

# *Prayer and Personality*

JAMES A. KIRK

**I**T is my impression that profound, devoted, optimistic and active prayer is increasingly uncommon in contemporary life. However, among many in whom the prayer life is merely flickering or has become extinct, I perceive no sense of glad release. Rather they seem to feel a sense of poignant disappointment or discouraging futility which forces them to yield a long cherished hope. The sense of futility may take the form of bitterness, resentment and revolt against the whole religious frame of reference. It would seem possible that the failures of prayer have turned as many people away from significant faith, as the practice of prayer has brought into faith. Even when the process of elimination of the life of prayer is gradual or casual rather than violent and intentional there is apt to be a sense of remorse or even guilt rather than of virtue and freedom. Even when prayer has consciously been discontinued there may linger a sense of longing for the rich serenity and confident integrity that marks the life of prayer at its best. Commonly the conviction of futility breaks down under direct, immediate stress and—whether there is adequate reason to believe in it or not—people pray.

This impression suggests two things. First, there is a certain subtle incongruity about the popular concept of prayer which does not integrate with the general contemporary world outlook. The conflict is not sharp enough to bring about the sense of appreciation for release from an outworn pattern such as is felt, for example, concerning the elimination of the witch doctor by modern medical methods. Secondly, the

poignant regret suggests that in its appropriate context the life of prayer promoted certain functional values which men still cherish. The sense of profound inner integrity, of a purposive and alert serenity, of an intimate personal relatedness to the very source of life—these are what we observe as possible fruits of the life of prayer, and these are what we are loathe to yield to the concept of the inexorable world machine that seems to pervade the *Weltanschauung* of our times.

It seems to me that an attack upon the problem of meaningless prayer must have two main thrusts. On the one hand we need to clarify and redefine the concept of prayer itself. On the other hand we need to clarify and enrich the world outlook and dominant attitudes of our times to make them adequate for dealing with the genuine and fundamental issues of life.

It would appear that most of those in whom the prayer life has been creative and significant have not had the simple concept of prayer which is so readily dismissed in contemporary life. The notable men of prayer, persons such as Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Brother Lawrence, Martin Luther, John Wesley, never were merely doing the kind of thing which so many of our contemporaries have stopped doing. The difference is sometimes subtle, but it is significant. We may think of prayer as a form of communication with God, a means of laying one's total self open before the source of his life in the confident expectation and anticipation of profound, creative, though not necessarily immediately pleasant consequences. Prayer is both a product and a producer of the religious life.

A number of considerations suggest that prayer in this sense is not primarily a matter of words. To be sure

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words, audible or inaudible, are usually involved. But this is a product of the way words function in evoking and expressing one's deeper sensitivities and probing one's profound commitments rather than a concern with the hearing apparatus of God. We do not use words because words are what matter to God, but because words are the keys which unlock our inward thoughts; they are the trigger mechanisms which set off chain reactions of commitment, evoking the response of our inner core of being. **Prayer is a fearless searching of the very depths of one's total self in the presence of God.** The primary thrust of its meaning is not upon the form or mode but upon a functioning, intimate relationship which has consequences. The form varies tremendously. It may be petition or intercession, adoration or gratitude, contemplative, meditative, appreciative, active, interactive, verbal, non-verbal or visionary. The form gives way to the vitality of the relationship with God and the uniqueness of the experience of relatedness.

There are two fundamental obstacles to the achievement of such a vital experience. The first relates to the concept of the total self. It is pathetically easy to regard an accumulation of trivial desires as the genuine concern and basic orientation that gives life meaning and purpose. So many people appear to be so accustomed to living at the surface of their values that it becomes exceedingly difficult for them to live openly with themselves, to contemplate seriously the self-disclosure which would reveal the fundamental disorientation of their lives. Unless pushed by crises they are unlikely, perhaps unable, to contemplate seriously and accept what Whitehead called their "solitariness." One profound fact stands out in the biographies of the men of prayer. They achieved this life not by chance but by discipline. Perhaps the discipline of form — which is not itself the prayer — is the entrance to the genuine self-disclosure which is. Prayer

which deals only with trivial issues and relationships is easily discarded and not much missed. The same cannot be said about prayer which penetrates to the basis of integrity. In order for prayer to be significant it must be possible to maintain in the concept of the self some sense of the genuine possibility of a fundamental core of identity from which motivations and judgments may be derived and for which the individual feels a certain sense of personal responsibility. It is also necessary to recognize in the concept of the self those larger dimensions of which it is created and re-created, including other selves.

A second obstacle to the significant life of prayer is in the concept of God. He who does not believe that there is in fact a Determiner of Destiny, a system of events to which he is necessarily related and in which his ultimate integrity must reside is simply not a candidate for a successful and significant experience of prayer. I do not believe that God must be imagined in terms of a Supernatural Person or Being who "listens" in order for prayer to be effective, but I do believe that it is foolish and hypocritical to think that prayer would continue to be genuinely significant as a recognized mode of auto-suggestion without reference to anything with which life, including our deepest desires themselves, must be brought into more productive relationship. Prayer which is predicated on getting God to conform to our desires is worse than useless: it is blasphemy or idolatry. Prayers to a god who "isn't there" in the hope that it will provide some spiritual uplift for the man who is there is at best silly and at worst malicious. The concept of God emerges as that largest perspective in terms of which our lives may find some sense of stability and attachment in the quest for significance. When we attempt to make God conform to our desires, the stability becomes as transient as our fleeting notions and the experience of unrelieved frustration becomes inevitable. It is of course impos-

sible to have a concept of God which is not a human conception; but it is not impossible to have a concept of God which transcends parochial and limited human interests, which refuses to idolize or unnecessarily despise the human self or to humanize the universe, and for which there is substantial evidence available. In the philosophical development of such a concept I find it useful to avoid as much as possible the use of personal categories because of their common distorting effect upon the evidence. One may view God primarily in terms of a plurality of relationships where now one and now another aspect of the largest possible perspective or total behavior of the universe becomes relevant to given situational issues. It is sometimes disruptive to think of these relationships as though God were a Person. But to flip the metaphor over, most of what we know about a person is relationships. The dignity and worth that is human is the dignity and worth of relationships that matter. It is possible to respond to such a process-relationship conception of God in an intimately interpersonal sense—to feel one's self in the presence of a Thou to which he must respond rather than an "it" over which he must exercise control. Serious contemplation of the origin and destiny of life leads to a recognition of that vast, creative process in terms of which life and significance are possible. Direct, personal interaction and relationship within that perspective can lead to the orientation, reorientation and refreshment of life in such a way that new awareness emerges, courage is renewed, meaning and significance take on larger perspectives and integrity is founded in the character of that on which we most deeply depend. To say that one doesn't believe in God because prayer doesn't work is redundant. If there is adequate reason for believing in God then prayer is simply the form that the relationship to God takes in moments of intensity and openness. If one says that he believes in God but not in the

experience of relatedness then he cannot believe in a real god. If one affirms the experience of relatedness to the ground of being then one believes in such prayer, although there is still plenty of room for debate concerning its most appropriate and useful forms.

This conception of prayer can be maintained only if there is room within the contemporary world-view for some concept of personal relatedness and value in reality. If the universe is in fact the linear, inexorable movement of a world-machine in which objects and events spew out by necessity in the guise of chance from the myriad collocations of atoms, and values are only transient and utterly subjective tastes, then the attitude of Implacable Indignation or the Dignity of Tragedy suggested by Bertrand Russell seem more appropriate than either worship or resignation. All the evidence, however, does not support a rigidly mechanistic conception. Important contemporary world-views find genuine creativity, the emergence of value, the sense of continuity in change, emerging differentiation and integration to be immanently involved in the cosmic process. This is not to deny that destructivity, inversion or corruption of values, the sense of change with continuity, discarded emergents and disintegration are also present, but they are present in a total context which has produced life and on which life depends for sustenance and enhancement with some considerable fulfillment. It is no accident that Alfred N. Whitehead, in developing what to the present at least seems to be the most complete and integrated statement of this outlook, turned to interpersonal as well as biological categories to convey his meaning. He was not attempting to humanize or personalize the universe; he was attempting to convey a sensitivity to precisely those elements most obscured and inadequately treated in the mechanistic view of the immediately preceding centuries. If this view has any substantial validity then

such a concept of God and such a concept of prayer as have been discussed here not only are possible, but are required for understanding those values which from an ancient time men have discovered in the life of prayer. As Whitehead himself suggests, "Nature is patient of many interpretations." I do not know that this world-outlook is compelling of assent, but its credentials are at least as respectable as the alternatives with which it may be compared, and it appears to me that it maintains a livability that many other views lack. The scientific and literary imagination seem to have found out about the twentieth century. One wonders if he theological imagination might not benefit by joining our century with more vigor an enthusiasm.

If prayer is the fearless searching of the depths of one's total self in the presence of God, then by what methods and with what results? It has already been pointed out that prayer in this sense is a form of life and not just a form. If it is to be fearless it must involve the fullest possible sincerity. One ought to enter into his personal religious life with the least possible amount of mental reservation or conformity to other people's standards. Little of value can emerge from the relationship to God in terms of sham, pretense, or insincerity. Secondly, such prayer requires concentration, directed acts of conscious awareness. This awareness involves primarily concentration upon the relatedness to God. If we are continually distracted by the everpresent pleasures of self-pity and self-analysis we shall never be able to "think of ourselves as we ought" in relation to God. It was Paul who said, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." In order for such a statement to be meaningful even as a metaphor there must be profound awareness of the character one feels obliged to attempt to become. Inner distraction must be overcome or depth in prayer can never be achieved. A

third method is discipline. Discipline, I am told, is no longer a popular word. Perhaps it is just as well. It never was popular behavior. I am continually saddened by people who will discipline their standard of living through a budget because they must, but who find it impossible to discipline themselves for the achievement of a basic integrity in living. No significant prayer life is possible that is not subjected to structured, intentional and discomfoting control (the same characteristics which obtain for significant education). The ancient fast and prayer, perhaps even the discomfort of kneeling, were perceptive insights. These practices suggest that it is only the controlled, disciplined life which can be opened before God significantly. We should now be able to discover more productive forms of discipline than these, but our lives will still require focus and control. If prayer is the quest for integrity and meaning in the light of the character of God, each person must work out his own forms, but he ought not to expect the basic orientation of his life to be achieved too easily or without cost and effort.

Finally, what are some of the potential results of such a life of prayer?

- 1) Through prayer a person may discover a sense of identification with God, an integration with the basic character of the Determiner of his Destiny.

- 2) Through prayer one may be able to bring about a unification of motives into patterns of integrated and purposive living.

- 3) Prayer produces a sense of confidence that comes with the vision of one's relatedness to the world as a whole.

- 4) Prayer may lead to a sense of contentment, serenity or peace which comes from the recognition of one's deepest needs and of adequate resources for their fulfillment. It is important to note that this is usually a contentment which is not complacent, irresponsible or in-

sensitive to pain, but which is sustained in the midst of the most strenuous efforts to implement one's sense of social concern.

5) Prayer produces a deep and abiding wisdom that sees life daily in terms of its largest fulfillments, that releases men from ego-centric to broadly human interests, from narrow prejudice to inclusive perspectives.

6) Prayer requires and results in a profound investment of one's life energies through wholehearted acceptance of one's place in something that is of persistent concern, that is greater and more lasting than himself.

I doubt that this kind of prayer life is always possible; apparently it has

not always been achieved. But the prayer which has been rejected is usually some sterile formality which has lost its meaning in triviality and repetition and which can well afford to be discarded. For some, however, the life of prayer goes on, becomes a life of renewed integrity, repeatedly finds new forms in which to express itself and deepens and enriches life through persisting commitments.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The absence of the usual indications of scholarship is intentional. This material was originally used as a basis for discussion in an undergraduate class on Religion and Personality. It is a synthesis of material from many sources none of which can be held responsible for the present form. Many of the ideas were suggested originally by Dr. Howard M. Ham, now of Syracuse University.

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