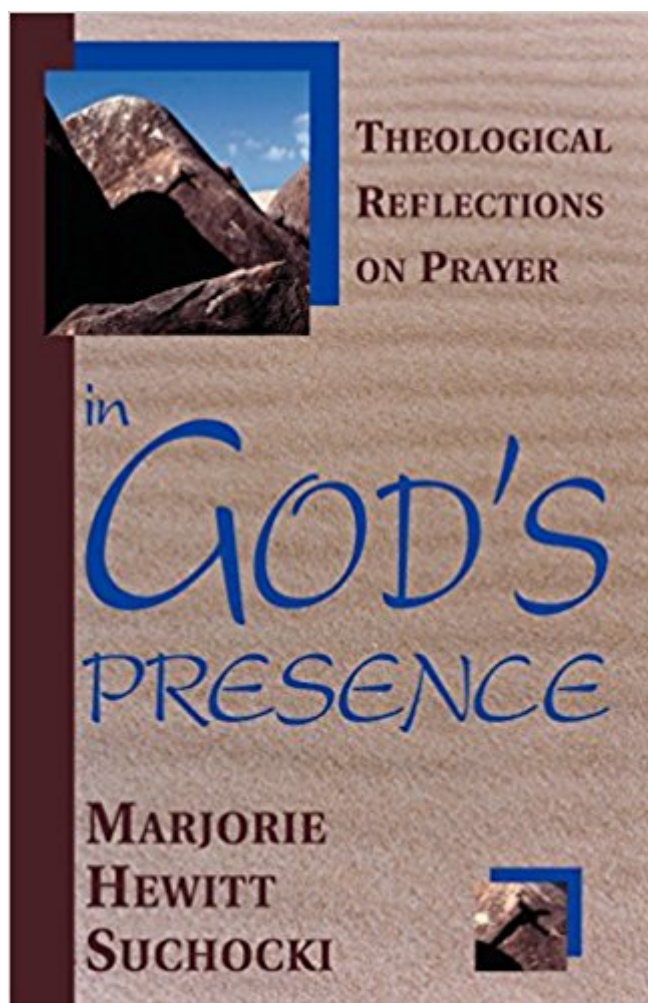


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# In God's Presence: Theological Reflections On Prayer



## Synopsis

Suchocki explores the dynamics of prayer. "If," she says, "we regard prayer as a partnership with, not a manipulation of, God, we can find whole new dimensions in our prayer life."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

What are we really doing when we pray? Are we communicating with God or merely talking things over with ourselves? If you've ever asked yourself questions like these, this book is for you. In it, a distinguished theologian explores the dynamics of prayer: what it is, what it isn't, and how various kinds of personal and corporate prayer work to bring us into the presence of God.

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki is professor emerita of theology at Claremont School of Theology. She is also co-director of the Center for Process Studies at Claremont.

Marjorie Suchocki's work, *In God's Presence*, is a thing of beauty. It is not a predominance of irrefutable logic that is the character of this beauty. Nor is it exemplified by her nearly unnoticeable lack of a personal pronoun in reference to God. It is not a beauty of academic erudition; you won't find any citation or reference to any other author (aside from several scriptural references) that would indicate some connection to a body of academic literature. Rather the beauty is found in the language of the work which speaks on multiple levels to a rich diversity of issues in words that can be easily absorbed by

non-academics. Suchocki's synthesis of Whiteheadian concepts, the Social Gospel, environmentalism, equality, honesty, and solidarity is translated into a pastoral vocabulary and tone that might be familiar to many mainline churches, but surprising close to the vocabulary of Pentecostals and evangelicals as well. It is interesting to note that Suchocki never introduces a single Whiteheadian technical term other than "God" even though throughout the work her ideas permeate the background. For example, she writes, "In a relational, interdependent world, God not only gives to me and receives from me, but also gives and receives directly from every element in my environment. God knows my situation, better than I know it myself." (Kindle Locations 272-273). In this brief passage are embedded her concepts of God's primordial nature, which provides the initial aim, God's consequent nature, which prehends each and every occasion in its subjective immediacy, and the feedback between the two natures which brings relevance to the initial aim of each novel concrescing occasion; and yet, no mention of "concrecence" of actual occasions, "the primordial nature," "the consequent nature," "the theory of prehensions," or "objective immortality." Instead Suchocki gives this metaphysics lecture to us in the form, almost, of a homespun religious statement that seems so "common-sense" after we read it. The potential for Suchocki's work to reach into existing Christian churches and be a source of renewal in those churches is a real potential. This work is not only something a seminary student should study along with more rigorous topics before going into pastoral work, but it should also be used by each of those pastors to teach her congregation. Having said that, it is also true that this work has little to no relevance outside the Christian church. This is a distinctively, and unabashed work of Christian thought. The substance of the language is taken directly from Christian doctrines and practices of worship. The idea of "transformation" (especially "creative transformation" although she does not use that term here) clearly derives from Christ's resurrection, and is frequently referred to as the power of the resurrection transforming the individual in spite of the suffering. It is worthy of note that she nowhere suggests that Christ's resurrection is a myth and that the true meaning of resurrection is this transformation rendered by God out of the suffering we feel; yet, I am less than convinced that she indeed views the resurrection as an historical reality. At any rate, the doctrine of

a physical resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—his body is without question a deal-breaker, at worst, and a stumbling-block, at best, for those of any other faith than Christianity; not to mention agnostics, and we secular humanists. In the middle of a discussion on how the word “our Father in the Lord” in the Lord’s Prayer address of God as “Our Father” rejects the patriarchal privilege so prevalent in that time, Suchocki attempts to justify the parochial nature of the discussion by saying, “This is certainly not to deny that peoples of religious faiths other than Christianity address God with their own form of ‘our,’ and that they, too, have a distinctive identity that renders their own ‘our’ meaningful to them and to God. But that is God’s story with them, not God’s story with us.” (Kindle Locations 1086-1087). She goes on to say that because of our Christian identity, “we become a distinctive family among the world’s peoples—and among God’s peoples, too.” (Kindle Locations 1088-1089). In some sense this celebration of distinctiveness amid diversity is probably a fairly ecumenical attitude for a Christian, although, frankly, it is unlikely Suchocki will find much support for this view in those churches leaning toward the right. In another sense, it is explicitly parochial in the sense that it seems to express approbation for an underlying tribalism. For those involved in tribes, tribalism is a great source of support and community, but the exclusivity which constitutes a tribe—familial, ethnic, sports teams, national, religious, or political, is also that thing which binds together some select/elite group by excluding and vilifying another group, and claiming exceptionalism and moral superiority on behalf of their tribe. It is the cause of the greater part of our separation and polarization. One final item of note involves a statement just past the middle of the second chapter where Suchocki first begins to develop her thesis, “God works with the world as it is in order to bring it to where it can be. Prayer changes the way the world is, and therefore changes what the world can be. Prayer opens the world to its own transformation.” (Kindle Locations 192-194) These phrases, repeated over and over in a multitude of variations, constitute the argument for the efficacy of prayer. For me the whole argument hinges on the second phrase. I may have missed where she made the case that prayer changes the way the world is. The only thing I find that may justify this is later in the chapter where she notes, “Today, in an age of relativity physics, we learn that every pulse of energy actually has effects throughout the universe.” (Kindle Locations 286-287). Although this seems to give scientific credibility to the thought that prayer can change the way the world is, in truth, relativity physics tells us nothing of the sort. Einsteinian General Relativity tells us that no signal (i.e., information) can travel faster than the

speed of light. Even though this is an almost unimaginable speed (300,000 kilometers per second) it is a finite speed and a year traveling at that speed is quite a small distance relative to the distances encountered in the visible universe. At that speed, a pulse of energy would need 13,400,000,000 years to span the known universe, and we now know that the universe is expanding faster all the time. Even Whitehead's own version of the principle of relativity gives no credence to the statement as it stands. If we set aside Relativity physics and move into quantum physics we do encounter a principle of non-locality in which entangled particles have an ability to correlate their states simultaneously even though separated by distances which would preclude any signal from passing between them prior to the correlation, thus a violation of relativity. Nevertheless, the statement does not support the efficacy of prayer. In summary: As an exposition of process and/or scientific thought the work clearly lacks rigor. As an explicitly Christian work that seamlessly incorporates process theological thought with traditional Christian doctrine, this work is perhaps unparalleled. The unvarnished Christianity of the vocabulary is wonderfully balanced by the freshness of expression, and her ability to embed complex concepts into a language accessible by the lay reader.

Ms. Suchocki has delivered a potent message about prayer that illuminated quite a few dark corners for me. As a 61-year-old cradle Episcopalian, I had become more and more depressed about my feelings of inadequacy in prayer. Most especially, I was beginning to believe that "prayer doesn't work," and that the best we could ever do is to snuggle up close to our Creator and experience the love that abounds from that source. Suchocki offers that the Creator voluntarily constrained the omnipotence to which this Creator is entitled. By doing so, the Creator gave us free will; if God could (or would) just step in whenever we've decided to mess things up, our free will would not be free, at all, and the consequences of our actions would be subject to an irrational, undependable Mr. Fix-it. Consider all the prayers offered during Holocaust. Mr. Fix-it would have leapt right in. The Creator, with us as limited partners, co-creators, let us exercise our free will. Until the violence was over, God must surely have shed more tears than all the rest of us, combined; and hopefully, we learned from all the errors we made during that awful period, so that as we progress in co-Creation, we will be more the kind of partners that God desires. I was struck by the idea that God always wills the best that can be for anyone, and that our prayers are part of a tapestry woven in the Creation that tilt Creation toward the goodness that we and God desire. Suchocki's description of the connected-ness provided by the millions of Christians praying the Lord's Prayer, down through the millenia, was an epiphany for me. The first chapter was very clearly written by an academic! I

recommend that it be read through quickly and then deeply. After that, the rest of the book is illuminating on several levels, depending on how deeply the reader is willing to take herself or himself. I read it as part of a four-session summer book study, and would recommend doing so to others. Many minds can bring out the best of Suchocki's work. Highly recommended!

I read this book for the first time (of many) when I was still a seminary student. It is simply the best examination of prayer that I have ever encountered. It has been my privilege to teach the book several times in adult religious education classes at several churches. It was well received! As others have noted, much of the strength of the book lies in its highly personal nature. I continue to recommend it to persons interested in "how prayer works" and in exploring a thought-provoking view of our relationship with the divine.

process theology writer writes for the scholarly and the less so! If anyone is new to process theology, this is a good place to start!

Just now reading. Using it in Sunday School class. Our minister said the book changed his life! Good enough for me.

This book presents an inspiring description of how prayer "works" in a relational universe. When we pray we become partners with God in making the world, and ourselves, better and more aligned with God's ongoing work of bringing more goodness, beauty, and joy into existence.

Prayers matter and Suchoki beautifully describes why in this accessible short book I recommend to all who pray and all who care about God's good creation

Such a clear and helpful description of prayer. Understanding that God is present everywhere and having only our good in God's intentions.

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