

# Towards a Theology of Prayer

*Whatever is prayer?* There are three kinds of people who will not be able to answer this question. The first kind consists of those who do not pray or care to pray, and may even mock at those who pray and feel the wiser for it. The second kind comprises the downright secularists in the world of science, business, medicine and even bureaucracy who, abjuring all religious belief, take to meditational exercises like the widespread transcendental meditation for the sole purpose of developing their human potential. The third kind embraces profound believers who not only pray but pray so well that they are not even aware of their prayer. Had not Anthony the Great said, as we learn from John Cassian, that the best prayer of all happens when one is quite unaware of one's very act of praying?<sup>1</sup> How right Pascal was when he left notes about his high degree of prayer in his *Memorial* in the form of cipher!<sup>2</sup>

Obviously we belong to none of the groups, the first two ignorant of any reality of prayer beyond mere words and the third graced with their *docta ignorantia* having known prayer too profound for words. However we are certainly nearer to the third group than to the other two! While we may have not reached the end of prayer like the great colossi of God who have climbed the heights of prayer, we are people on the way with our own yearnings for, and glimpses of, the goal. We know and understand something of what is meant by prayer when we hear it mentioned. At least we can claim sincerely that we are not completely ignorant of it because of our practice of it in some way or other. So perhaps we can talk about prayer though certainly not authoritatively but humbly heeding the wise saying: "He who comes back having gone but half the way comes back not." And when we dare express ourselves on prayer we do so hesitantly; for, as Swami

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1. See S. Tugwell, *Prayer in Practice* (Springfield, 1974), p. 27.

2. See M. Nedoncelle, *The Nature and Use of Prayer*. (London, 1914), p.viii.

Abhishiktananda has explained knowingly in relation to the above paradox, "Nobody can really agree to talk about it save one who has only an intellectual knowledge of it-and in that case, besides words, what does one really transmit?"<sup>3</sup> So we know of clear statements made by people on prayer even if we should fight shy of making our own pronouncements.

### Two Descriptions of Prayer

To start off, here are two that came my way almost at random, both of them separated incidentally almost by a century. "Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion" said Auguste Sabatier, a liberal French theologian, in 1897. He continued:

It is prayer that distinguishes the religious phenomenon from such similar or neighbouring phenomena as purely moral or aesthetic sentiment. Religion is nothing if it be not the vital act by which the entire mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the principle from which it draws its life. This act is prayer, by which term I understand no vain exercise of words, no mere repetition of certain sacred formulae, but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence -it may be even before it has a name by which to call it.<sup>4</sup> Compare this with the short and sweet and simple description of prayer by a youngman of nineteen. "Prayer finally comes to mean not to express an opinion, but to feel a Presence".<sup>5</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Bishop Anthony Bloom, who could and did make people warm towards prayer by his talks on BBC, would approve of such a

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3. Henri Le Saux, *The Eyes of Light* (Denville, 1983), p. 20.

4. As in W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. (London, 1960), p. 444.

5. See W.R. Parker and E.St. Johns, *Prayer can Change your Life* (New York, 1974), p. 148.

vision of prayer, having had in his most aggressive atheistic moment an overpowering sense of the Presence that he was seeking to disprove as a young Communist! Even Paul Tillich, the theologian of the secular culture, has offered insights that lead to the same basic understanding of prayer, as made out by a thesis on his theology of prayer.<sup>6</sup> The classic name in this sphere, however, is Brother Lawrence, a Discalced Carmelite of the seventeenth century, for whom prayer was simply to realize the presence of God.<sup>7</sup> In this list of big names must be included the humble legion familiar with prayer like the anonymous Little Sister of Jesus whose simple testimony is so telling: "prayer has never been "Prayers" for me, but God's Presence: in silence, in suffering, in sin, in his Word, in his city, in his Bread."<sup>8</sup>

### Prayer as Concentration

Any pleasing presence produces in the other present an attention, an attraction, an absorption all of which ends in concentration. So it is also in the case of the divine presence felt in prayer by the human person who is drawn to pray. Only we must affirm that such must necessarily be the delightful happening in the sphere of the overwhelming presence enjoyed in prayer, as the divine presence cannot be thought of with the necessary limitations of the human presence. Indeed presence, like goodness, existence and providence, is an exclusive attribute of God. Is not God alone who is present here but not only here, and so omnipresent? The Indian religious mind could therefore name the divine presence by a separate word: *sannidanam!*

Once this truth of the compelling presence of God dawns on us we would be able to appreciate how "one of the traditional words for the fundamental act of prayer is concentration."<sup>9</sup> How central and universal this understanding of prayer is, may be illustrated by the way three different religious traditions have treasured this experience.

6. See S.Painadath, *Dynamics of Prayer* (Bangalore, 1980), p. 193.

7. D. Attwater, tr., *The Practice of the Presence of God* (London, 1926), p. 15.

8. *Pathway of Prayer*, 1984, mimeograph.

9. R. Panikkar, ed. and tr., *The Vedic Experience* (London, 1979). p.42.

When I took to learning some yoga rather late in life I was surprised at the first lesson taught me by the young Hindu instructor. He made me sit in *sukhasana* - which is to sit cross legged with the back of course erect and the hands stretched straight and tight resting on the knees - and then said, "Close your eyes and pray to God in the way you are used to." Certainly *sukhasana*, the easiest of all postures in yoga, is the simplest picture of concentration. What came to me as a surprise was that such an ordinary posture of sitting common among most of us is not only a calm posture of concentration but also one that enshrines the exercise of prayer. The whole experience of yoga may be interpreted in this light. After all the very word yoga, coming from the root *yuj*, meaning to unite or concentrate, has come to stand for a whole experience of physical, mental and spiritual concentration, contemplation and comprehension as may be inferred from the Upanishadic statements such as the following:<sup>10</sup>

Know this (Brahman) by the practice of faith, love, and concentration (Kaivalya Upanishad).

This they deem to be yoga-the steady concentration of the senses. Man then becomes pure attention (Katha Upanishad).

Brahman, they say, is the target, to be pierced by concentration, thus one becomes united with Brahman as an arrow with the target (Mundaka Upanishad).

In the Buddhist tradition there are four noble truths of which the fourth one, which is the eightfold path, lists as the eighth part right concentration. The place of right concentration in Buddhism can be seen by the statues of the praying Buddha deep in meditation in the lotus posture and smiling in the serenity of enlightenment, as the lotus rises towards the sun blossoming out of the dark, muddy pond. In particular Zen Buddhism with its culture of *zazen* (sitting meditatively concentrating on breathing in and out) and *sesshin* (a kind of retreat usually of seven days, devoted to prolonged periods of *zazen*) speaks volumes on its characteristic prayer leading to *satori* (the experience of

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10. See *ibid.*, pp. 441, 761-762, 774.

oneself, one's true nature, and hence to the nature of existence as such).

In the Islamic Sufi tradition too there has been a remarkable appreciation of concentration in the experience of prayer: "Meditation without concentration and contemplation is not very different from water without wetness and coldness."<sup>11</sup>

This experience of concentration so very central to the Hindu and Buddhist and Muslim traditions at their best must bear within itself what is central to all prayer. That is why, one may dare say, a sizeable number of the Westerners who have lost all their zest for the usual practice of their first religion and have turned away from or even rebelled against it for whatever reason, have turned to Asia, in particular India, and apparently found a way of prayer and a satisfying one at that. In response to this need Eastern *gurus* and *ashrams* have sprung up in the West too drawing flocks of seekers there to learn the unfamiliar Oriental techniques involving body and mind with the hope of attaining spiritual experience of a different sort. After mentioning these known religious phenomena<sup>12</sup> Andre Louf gives a pointed analysis bearing on our point of consideration:

These techniques are really a form of *ascesis*, the purpose of which is to direct a person's attention away from what is superficial and unrewarding in order to concentrate it on the very heart of things; first and foremost, of the innermost, essential core of the person himself. He has to attain a degree of harmony with his deepest 'I' and at the same time with other human beings and with the world as a whole. Finally with God as well. That is at any rate for the believer".<sup>13</sup>

11. dries Shah, *Reflections* (Baltimore, 1972), p. 65.

12. Such an experience had happened before too, for instance, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. See B. Pennington, *Centering Prayer* (Barden City, 1982), p. 25.

13. A. Louf, *Teach us to Pray* (Bangalore, 1978), p. 17.

For the Christian believer all this is not irrelevant, to say the least, specially in the atmosphere of interreligious dialogue that should awaken us foremost to our lost heritage. Though Louf does not go on to develop the theme of concentration further in the Christian experience of prayer he should know all about it especially because he has inherited the monastic tradition which inculcated the importance of concentration in prayer right from the beginning when no schedule, and therefore no method, of prayer was even thought of.<sup>14</sup> So it is not at all fanciful or far-fetched to discuss and describe the prayer experience of Christians in terms of concentration, mindful however that in Christian practice the goal of concentration is not, as perhaps in some other traditions, reaching a mental void.<sup>15</sup>

But the sad fact is that Christians, who are unfortunately as much of the world as the rest, are mostly distracted. Contrary to their calling they are, as observed rightly by Sebastian Moore, quite unable to "bear all the time the burden of Christ - consciousness."<sup>16</sup> This is no exaggerated view. How often do people not plead that, life being so busy, there is no time for prayer! But being busy is really being distracted; and being distracted, whatever time there is, one cannot find time for anything, let alone prayer! Cecil Mcarry drives home the point:

Time is not something outside of us. Giving time to prayer, our work, our friends, is giving *ourselves* in time to prayer, work, friends..... If we do not respond to God who calls us within and through outside circumstances, we are likely to become the victims of external things.<sup>17</sup>

And so we have developed a culture shock that keeps us ever dissipated, disoriented, disjointed and disintegrated. Even those who are credited to pray may not excel in concentrated prayer. In fact in a

14. See S. Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection* (Springfield, 1985), p.103.

15. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Bangalore, 1994), p. 492, n. 2724.

16. S. Moore, *God is a New Language* (London, 1970), p.163.

17. As in S. Bastianel, *Prayer in Christian Life* (Middlegreen, 1988), p.8.

laboratory experiment in the United States to study the degree of concentration of those who are known to pray regularly the Catholic priests fared poorly whereas the Hindu *swamis* and Zen *roshis* gave a good account of themselves.<sup>18</sup> Still the meanest Christian knows that distraction has no place in prayer. This very experience of distraction as a fault in prayer means that people, as a rule, consider prayer to be a matter of concentration!

One of the least suspected distractions in prayer is playing to the praying gallery. People at prayer can be more preoccupied with others, present or absent, than occupied with the sole Other to whom alone we pray! So Jesus warned straight out :

And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them..... But when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place (Mt 6:5-6).

How proper it would be then to begin our prayer becoming aware of God's secret presence and so coming alive to God our Lord who is looking at us and so composing ourselves suitably, as Ignatius advocates in his *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>19</sup> For all the simplicity and naturalness of this directive-Ignatius only illustrates it without explaining it as such anywhere -its importance cannot be emphasized too much; that is why Ignatius, though sparing in words usually, does not tire of repeating in every model exercise of prayer that it should be preceded and sustained by proper composition of ourselves in the presence of God!

Composition, which certainly connotes concentration, may be better rendered "composure of heart", the expression used by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to identify the common basic trait of all prayer. This trait may be described actively thus :

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18. See W. Johnston, *Silent Music* (London, 1974), p. 36.

19. See nn. 47, 75.

.....we "gather up" the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter the presence of him who loves us.<sup>20</sup>

Such composure takes place in the heart; and the heart is precisely our hidden centre beyond the grasp of any but the Spirit, the place of decision deeper than our psychic impulses, the place of truth where we choose life or death, the place of human encounter and indeed the place of divine covenant.<sup>21</sup> "God is always there", as a Sister of the Poor Clares persuades us, "and when we, too, are present, communication flows as naturally as the sun shines. The life-changing element is that we are drawn out of disintegration into focus, and enabled, at last, to speak to the one who speaks to us."<sup>22</sup>

All this is reminiscent of the whole tradition of Christian prayer coming from the Desert Forbearers that has been newly named *centering prayer*. The nomenclature is striking, emphasizing that prayer must arise out of the center, of the fullness of who we are; and thereby hangs a mystery. In the words of William of St. Thierry in *The Nature of Body and the Soul* (which is in a way applicable to non-Christians too as it is based on philosophers and physicians besides Church writers):

For just as the body lives from the soul, so does the soul live from God..... It lives as one spirit with him. For the will of the Father and the Son- the Holy Spirit..... conforms the will of the soul to himself uniting its love to himself with spiritual omnipotence. He becomes so united with the soul that..... when the soul prays with aspirations beyond conception, it is rather the Spirit who is said to pray.<sup>23</sup>

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20. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 488, n. 2699.

21. See *idem*, p. 462, n. 2563.

22. Frances Teresa, *Living the Incarnation* (London, 1993), p.41.

23. As in B. Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, p.23.

In tune with this tradition a mediaeval English mystic spoke of prayer as 'oneing exercise'. In prayer think of God in such a way, he would say, "that thy thought be not scattered nor separated, but oned in him that is all."<sup>24</sup>

So it is obvious that for any mature, enlightened Christian prayer is basically an existential experience: i.e., existentially integrating the person in the context of life that is at once personal, social and cosmic, all the while becoming aware of one's growing identification with the divine milieu or divine reign. In so speaking about Christian prayer as the divine focalizing centre that influences and informs and so concentrates all the concerns of life, we are only making a restatement of *the* Christian prayer, namely the Lord's prayer, that so focuses on the Kingdom. What is the dynamics of so praying, setting our heart's on the kingdom even while living with other denizens on this very earth in the still revealing cosmos? This is how Macquarrie explains it:

While on the one hand this prayer may be a strengthening of one's own commitment to Christian kingdom, may we not also believe that the sincere prayer of faith is a strengthening of the movement of Being itself in its threefold action of creation-reconciliation- consummation? For this..... is not something that proceeds just automatically, but something that needs man's free response and cooperation. So where one person or group of persons pray for the coming of the kingdom and commit themselves more deeply in faith, this means an "objective" strengthening of the kingdom beyond the lives of the actual persons concerned.<sup>25</sup>

So we can say that prayer *subjectively and objectively* concentrates the divine movement that goes on throughout the whole realm of beings by way of redemption from creation to consummation.

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24. As in W. Johnston, *Still Point* (New York, 1970), p. 100.

25. J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London, 1977), p. 496.

To conclude this discussion on prayer as concentration we refer to what R. Panikkar considers the most precise elaboration of this idea. His consideration only generalizes what Macquarrie expresses in typically Christian terms:

The man of prayer, in and through his spiritual concentration, really concentrates more and more part of reality; he condenses, as it were, the less concentrated sparks of the universe floating around him, so as to reduce them to their essence. He can do so because he has found the center of reality which allows him really to concentrate, that is, to center his worlds in one single center. This can be done when the three centers, that of outer reality, that of inner reality, and that of man himself, coincide..... Real prayer is always an act that embraces, all in one, the Divine, the Human, and Cosmic, that is the *adhidaivika*, the *adhyatmika*, and the *adhibhautika*.<sup>26</sup>

What needs theologizing in the matter of prayer is precisely this threefold oneness of prayer, this threefold concentration of the experience that goes by the name of prayer. Failing to sense the divine in prayer is pharisaism, a form of which is narcissism that consists in focussing on one's pursuit of prayer so that one keeps looking at oneself looking at God! Ignoring one's own personal, human roots during prayer is escapism or angelism that contravenes the logion: "The kingdom of God is within you". Forgetting the living context of our prayer, namely the universe of people and also planets, is a sort of solipsism setting everything and everyone at nought if not arrogantly at least ignorantly, not realizing the setting of the past encounter of God with humans. Avoiding these triple dangers of false prayer, or positively speaking, making peace in the spiritual, human and environmental level, as Simon the new Theologian would say,<sup>27</sup> a theology of prayer would seek to lay bare and comprehend the divine, human and cosmic activity that shapes and sharpens the experience of all true prayer. If we should

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26. R. Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, p. 42.

27. Metropolitan Anthony, *Creative Prayer* (London, 1987), p.16.

leave any one of the three strands of prayer we would indeed be stranded in our prayer, even if not in our theology, which distinction, however, is not valid beyond a point, given the overriding insight that proper prayer issues necessarily in theology and proper theology necessarily pursues prayer.<sup>28</sup>

The best approach then to this spiritual attempt at the theology of prayer would be in the spirit of the theologian in Casey, an eight year old American boy I know, who announced one day to his mother that he wanted to be a spiritual person and explained to his puzzled mother who did not understand him: "Oh, I want to be a person who feels he is a part of everything!" The theology of prayer so developed will hopefully articulate the work of the Spirit in people's experience.

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28. See D. Lewis, tr., *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus* (Westminster, 1943), p.71 and S. Painadath, *Dynamics of Prayer*, p.2.