I have recently attended, given by a colleague from the anthropology department (I am teaching in theology) on the subject of Christian-Muslim relations. I have raised with him the question of whether, in his view, it is ever appropriate to argue with Muslims about the adequacy of their understanding of God in light of Christian trinitarian conviction. He replies, calmly and reasonably, that this is never appropriate, that we are surely past that outdated and harmful emphasis on apologetics and mission. Isn't understanding what we need to seek?

I argue, too polemically and too angrily and without subtlety, that he is selling the idea of truth short and that being a Christian means, among other things, having deep convictions about the crucial significance of Jesus Christ for the entire cosmos and thus understanding the Christian narrative as capable of embracing all others just as Christ was eager to embrace everyone, Muslims included. I convince him of nothing and spend the next few days stewing over the event.

It gradually assumes symbolic significance for me. I come to see it as representative of all that is bad about the academic life. If what the academy does to Christians is make them incapable of seeing the importance of the gospel's truth, then why am I in it? Am I not a Christian? Am I not supposed to be preaching the gospel? How can I bear to spend a career immured in this hell? I convince myself that I can't. After several days of discussion with long-suffering faculty colleagues— Joseph Wawrykow

acts a saintly part here—and an even longer-suffering and supportive spouse, I decide to resign my position effective at the end of the academic year and write a letter formally saying so to my chair and dean. That dean, Nathan Hatch, now president of Wake Forest University, is humane and perceptive. He tells me that he will sit on my resignation letter for six weeks, and if at the end of that time I still want to resign, he will accept it. If not, he will tear it up.

For the next few weeks I am, again, beside myself. There is, I am sure, something importantly right in my judgments about the academic enterprise; but it is equally obvious to me that there is something wrong with the passion and vehemence with which my own sense of being right is suffused. I become increasingly aware, too, that I have real and nonnegotiable practical responsibilities to my wife and two small children (then one and four years old). I back down and withdraw my resignation and am graciously received back into the academic community at Notre Dame—much more graciously than I deserve.

I was learning something. The most important thing, I now think, was the lesson that, yes, Jesus does trump the university, and that, yes, my primary loyalty is to him. I had, for the previous five years, been trying hard to forget Geshe Sopa's lessons in reading and to dry out my baptismal soaking of 11 years before in the harsh fires of academic ambition. What Augustine likes to call the *libido dominandi* had assumed an excessive importance: I had published my first book; a second was on the way; I was publishing essays and articles; and I had my eye on early tenure. Everything was in place, but my affections—my loves—were misweighted and that out-of-jointness was in part corrected, or at least moved in the direction of correction, by this incident.

This lesson began to bear fruit in ways that even I could see. I found a renewed delight in my sacramental life as an Episcopalian; I sought my local bishop's permission to preach, which he gave, and for a number of years I preached, off and on, in pulpits in the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Indiana; and I began to write more explicitly theological work, combining my historical and exegetical work on Buddhism with Christian-theological analyses of and responses to that tradition and writing some books and essays on how Christians should respond to the facts of religious diversity. I began to read widely and with passion in contemporary theology—George Lindbeck and Alasdair MacIntyre were important here, as later was John Milbank; I discovered Hans Urs von Balthasar; I read the early encyclicals of John Paul II and as a result began to read almost everything that appeared above his

name. These men, of course, do not agree about everything; what I liked in them was the primacy that each of them gave to the Christian claim and the intellectual confidence with which they expounded that primacy.

Anger is, among the seven deadly sins, the most ambiguous. It is the least clearly sinful and the most possibly fruitful. For me, it has often accompanied the ecstasy of being drawn away from myself, set beside myself and thereby closer to God.

Independence Day 1996, in Chennai (once Madras), South India. A hot day, like all July days there. The sweat runs between my shoulder blades as I pace the roof. I am 40. I am spending the summer in a Jesuit-run ashram called Aikiya Alayam, on the edge of the city. I am teaching now at the University of Chicago Divinity School and working on a book called *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*. I am in India to read and write, and for a breathing space. The work is going well, and I can see the shape of the book before me. I am Anglican still: I am going to the nearest congregation of the Church of South India on Sundays and attending daily mass with the Jesuits during the week. After a week or so and some considerable conferring among themselves, they invite me to participate fully in their daily mass, and I happily do so: I've not much notion of the doctrine and discipline of the Catholic Church on these matters and so am not fully sensible of the complexities of this position. I am, however, grateful for the hospitality shown me.

The sisters who prepare food and run the place had surprised me the week before by bringing me a special cake on the 29th of June. They assumed that I would know why, but I don't. They laughed, and although we have little language in common, they eventually got it across to me that this day is the Solemnity of Peter and Paul and therefore my name day, my saint's day, a proper occasion for celebration. They know that I am not Catholic, and I think they were amused by the depth of my Protestant ignorance about things that matter. I was moved almost to tears by the unexpectedness of the gesture and by the vistas opened to me by it: a world in which the communion of saints is an everyday matter. This was the beginning of another derailment, another progressive setting aside of myself.

It deepens a few days later. I'm walking past the Catholic Cathedral in Chennai, pondering whether to go in, when a large crowd of people makes a noisy exit. They gather behind a decrepit but beribboned and garlanded flatbed truck, and as it moves slowly away, they walk behind it, singing. More and more people join them as the truck makes a slow pilgrimage through the city. Bad (to my ear) and very loud

recorded music blares from speakers on the truck. People begin to dance and sing. I follow, wondering what is going on. I manage to ask and to understand some part of the answers given me. I learn that an image of St. Thomas the Apostle is being paraded through the city as part of the celebration of that saint's feast day on July 3. I have long known that Thomas was supposed to have brought Christianity to India, and this piece of knowledge now comes alive. I learn that his relics are enshrined in the cathedral and that there is great local devotion to him. By now there are thousands of people following the truck-borne image, and I, along with them, am transported.

The next day, Independence Day, I walk the roof of the ashram in the heat of the afternoon (mad dogs and Englishmen: everyone else is sleeping), restless and still ecstatic. I contrast the deep and direct devotional passions I've seen the day before with the staid and oddly English worship I've been experiencing in the Church of South India. I think of the Jesuits and their mass, celebrated early in the morning with the cool breeze blowing through the portico, the sweet smells of flowering trees whose names I do not know, and the soft mixture of Tamil and Latin caressing my ears. I meditate upon the sisters who knew my name day when I did not and gave me the ability to celebrate it. I think of John Paul II's witness and work.

It is suddenly and strikingly obvious that I should seek full unity with the bishop of Rome. I've long known that there are no theological or other conceptual difficulties for me in that move; and I have occasionally toyed with the thought of what it would be like to be Catholic. But it had remained a thought, and now it is a conviction. Five months later, on the third Sunday of Advent in 1996, I am received into the Catholic Church at the parish church of St. Thomas Apostle on the South Side of Chicago.

It's a bright, cool day in Durham, North Carolina. I'm 53. I'm writing the account you are reading not in an ecstasy of self-forgetfulness and not in anger, but with some puzzlement at the difficulty of doing such a thing. I've written it in vignettes rather than as a connected, sequential account because that is how it appears to me. I am deeply opaque to myself in the present and even more so as the present recedes into the past. My Oxford self of 1976 is almost completely gone, and my later selves in Wisconsin, Notre Dame and Chennai are not much more available. What stands out, in bright relief, are tableaux: short sequences of events whose details are vivid and whose power remains strong. But the connections that would string those vignettes into a narrative are mostly dark; to supply them would require an act of imagination at present beyond me and were I to attempt it now the result would be

a fiction, a figment, a phantasm.

What remains is gratitude for the God-given gift of time, of thought, and of the companionship of the saints, living and dead. Two among the dead—John Henry Newman and Aurelius Augustinus—have been my constant companions since even before my Oxford days. They showed me, before I had any hope of understanding it (I still have not much), the scope and flexibility and fascination of the gospel's challenge to thought. An ever-present thread in my intellectual life (how hard it is to use that phrase without pomposity) has been this sense, inchoate and undeveloped, of gratitude for the gift of tools with which to think. My Anglican teachers gave me Christian language and a first acquaintance with the work of those who had used it before me. My Buddhist teachers showed me what it is to submit, joyfully and with intellectual energy, to a tradition of thought and practice and how, therefore, to read.

And my more than 12 years in the warmly embracing arms of the Catholic Church have given me the whole of the tradition, a vastly expanded range of authorities and teachers with whom to think, and a cloud of witnesses, living and dead, to chide me and support me and take me further from this burdensome self, whose spectacular inner theater it is the business of Christians gradually to transform into an outer-directed voice, a small note in the chorus of praise to the God who is not a being among beings, but rather the giver of being itself. As Augustine writes: *non solum non peccemus adorando, sed peccemus non adorando*, which is to say that adoration of God is both necessary and sufficient for the avoidance of sin. I have not changed my mind about that, but I have come to see its meaning more clearly.

Other installments in this "How my mind has changed" series:

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