“Prayer, after All, Is but Thinking towards God” Philosophical Theology and Private Prayer in the Spirituality of John Baillie

James M. Gordon

School of Divinity History, Philosophy and Art History, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3FX, Scotland, UK; james.gordon@abdn.ac.uk

Abstract: John Baillie was a leading Scottish theologian during the middle third of the 20th Century. A son of the manse and a staunch Presbyterian, his intellectual journey engaged the disciplines of philosophical and systematic theology. Following 15 years in North America he returned to Edinburgh as Professor of Divinity in 1934. In the decade 1929–1939 Baillie published several substantial books of theology and a volume of prayers. While his theology during this period was speculative and liberal, the prayers reveal a piety which is biblically rooted, Christ centered, and theologically robust. By comparing the prayers with his theological publications of the same period, this essay explores the spirituality of John Baillie by examining the conversation between his philosophical theology and personal piety, with a particular focus on The Place of Jesus Christ in Modern Christianity (1929), A Diary of Private Prayer (1936), and Our Knowledge of God (1939). Each book is placed in context, and Baillie’s spirituality in the prayers is shown to be significantly indebted to his particular intellectual and conceptual understanding of knowledge of God, human experience of God as mediated immediacy, and the central place of Jesus Christ in his Christian piety.

Keywords: John Baillie; prayer; knowledge of God; Christology; philosophical theology; religious experience

1. Introduction

John Baillie was a man of prayer. He was also a consummate churchman, a theologian generously described as “orthodox liberal” (Fergusson 1993, pp. 123–54), and an ecumenical activist and public intellectual. In his study there were two desks; one at which he studied, wrote, and worked on the intellectual articulation of Christian faith; the other was a prayer desk, reserved for communion with God (Fergusson 1993, p. 256). This article seeks to understand the mind and the faith of Baillie as it emerged in the 1930’s through an examination of his theology at the time, brought into conversation with the book of prayers published in 1936 as A Diary of Private Prayer.

Baillie’s theological interests in the decade in question included a massive study The Interpretation of Religion, a more popular book on Christology, and the book that arguably contains his most characteristic theological claims, Our Knowledge of God. The question this article explores is the co-existence in Baillie’s study of two desks, reflecting the confluence and congruence in one mind of an intellectually speculative theology, and a book of prayers which is carefully ordered, biblically rooted, and theologically shaped by a faith both impassioned and demonstrably orthodox.

What emerges is an account of Baillie’s religious experience both as prayerful theologian and intellectual explorer of the margins of human experience where God is encountered. Such concepts as revelation, moral values, human relationality, and mediated immediacy are shown to have exerted considerable purchase on Baillie’s own approach to prayer.
2. A Diary of Private Prayer and Our Knowledge of God

Years ago I bought several of John Baillie’s books in near mint condition. I wondered if previous owners had read them. It was the titles that attracted me. They included *The Interpretation of Religion*, *Our Knowledge of God*, and *The Sense of the Presence of God*. I sold them some years later guessing I too would never read them. John Baillie was, from 1934–1956, Scottish Professor of Divinity at New College, University of Edinburgh. Prior to this, he spent fifteen years in North America at three different academic locations as a Professor of Theology. Shortly after his return to Scotland, Baillie wrote what proved to be a devotional bestseller. *A Diary of Private Prayer* was published in 1936. At the time of publication, Baillie’s other major publications were mostly in philosophical theology with an apologetic slant, and widely informed by conversation with leading philosophers and systematic theologians.

Baillie’s three most significant academic publications are seriously dated now, and have long since been removed from reading lists in Scottish Universities. For example, until the 1990’s, *Our Knowledge of God* and *The Sense of the Presence of God* were staples on reading lists for Aberdeen Divinity undergraduate courses in systematic theology. Neither book has been borrowed for years. However, both volumes are worn out and in poor condition, owing to their allocation to the heavy demand section of the library year on year up to the 1990’s. Indeed, when I requested *The Interpretation of Religion* from the reserve stacks I was informed that the book was “too fragile and disbound” to be borrowed and would have to be consulted within the library.

John Baillie would eschew the ubiquitous word ‘spirituality’ as being far too ambiguous, amorphous, and imprecise to describe something of such moment and felt reality as religious experience that could be morally and personally transformative in the realms of the human mind, conscience, and soul. His preferred term was ‘religion’, and his preferred explication of religious experience is revealed in the titles of his most important books: the interpretation of religion, our knowledge of God, and the sense of the presence of God. These books, especially *Our Knowledge of God*, are written in a style that combines spiritual fervour, philosophical caution, and intellectual humility about drawing theological boundaries too soon or too rigidly.

In theological enquiry, Baillie’s writing is rigorous in thought about human moral and religious experience of God, but expressed in a tone by turns doxological, inquisitive, and speculative, and frequently couched in first person terms. Autobiography, the account of his own religious experience, appears with surprising frequency as part of Baillie’s evidential support for his theological positions. Thus Baillie’s writing often includes paragraphs of autobiographical testimony to his own experience of God, so that the reader has the impression of being taken into the confidence of one who is a fellow enquirer, honestly telling his story, and personally invested in the outcome of the discussion (as examples see Baillie 1933, pp. 33–62; 1957, pp. 3–16).

*A Diary of Private Prayer* was written during 1935 and published in 1936. *Our Knowledge of God* was published in 1939, but incorporated material from lectures and writing from the previous several years (Baillie 1939, pp. vii–viii). Within the developing thought and piety of Baillie in the 1930s, two very different streams ran in parallel and at times coalesced in his writing.

The first stream was academic theological endeavour working with such concepts as exploring the viability of a religious form of epistemology, accounting for numinous Presence, arguing the evidential import of moral values, reflecting on the *I-Thou* relationality of human existence and experience, and attempting to articulate the nature of human religious experience within a Christian framework and worldview.

The second stream involved spiritual writing in the context of a personal faith commitment which laid significant tribute to the full range of his intellectual interests and exploited them with vocational and pastoral intent. The same mind that wrestled with philosophical theology and articulated apologetic arguments also composed and arranged prayers with a similar care for theological clarity, spiritual fittingness, and pastoral usefulness for others.
A brief comment in his lecture notes observes, “Theology must be of the nature of prayer, of the nature of response to One who has spoken to us.” (Newlands 2002, p. 91).

Prior to the book of prayers, Baillie had been forced to clarify his thought on Christology. In 1927, William Sloane-Coffin invited him to deliver a series of lectures, later published in 1929 as *The Place of Jesus Christ in Modern Christianity*. This was Baillie’s most substantial effort at expounding his own understanding of Jesus for Christian life and the witness of the Church. While later in life Baillie would move on from this early and more popular account of Christology, and towards a more orthodox account more sympathetic to Nicaea and Chalcedon, significant echoes of Baillie’s earlier apologetic Christology are discernible in carefully crafted prayers published a decade later.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine the mind and heart of John Baillie, as revealed in the theology and experience that shaped and informed the prayers in *A Diary of Private Prayer*. In attempting this, and as an external controlling perspective, the prayer book will be brought into conversation with, and compared with, what John Baillie was writing and teaching about our knowledge of God, the claims of Jesus Christ, and the human being’s sense of the presence of God at the time of writing the book of prayers. Some of the key elements in John Baillie’s theology were continuous throughout his life, and even when modified by later developments in theological thought, his own intellectual development was more a changing continuity than a process of newer ideas displacing the old in his thinking. In the judgement of one of Baillie’s most sympathetic critics, *Our Knowledge of God* is by some measure Baillie’s most original work. “*Our Knowledge of God* is his most original book in my view—and I’m sorry that he became so diverted by church and academic leadership that he never quite recaptured the form of that work.”


On three consecutive days in April 1935, Baillie notes in his diary, ‘Wrote one prayer for book’. The handwritten manuscripts reveal his editing and polishing of each prayer, and the care taken to offer words and structure that were plain, accessible, and woven through with the classical discourse of biblical and devotional piety of a Reformed Scottish tone (Newlands 2002, pp. 204, 341). The book itself provides morning and evening prayers for each day of the month. Used regularly, it was intended to establish a rhythm which covered the key elements of Christian prayer: adoration and worship, praise and thanksgiving, confession and self-examination, petition and intercession. The varied terms used in addressing God are themselves an invitation to explore the rich diversity of the nature of God and the names by which God is revealed, experienced, and known. These are important clues both to Baillie’s theological presuppositions about Divine grace and human response, and to the workings of his spiritual imagination expressed in prayers characterised by classic devotional terms of Christian piety and pervasive biblical discourse.

Published in German in 1923, Buber’s *I and Thou* decisively influenced Baillie’s ways of understanding the God-human relationship, and in *Our Knowledge of God* he is in significant conversation with Buber’s philosophy (Baillie 1939, pp. 201ff, 221–24). His diary records his re-reading of Buber in 1933. He quotes approvingly, “God cannot be expressed but only addressed.” (Baillie 1939, p. 221). That maxim is worked out in Baillie’s understanding of God in relation to each human being, and in his understanding of human responsiveness to God’s call, presence and divine Being as personal.

God confronts us not as an It, nor as an inference from all possible Its, but, from the very beginning, as a Thou. He is not something we find ourselves speaking about, but Some One we find speaking to us and whom we then, in our turn, find ourselves speaking to. He confronts us in such a way that we know we must not speak about Him in the third person, but can only speak to him in the second person. (Baillie 1939, pp. 220–21)

* A Diary of Private Prayer could therefore be described as an exercise in the dialogic *I and Thou* of Christian prayer, each prayer being the human side of an overheard conversation between intimates. “God is the Omniversal Other, the Eternal Thou, by whom we are at
every moment being addressed.” Additionally, “He is not something we find ourselves speaking about, but Some One we find speaking to us and whom we then, in our turn find ourselves speaking to.” (Baillie 1939, p. 221).

Baillie’s purpose in writing the book of prayers is stated in a prefatory note:

“These prayers are to be regarded as aids; they are not intended to form the whole of the morning’s or evening’s devotions, or to take the place of more individual prayers for oneself and others. On the blank left-hand pages such further petitions and intercessions may be noted down.” (Baillie 1936, p. 7)

Then there is the clear disclaimer: “The prayers are suited to private use, not to the liturgical use of public worship.” That is a revealing note of caution, sounding almost like a prohibition. As intended for personal use, the first person singular is pervasively present, whereas the second person plural is almost never used except in some passages of intercession. This is a theology of prayer governed by select pronouns—I-Thou, me-Thee, mine-Thine, and my-Thy—a twice daily recurring conversation between familiars, in which the supplicant is welcome, but knows his place, and in which there are no secrets because none are possible, except the mystery of how human hearts encounter One of absolute holiness and discover they are addressed by Holy Love, All-Seeing Judgement, and Eternal Mercy.

The content and concerns of the prayers are rooted in daily life, the personal struggles with sin and circumstance, and expressing the emotional intimacy and psychological experience of the individual, rather than reciting the more objective generalities with their restraints on personal detail, which though more appropriate to public liturgical discourse and worship, were not to Baillie’s purpose. That said, some of the prayers and paragraphs would need very little adjustment to be of significant value as prayers in which the pervasive “I” of private prayer could be replaced with the more public “We” of corporate worship. Indeed, some of Baillie’s self-examining scrutiny before God would not be out of place in the end of day _examen_ of those embroiled in 21st Century office politics, relational competitiveness, grievance nursing, consumer jealousies, or toxic public discourse. Baillie was an unsparing self-critic, which makes him a well-informed diagnostician of moral motives in the struggle towards holiness!

The book is clearly intended to establish in its readers and users a regular discipline of prayer, adequately nourished with theological truth, enabled by a wide and sympathetic Christian discourse, and rooted in biblical images juxtaposed to the everyday life and existential realities of people seeking to live their lives with God on the horizon. Those horizons were circumscribed by sunrise and sunset, morning and evening prayers, each day bracketed by an early-day commitment to the day’s duties, and an end of day thanksgiving and confession as the day closed.

Many theological emphases in Baillie’s prayers occur in more theologically developed form in _Our Knowledge of God_. Some are also previously intimated in his earlier Christological reflections in _The Place of Jesus Christ in Modern Christianity_. The 1929 book on Jesus stands as an apologia for the life, teaching, and example of Jesus as definitive and authoritative for Christian thinking and acting, in all the perplexing exigencies of daily life. Many of the prayers in the Diary are addressed to Jesus, or have Jesus as the primary referent, using such common devotional terminology as Saviour, Friend, Redeemer, and Word of God, each of these revealing Baillie’s unembarrassed devotion to, and trust in, the person of Jesus crucified and risen.

“Words, words—we grow so weary of them! The world, we feel, is too full of talk, too full of good advice! But we thank God that once at least the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory!” (Baillie 1929b, p. 74)

The italicised emphases are original and illustrate the importance to Baillie of the historical Jesus experienced as the _Living Christ_, incarnate, crucified, and risen. In keeping with much liberal emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, Baillie portrayed Jesus as perfect humanity, rendering perfect obedience to the Father, and therefore the inexhaustible in-
spiritation and energising power of Christian obedience. However, he also presented Jesus as the one whose transforming presence as risen Lord and Mediator of God’s grace is the daily working assumption of the Christian at prayer in the presence of the Triune God.

There is gentle irony in the title *A Diary of Private Prayer*. The prayers are clearly deeply personal, formed with great care out of Baillie’s own religious experience, and thus confessional in both senses; the prayers reveal much of the private musings and inner communing of Baillie with his God, and they also confess his faith to his readers. Thus, through the publication of what was to become a much loved bedside companion to hundreds of thousands, the private prayers of John Baillie become public confession of his own mind, heart, and faith.

One of the writers Baillie read and referenced, often critically in those early years, was the pragmatic philosopher William James. In his Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James offered a definition of religion which mirrors almost exactly, but in far more impersonal terms, what Baillie was demonstrating in the compositions which make up *A Diary of Private Prayer*:

“Religion consists of the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to what-ever they may consider divine.” (James 1902, pp. 32–33)

How Baillie apprehended himself standing in relation to what-ever he considered the divine was, however, strongly conditioned by a number of particular Christian theological presuppositions: a commitment to personal theism, an I-Thou relational understanding of the Divine-Human encounter, an incarnational Christology, his belief in the religious experience of regeneration and transformation by the direct action of God in grace and forgiveness, and his consequent and permanent sense of gratitude, expressed as personal obedience to Christ his Saviour.

The private prayers do indeed display the “feelings, acts and experiences of the individual man [John Baillie] in his solitude”, but his apprehension of the Divine had much less to do with what he considered divine, and came to rest securely in what of the Divine has been revealed in Christ, of a love that is reconciling, suffering, redemptive, and above all personal and present and encountered in the deep places of the human soul. A 1954 sermon ends with advice which reads like the voice of experience: “Every man who calls himself a Christian should go to sleep thinking about the love of God as it has visited us in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Baillie 1962a, p. 77).

All of this is worked out in his major publications around the time these prayers were written. However, the *Diary of Private Prayer* was more than the publication of well-crafted prayers by a Presbyterian Divine safely secure within a narrow intellectual thought world, and writing pre-prepared prayers for others as examples of what a ‘proper’ prayer should read and sound like. All his life Baillie was immersed in the life of the wider world and in the concerns of the world Church. That too becomes obvious in reading and using the prayers. Baillie’s wide exposure to the concerns, demands, and perplexities of contemporary life in the growing shadows of the 1930’s is evident in prayer after prayer.

Indeed, it is fascinating to read the prayers and follow the daily diary which he kept throughout his life. It remains extant amongst the Baillie papers at New College Library, University of Edinburgh. The diary entries for 1934–1935 provide a fascinating and illuminating context for the world in which Baillie moved, and from which he drew thought and inspiration in the writing of sixty four prayers, published as aids to others struggling to maintain their own spiritual disciplines of regular encounter with the Thou who was always prevenient in grace and constant in address to the I at the centre of each person.

A year or two before his book of prayers was published, and just prior to moving back to Scotland, Baillie records that he was dining and collaborating in theological projects with Paul Van Dusen, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and William Sloane Coffin. Around the time the prayers were being drafted and polished, March–April 1935, he ‘had lunch with and played ping pong’ (table tennis) with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The year of publication he
continues to note such socialising highlights as, “We had a dinner party here for Albert Schweitzer and his wife.” (Newlands 2002, pp. 340–42).

Beyond this rich circle of academic exchange and social friendships, he was fully engaged in the national life of the Church of Scotland, participated in ecumenical discussions far and wide, and was busy conducting academic and scholarly interactions with America and Germany. In a busy spell, he went to the cinema to see The Iron Duke, was reading and critiquing Barth’s Nein, (he would have a running battle with Barth and Barthianism in relation to natural theology and much else throughout his academic career), marked 24 Glasgow exam papers, and toiled through James Joyce’s Ulysses. The years 1935–1936 reveal a wide-ranging intellectual tour of theology, philosophy, poetry, art, and theatre, all the time absorbing up-to-date ideas from a diversity of perspectives and currents of cultural life (Newlands 2002, pp. 340–44).

In the growing turmoil of Europe, and amid rising concerns about Germany, he was fully involved in the work of the Church of Scotland Peace Committee. He followed the situation with the German Church and the birth of the Confessing Church, travelled to Berlin and Munich to meet with church leaders, and was translating Brunner’s pamphlet on the church, The Churches, the Group Movement and the Church of Jesus Christ. On 30 April 1936 is the intriguing juxtaposition of diary-worthy entries, “Paul Tillich arrived at 5 pm to stay with us, my Diary of Private Prayer was published today.” (Newlands 2002, pp. 340–44).

4. A Diary of Private Prayer: “Incline My Heart to Follow in His Way . . .”

The last sentence of The Interpretation of Religion, Baillie’s 1929 tour de force and the book that consolidated his reputation as a major liberal theological voice, expounds Baillie’s estimate of the place of Jesus Christ in the religious experience of humanity in general, and of Christians in particular:

Love is not merely an outward mark and symbol of his presence, but is his very self in action in our world. And in the soul of the man of Nazareth, and in his life and death, wherein our world’s highest values are embodied and love for us made perfect, it was no mere dim-described shadow of an otherwise masked and inscrutable God that we saw and knew, but, as his Church has always believed, very God of very God (Baillie 1929a, p. 470)

The words are almost programmatic for Baillie’s more popular and accessible book on Jesus. The Place of Jesus Christ is based on lectures first drafted in 1927 for a conference for ministers and religious workers held at Union Theological Seminary. They were then significantly revised into a more scholarly series for the Ely Foundation Lectures at Union, and then published in 1929. Baillie’s aim was modest. But even in the Preface he signalled his intention to challenge and clarify some of the forms and formulae which had given shape to traditional models of Christology.

“My endeavour in these chapters is to restate our Christian conviction about our Lord Jesus Christ in a form which shall avoid the many perplexing difficulties inherent in the traditional presentation of it, while yet losing hold of none of the great insights into spiritual truth which lay embedded within the traditional presentation and were the real secret of its marvellously powerful appeal to the human heart.” (Baillie 1929b, p. vii)

Something of Baillie’s early shaping influences is soon given away:

I have myself drunk long and deeply at the fountain of Greek wisdom, and I have companied also with the philosophers of later days more than most of you would think quite good for me; yet I have come more and more to feel that this evangelic tale which the simple folk of the Western world have now been hearing during some fifty generations has that in it which no philosophy has ever quite succeeded in filtering out for its own use. (Baillie 1929b, pp. 13–14)

Baillie was troubled by the fact that the traditional formulation of Christian theology “is at many points without meaning to the contemporary mind.” (Baillie 1929b, p. 30). In
his lectures he sought a restating of the formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon into more meaningful language. “The history of Christian theology during the first five centuries of its existence is, as a matter of fact, more than anything else a history of Christological perplexity.” (Baillie 1929b, p. 34). For a theologian such as Baillie, busy expounding religious experience from a Christian perspective, and doing so with apologetic and pastoral concern, such barriers to faith and experience should now be removed and replaced with conceptual bridges more suited to a different age. Yet he was cautious about babies and bathwater:

The story does indeed read as a magnificent testimony to the compelling greatness and glory of Jesus Christ and the reality of the spiritual awakening which His gospel had brought to the whole Mediterranean world. Moreover, a renewed and more patient study of the fundamental plot of it will usually be rewarded by the discovery that behind even its most unreal debates there lay hidden, however deep buried in the sawdust of the pedant’s workshop, issues that are of real import for the understanding of the soul’s life with God. (Baillie 1929b, pp. 34–35)

In his restatement of how to think of Jesus in less conceptually perplexing ways, Baillie rooted Christology in the worship, witness and experience of the Christian fellowship, the Church. What is unmistakable in the gospel story is the portrayal of Jesus as the one in whom love is perfected, as self-giving love to others and self-giving obedience to God, culminating in the Cross. In Jesus, Baillie argued, love comes to encounter and rescue, to redeem and restore. Jesus embodied the love of God. That love is reproduced in the Christian fellowship, “for God has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 5.5) It is this divine inpouring of love that provides a spiritual and theological sub-structure to Christian prayer and practice.

Love for the sake of the beloved, a love which seeks to benefit not ourselves who love, but those on whom our love is poured, a love that seeks not to be ministered unto but to minister . . . a love which loves, not in acknowledgement of an already present loveliness, but in order to render lovable in the future what at present repels love.” (Baillie 1929b, pp. 44–45)

How does this happen? At this point Baillie becomes evangelist more than apologist, and homiletic teacher more than critic of Chalcedon.

Jesus of Nazareth is the explanation of it all! The new spirit was just His spirit. The new outlook was His outlook. The ‘Way’ was His way. And that agape which was the substance of the fellowship, what else was it but the temper that was in Him in the days of his flesh? (Baillie 1929b, p. 55)

The Christian fellowship practice of agape is nothing more than “the mind which was in Christ Jesus”. Baillie was in no doubt about the essential and living connection between the love revealed in Jesus and that love which is the defining characteristic of his followers. In several of his books, John’s First Letter is repeatedly appealed to by Baillie as evidence that the sine qua non of Christian faith and obedience is agape, the love revealed in Jesus: “We know what love is by this, that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for the brotherhood.” (I John 3.6).

A number of the prayers in the Diary of Private Prayer reveal those connections between the love of Jesus in his earthly life, its culmination in his death on the Cross, its reproduction in the Christian community, and its source and origin in the love of God for a fallen world and a broken humanity. What Baillie taught with such conviction in the seminary also provided the substructure of his prayers and the fuel of his spirituality.

O Thou the reflection of whose transcendent glory did once appear unbroken in the face of Jesus Christ, give me today a heart like His—a brave heart, a true heart, a tender heart, a heart with great room in it, a heart fixed on Thyself; for His name’s sake. (Baillie 1936, p. 61)

Reading Baillie’s prayers enables us to explore the relationship, and perhaps the tension, between Baillie’s attempts to explain Jesus to the contemporary mind within and
outside the church, and his own experience and thought about Jesus as revealed in his prayers to be a better Christian and a truer follower of Jesus.

“Our first duty is to follow the way of life pointed out to us by Him, and until this duty is recognised, all Christology is meaningless.” (Baillie 1929b, p. 62). This is not so much a dismissal of efforts at more adequate Christological statement, as Baillie’s conviction that the Lord Jesus Christ (for Baillie all three terms are freighted with Christological assumptions) cannot be comprehended apart from a trustful obedience in which faith and love are combined. One of the morning prayers shows exactly how Baillie believes such trust and obedience can be sustained in the living of the ordinary regularities of life:

O God who hast proven Thy love for mankind by sending us Jesus Christ our Lord, and hast illumined our human life by the radiance of His presence, I give Thee thanks for this Thy greatest gift.

For my Lord’s days upon earth:
For the record of His deeds of love:
For the words He spoke for my guidance and help:
For His obedience unto death:
For the presence of His Spirit with me now:
I thank Thee, O God.

Grant that the remembrance of the blessed Life that once was lived out on this common earth under these ordinary skies may remain with me in all the tasks and duties of this day. Let me remember.

There follow seven petitions followed by the request,

“And in each of these ways give me grace to follow in His footsteps.” (Baillie 1936, p. 29)

This is a much more Christologically robust prayer than those tied to a more theologically liberal fascination with historical Jesus studies and a human commitment to following the human Jesus’ example as Teacher. This is a prayer committing to ‘avowed intent’ as a disciple. Though not quoted by Baillie, his understanding of the devotion implied in following Jesus has the same determined longing of Bunyan’s Pilgrim, “I have loved to hear my Lord spoken of, and wherever I have seen the print of his shoe in the earth, there I have coveted to set my foot.” (Quoted in Corrigan 1986, p. 58).

Baillie’s ‘Amen’ to such an aspiration is clear from several of his prayers. Jesus as Exemplar and Teacher is true enough, but not enough truth for Baillie.

“Nothing is more certain than that this category of teacher and taught does not in itself exhaust the relationship in which the Founder of the Christian religion stands to those who call themselves by His name. Jesus Christ was far more than a teacher.” (Baillie 1929b, p. 65)

Baillie prays to One who in the days of his flesh was the Word become flesh, the One in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. “Just as Christ’s bearing of His Cross holds in it the highest secret of our human relationships with one another, so also it holds in it the highest truth about God. The Cross is the showing forth of the divine redeeming love.” (Baillie 1929b, p. 59).

The convergence in Jesus of perfect humanity and fullness of God may well provoke Christological perplexity at the level of dogmatics. However, when it came to prayer, Baillie was less concerned with what James Denney called “Chalcedonian metaphysics” and more with renewing his own daily personal commitment to God in Christ:

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I commit all my ways unto Thee. I make over my soul to Thy keeping. I pledge my life to Thy service. May this day be for me a day of obedience and charity, a day of happiness and of peace. May all my walk and conversation be such as becometh the Gospel of Christ.

Amen (Baillie 1936, p. 29)
John and Donald Baillie dominated the Scottish theological landscape in the middle years of the 20th Century. There was much common ground in their theology, albeit with significant differences in interests and emphases. Donald’s most distinguished book, *God Was in Christ*, was published 20 years after John’s book on Jesus, but John had already anticipated at least the title in 1929. Summing up his chapter ‘God in Christ’, John begins to formulate and develop ideas that will be more fully articulated over the next decade and published in *Our Knowledge of God*, before being later refined in his Bampton Lectures of 1956, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*.

“Christ’s life . . . marks the culminaion, not only of our human search for God, but also of God’s search for the human heart. This is a story, we say, not only of great faith but of great grace! This is a story not only of human discovery, but of divine impartation! Here is not only a Man raising Himself up towards God, but God bending down to man! Here is not only ‘one man’s obedience’ to God, but God’s generosity to all men . . . We are moved, all of us, not to applaud but to kneel; not to clap our hands in admiration, but to fold them in worship.” (Baillie 1929b, pp. 108–9)

So, throughout the prayers published in 1936, there is a sense of being called to renewed commitment in pleas such as for “Grace to follow the road Thou didn’t first tread” and “Let the power of his cross be with me this day . . . let me love as He loved”. The Cross is never far away; “Enable me now so to meditate upon my Lord’s passion that, having fellowship with Him in His sorrow, I may also learn the secret of His strength and peace.” (Baillie 1936, pp. 13, 49, 71, 113).

On two occasions a morning prayer consists entirely of sayings of Jesus. The first is to be read along with an added response fitting the logion to the grace needed to obey and embody Jesus words (Baillie 1936, p. 37). The second has the recurring refrain, “O God incline my heart to follow in His way”, the whole prayer ending with the Lord’s Prayer, a gathering up of thought and response into the key petitions of Christian life (Baillie 1936, p. 77).

5. A Diary of Private Prayer: “The Great Fact for Which All Religion Stands . . . ”

The first sentence of *Our Knowledge of God* relates as strongly to Baillie’s theology and practice of prayer as it does to the working out of an adequate theological epistemology at the more abstract and intellectual levels. “The great fact for which all religion stands is the confrontation of the human soul with the transcendent holiness of God.” (Baillie 1939, p. 3). The substance of *Our Knowledge of God* was being taught in lectures and prepared for final book form from the mid 1930’s until its publication in 1939. The cross-fertilisation of theological study and regular disciplined prayer was inevitable in a life integrated at the deeper levels of intellectual and spiritual thought. The inner conversation of philosophical theologian and scholar at prayer raises fascinating questions about Baillie’s religious experience, from its formation in a Highland manse, through his years of education in the humanities, and on into academic study of theology and philosophy. Baillie’s lifelong learning created a busy traffic intersection in his mind of academic conceptual rigour and devout religious commitment, a merging of intellectual and spiritual experience, a dialogue of faith questioning and faith confessing.

Late in *Our Knowledge of God*, Baillie acknowledges both the tensions and coalescence of these two different but valid forms of knowing. Speaking of the role of faith in his knowledge of God, a knowledge which was a relational encounter of I and Thou, Baillie, with a nod towards Kierkegaard, confessed:

“There is no moment of my life in which God does not approach me in a personal way, offering me some blessedness and making some demand upon my obedience. There is therefore no moment in which I can speak about God in a third-personal way, whether to myself or to you, without in some measure losing hold of the reality of the situation in which I stand.” (Baillie 1939, p. 224)
Baillie was profoundly aware of the tensions between the intellectual wrestling of the theological and philosophical mind, and the mind at prayer, worship, and proper attentiveness not only to the truth of God but to God’s living presence as both succour and demand.

“As soon as God becomes merely the object of my thought my thinking ceases to be thus existential. And yet, if theology is to proceed at all, if even the preaching of the word is to proceed, I must make God the object of my objective contemplation, speaking of Him, as I am doing now, in the third person.” (Baillie 1939, p. 225)

The imperatival emphasis is original; note also, in this apology for philosophical and contemplative study of God, the third person pronoun is capitalised. It always is in Baillie’s writing, and without apology.

Any regular and thoughtful user of Baillie’s *A Diary of Private Prayer* quickly becomes aware that these are prayers written by someone whose spirituality is serious, formal, devout and profoundly personal, while also displaying theological care and an unwillingness to reduce the language of prayer to a low common denominator. The remainder of this essay will explore several further characteristics of Baillie’s spirituality, at once personal in tone, while being theological and liturgical in form.

First, prayers of confession, repentance, and forgiveness occur regularly throughout. Many of these are given urgency and passion by the deeply personal and searching psychological accuracy of Baillie in pursuit of ‘truth in the inward parts’ and determined on personal integrity before God. In his prayers, Baillie displayed a stern honesty, however painful, in the presence of the All Knowing, combined with trustful confidence in the love and mercy of God towards the truly penitent heart. There is a robust realism about sin and evil throughout the prayers, and about the capacity of the human heart for pride, self-deceit, hatred and the baleful consequences of human sin in violence and human hurt.

The prayers of self-examination are regularly unsparing of his own inner springs of motive, and critically sensitive to the contrary currents of his emotions, feelings, and thoughts as he sought daily an obedience commensurate with the grace and demand of Holy Love:

> Holy God, to whose service I long ago dedicated my soul and life, I grieve and lament before Thee that I am still so prone to sin and so little inclined to obedience. (Baillie 1936, p. 107)

In this Evening Prayer there follows a litany of unfavourable comparisons and contrasts between what ought to be and what the reality is. Such noted failures are noted as “So soon at play, so late at prayer: so brisk in the service of self, so slack in the service of others . . . so little able for great tasks, so discontented with small ones.” (Baillie 1936, p. 107). The list is long, there are fourteen deficits acknowledged, each of them a painful exercise in self-knowing before God.

The final paragraph is a prayer for restorative mercy, a return to the equilibrium of purified intent and more complete fulfilment in obedience:

> O merciful heart of God, grant me yet again Thy forgiveness. Hear my sorrowful tale and in Thy great mercy blot it out from the book of Thy remembrance. Give me faith so to lay hold of Thine own holiness and so to rejoice in the righteousness of Christ my Saviour that, resting on His merits rather than my own, I may be more and more conformed to His likeness, my will becoming one with His in obedience to Thine. (Baillie 1936, p. 107)

Some of Baillie’s theological constants are woven throughout this prayer. Faith as ‘laying hold of’ and taking to heart the truth of who God is as revealed in Christ; prayer understood as relational encounter between the supplicant I and the gracious Thou; mercy and forgiveness as definitive of Divine Love encountering human repentance and trust; the persistent Christological fulcrum to which all Baillie’s speculative and philosophical theology was firmly attached; and Christ-likeness as a moral and transformative process of
conformity to the will of the Father through loving obedience as enacted faith in conformity to Christ by the work of the Spirit.

A second characteristic relates to how Baillie addresses God. Some of these invocations to God are unlikely to have occurred to many of those whose work was outside theological halls, though in truth that may be less true of 1930’s Scottish Presbyterian prayer language than the far more casual and even informal discourse of contemporary public prayer.

One prayer begins, “Omnipresent One, beneath whose all-seeing eye our mortal lives are passed . . . ” (Baillie 1936, p. 49). For all his moral seriousness and inner disposition of reverence before God’s holy love, God’s omnipresence is not portrayed as cause for fear, nor is God’s omnipresence freighted with an excessive sense of oppressive scrutiny. Baillie quotes with approval the words of Karl Heim: “God is either not there at all, or else He is the single ineluctable Thou before whom all creatures continually stand. So when I am with him, I am with all my fellow creatures.” Baillie comments, “He is . . . the absolute and omnipresent Other in which all others have their ground.” (Baillie 1939, p. 228). More than that, the omnipresent one being present to the totality of our human experience, there are possibilities of divine disclosure all around us, and within us. “Because He is omnipresent, there is nothing in our experience which may not be the medium of God’s self-revelation.” (Baillie 1939, p. 222).

Such conviction about the connectedness of his own life experience, and indeed all of creation, to the source and sustaining power of the Omnypresent one, created in Baillie a sense that Christian existence carried with it a responsibility and duty to pray. The Omnypresent one has come as the incarnate presence of God in Jesus Christ, the Word through whom all things were made. The Creator Spirit has come to renew the face of creation, and mediates the personal gracious presence of the Triune God. From such conviction arose in Baillie the duty to pray for the world of humanity, of creatures, of structures and cultures, and to do so within the historical contingencies of his own life and times, but with an eye of faith to the often hidden movements of God in the life of the natural and human worlds.

“O God, the Father of all mankind, I would bring before Thee tonight the burden of the world’s life. I would join myself to the great scattered company of those who, in every corner of every land, are now crying out to Thee in their need.” (Baillie 1936, p. 39)

This is precisely the kind of prayer that finds words of address to God that presuppose “the absolute and omnipresent Other in which all others have their ground.” (Baillie 1939, p. 228). Except, in the context of his personal prayer, Baillie would change that last clause to the more relational “in Whom all others have their ground”.

Underlying Baillie’s prayerful watchfulness over the world of nations and of friends and family, the local neighbours and the global billions of humans unknown, was one of Baillie’s most characteristic theological claims. For Baillie, our knowledge of God and sense of the presence of God comes to us, as it must, from beyond ourselves, and it comes as a mediated immediacy. This is a third and recurring characteristic in Baillie’s approach to prayer. The revelation of God and signals of divine presence are mediated to embodied human beings in at least four different ways.

First, the Creator is discernible in, disclosed by, and comes to us through, the beauty, order and productiveness of the natural world. Second, our encounters and responses to and with other people create opportunities for love, compassion, and service, and in the mutuality of such dispositions and actions something of God is disclosed. “If we love one another, God dwelleth in us.” (I John. 4.12). Human experiences of love are intimations of that deeper, surer love that is the mystery of God in Christ. A third strand of mediation is our own historical rootedness in who and where we are, the here and now of our own communal religious experience. Baillie repeatedly traced much of his own spiritual awareness to his upbringing and the influences of his own church tradition.
These three forms of implicit faith are controlled and shaped by the fourth and decisive form of mediated immediacy, the story of Jesus Christ as the final and definitive disclosure of God (Fergusson 1993, p. 142).

The importance of mediated immediacy for Baillie’s understanding of prayer, and particularly for intercession, is strongly implied in a crucial chapter of Our Knowledge of God. He quotes in full the locus classicus on Christ as Mediator: “For there is one God and one mediator between man and God, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (1 Tim 2.5–2.6) Then, recounting his argument so far, he describes his indebtedness to his own traditional roots:

The service of others, the fellowship with others, and the historical tradition in which in which I stand are all media that lead me to the Mediator, and the Mediator leads me to God. And all this mediation is part of God’s gracious purpose in refusing to unite me to Himself without at the same time uniting me to my fellow men—in making it impossible for me to obey either of the two great commandments without at the same time obeying the other. (Baillie 1939, p. 180)

All four of these elements of mediated immediacy are fully represented throughout A Diary of Private Prayer.

As to God mediated through the created order, the natural world was, to Baillie, a place of wonder, a theatre both of God’s glory and God’s creative and purposive activity. A number of the prayers acknowledge the beauty, order, and sheer giftedness of the world, illustrating how for Baillie natural theology arises from a natural human response to the sense of the presence and purposes of the Creator. For Baillie, theology was less an argument towards God’s existence and more an understanding of the lived environment in which God’s creative purposes can be disclosed in beauty, fruitfulness, and the rhythms of time and space. In a prayer to the ‘Maker of all things’, Baillie offers a litany of praise: “I praise Thee for the bright and beautiful world into which I go: I praise Thee for earth, and sea and sky, for scudding cloud and singing bird.” (Baillie 1936, p. 33).

Even the words of address in some of the prayers assume a view of the relations between God and the world in which God is discoverable and willing to be discovered. Such forms of address as Hidden Source of Life, Light that never fades, Unapproachable Light, Desire of All Nations, Eternal Being, and Hidden Source of Love each bear testimony to Baillie’s sense of God’s presence around him, immanent and transcendent, God as revealed and hidden, God as accessible Father and Light inaccessible.

One of Baillie’s favourite images is of God knocking on the door, borrowed from Revelation 3.20. “When Thou dost knock at my heart’s door, let me not keep Thee standing without but welcome Thee with joy and thanksgiving.” (Baillie 1936, p. 57). To that overall sense of God’s presence, and God’s summons to God’s creatures in and through the created universe, Baillie bears repeated witness in these prayers. In Our Knowledge of God he quoted with warm approval the words of George Adam Smith:

“When psalmist or prophet calls Israel to lift their eyes to the hills, or behold how the heavens declare the glory of God, or to listen to that unspoken tradition which day passes to day and night to night, of the knowledge of the Creator, it is not proofs to doubting minds which he offers; it is spiritual nourishment to hungry souls. These are not arguments—they are sacraments.” (Baillie 1939, p. 121)

When it comes to Baillie’s second named source of mediated immediacy, there are numerous examples in his prayers for the flourishing of human community and the healing and sustaining of human relationships through agape-love for others. There are many and varied allusions to the human encounters that bring forth compassion, service and care for others, and which bring before God all kinds of human situations and circumstances. He prays for “those who are bearing the burdens of others...all those amongst whom my lot is cast ... those in lonely places serving others.” The pastoral experiences of life are gathered up into a concentrated petition, “Be in every sore heart, in every stricken home, beside every bed of pain, giving to all the blessing of Thy peace.” (Baillie 1936, p. 23). While it is true
that no individual can love the whole of humanity personally, it is one of the theological values of Baillie’s prayers that he nevertheless reaches beyond his own immediate circle to imagine and remember those beyond his own inevitably limited horizons; because the love of God has no such limited horizons:

“O Thou who compassest the whole earth with Thy most merciful favour and willest not that any of thy children should perish, I would call down thy blessing today upon all who are striving towards the making of a better world.” (Baillie 1936, p. 109)

The prayer goes on to commend to God’s grace those working for ‘purer and juster laws’, for peace between nations, engaged in the work of healing diseases, relief of poverty, and rescue of the fallen. He finishes with the passive aggression of the prophet who knows how wrong the world can sometimes be, and who turns such unproductive anger into assertive prayer: “Cast down, O Lord, all the forces of cruelty and wrong. Defeat all selfish and worldly minded schemes, and prosper all that is conceived among us in the Spirit of Christ and carried out to the honour of His blessed name.” (Baillie 1936, p. 109).

One Morning Prayer is a good example of how Baillie’s claim that one’s own upbringing, tradition and historical contingency, informs and shapes the content of prayer. In this prayer he is especially grateful for the tradition into which he was born—and therefore for this third source of mediated immediacy:

O Thou who wast, and art, and art to come, I thank Thee that this Christian way whereon I walk is no untried or uncharted road, but a road beaten hard by the footsteps of saints, apostles, prophets, and martyrs. I thank Thee for the finger posts and danger signals with which it is marked at every turning and which may be known to me through the study of the Bible, and of all history, and of all the great literature of the world. Beyond all I give Thee devout and humble thanks for the great gift of Jesus Christ, the Pioneer of our faith. I praise Thee that Thou hast caused me to be born in an age and in a land which has known His name . . . “ (Baillie 1936, p. 25)

The features chosen for exposition in this essay arise quite naturally from a close reading of A Diary of Private Prayer and Our Knowledge of God, with some side glances to other sources. There are other characteristics that could be explored, but it is hoped these will suffice to demonstrate the connectedness between Baillie’s philosophical theology as it was in process of development, and his book of prayers written while his mind was being opened to new ways of configuring his theology, and at a time of social, political, and intellectual flux.


There is, however, one further live and strong connection between the language and content of Baillie’s prayers and some of the culminating arguments of Our Knowledge of God, which demonstrates the congruence of his philosophical theology with his practice of prayer. In Our Knowledge of God, Baillie wrestles with what he calls ‘God on Both Sides of the Relationship.’ (Baillie 1939, pp. 234–39). By this he means that a person’s experience of the Christian God is not that of the human being over and against God, the collision of two equal and independent wills. It is more true to talk of that relationship as one in which God through grace and love moves within the human mind and will, so that human response is both free and enabled. Here is Baillie’s explanation of what he believes to be the spiritual psychology of divine address and human obedience.

“When I respond to God’s call, the call is God’s and the response is mine; and yet the response is God’s too; for not only does He call me in his grace, but also by his grace brings the response to birth in my soul. His Holy Spirit is the real author and originator, not only of His address to me, but of my response to Him.” (Baillie 1939, p. 234)
The implications of this way of construing the divine–human relationship are considerable for the practice and experience of prayer. Not only is prayer a discipline and a dialogue, it is also a living encounter with God in which mind, conscience, will, and affection are all engaged. Prayer is in this sense an act of prevenient grace, the intentional and personal response of each person to the prior prompting and call of the Spirit of God. The will to pray requires an act of “self-surrender in which our true selves are handed back to us.” (Baillie 1939, p. 247).

Every call of God is a call to obedience and an act of grace. “There is Another Will whose service is perfect freedom . . . Whoever is aware of this is aware of God, even if he is not aware that he is aware of Him.” Baillie goes on to speak of an “authority we here encounter . . . of One who loves us better than we love ourselves.” (Baillie 1939, p. 247).

Baillie is establishing here the fundamentals of the life of prayer as obedience of will, loving response, and submissive trust. By submission he does not mean self-immolation but self-surrender to the One in whom each human being is fulfilled. “Man is indeed an ‘end in himself’, but only after he has first found his selfhood in an end beyond himself—which is the glory of God.” (Baillie 1939, p. 246). Recalling his own early encounters with God, Baillie, with characteristic candour affirms, “In our very earliest awareness of the encompassing Will of God are already contained the seeds of the knowledge that His banner over us is love.” (Baillie 1939, p. 248).

The previous quote brings us to the heart of Baillie’s spirituality, and one of the key characteristics of his own life of prayer written pervasively throughout A Diary of Private Prayer. “This recognition of love brings with it the sentiment of gratitude.” (Baillie 1939, p. 248). In the philosophy of religion and study of the religious consciousness, Baillie claims there is a serious neglect of human gratitude expressed to the object of worship. Going to the core of the New Testament, he quotes the heart cry of Christian devotion, “Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift.” (2 Cor. 9.15; Baillie 1939, p. 248).

“Even those who think they do not believe in God do nevertheless in some degree possess the knowledge not only that something is being demanded of them . . . but that there is something for which it behoves them to be thankful.” (Baillie 1939, p. 248)

For Baillie, gratitude implies a sense of gift, a recognition of undeserved generosity, humble awareness of unsolicited benefit that requires more explanation than luck, chance or accident. “It is impossible to be grateful without being grateful to somebody – and to somebody rather than something.” (Baillie 1939, p. 249). Gratitude is, for Baillie, an acknowledgement and exchange between two persons. To give praise and give thanks presupposes not an object but a subject, just as a gift presupposes a Giver.

Therein is the master-key to the impulse of prayer. “Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!” Throughout A Diary of Private Prayer the reader encounters on an almost daily basis, and with variations on this major theme, the recurring mood, sentiment and discipline of gratitude. The book was intended to be used twice daily, so that the repetition of words of gratitude, praise, wonder, and a sometimes inexplicable sense of indebtedness, becomes a habit, an inner formation towards God that eventuates in a readiness to affirm with thanksgiving rather than ask for petitions, and that acknowledges God’s generosity before voicing our own need. Out of such gratitude comes concern for others and an opening of the heart in intercession for the blessing of others, thus relegating the more self-concerned prayers for our own blessing.

7. Conclusions

“Prayer, after all, is but thinking towards God.” (Baillie 1962b, p. 23). The mind of John Baillie constructed and wrote theology prayerfully, and composed and wrote prayers fuelled by his best theological and intellectual work, resulting in prayers that were theologically astute and pastorally perceptive. That the book, in English and numerous translations, sold so many copies, indicates how effectively such a monthly prayer manual,
establishing a rhythm of “thinking towards God”, enabled, encouraged, and resourced the prayer practices of generations who used it.

This essay has sought to trace the connections between Baillie’s theology and the content and composition of prayers which, though intended for others to use, inevitably reflect the piety and content of Baillie’s own devotional life. The prayer below is one example of the richly textured spirituality of John Baillie the theologian at prayer. It reveals an intellect accustomed to adoration, a mind comfortable with mystery, affections focused on Christ the Light who enlightens everyone born into the world, and highlights Baillie’s demeanour in the presence of God as that of humble wonder at the mystery and the wisdom of Love; the philosophical theologian at prayer:

O God above me, God who dwellest in light unapproachable, teach me, I beseech Thee, that even my highest thoughts of Thee are but dim and distant shadowings of Thy transcendent glory. Teach me that if Thou art in nature, still more art Thou greater than nature. Teach me that if Thou art in my heart, still more art Thou greater than my heart. Let my soul rejoice in Thy mysterious greatness. Let me take refuge in the thought that Thou art utterly beyond me, beyond the sweep of my imagination, beyond the comprehension of my mind, Thy judgements being unsearchable and Thy ways past finding out. O Lord, hallowed be Thy name.

(Baillie 1936, p. 73)

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Notes
1 The chapter John Baillie at Prayer, Thomas F. Torrance, is written by one who was colleague, friend and successor to Baillie in Edinburgh. It is warmly appreciative and conveys the reality of prayer as an essential discipline in Baillie’s life.
2 Fergusson, April 2022, University of Cambridge, UK. Personal communication.
3 Newlands (2002, pp. 321–420) exploits very effectively the Baillie Papers in his study of the intellectual biography of John and Donald Baillie. See especially Appendix One: ‘Selected Additional Entries from John Baillie’s Diaries and from his Letters’.

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