

PRAYER IN WORLD RELIGIONS

Religion, as its etymological origin indicates, is basically a human device to establish and nurture holistic relationships at the vertical as well as horizontal dimensions. Taking the existential nature of the involvement of religions in the life of their followers, it is obvious that nothing can be outside the sphere of their activity. If establishment and maintenance of relationship are central to religion, any religious activity should have its unique characteristic mark in terms of the ability to cater to this central mission.

Prayer is one of the most important activities of religion. Irrespective of the nature of the Absolute that different religions subscribe to and worship, irrespective of the variations in the emphasis on the horizontal or vertical dimension among religions, and irrespective of any barbaric or demonic nature ascribed to the understanding of the Absolute in one religion by the followers of another, all religions seem to fall in the same track when it comes to the need of prayer in matters related to the life of the persons who subscribe to their creeds. Although prayer may take different forms depending on the need and circumstance, culture and tradition, personality traits and communal identity, the dynamics of prayer centre around a constant attempt to initiate, nurture, culture, and blossom healthy relationships between the religious devotee and the Absolute, or/and among the devotees themselves. Indeed, especially in the case of the theistic religions, authentic prayer is said to have a necessary orientation towards or relationship to the divine Absolute, which, in turn, would give rise to the same in relation to the others.

Prayer, thus, can be understood as a human mechanism to realize the core of religion. While it is possible to find vast variations in the methods of prayer adopted by different religions and individual members within a particular religion itself, it is essential that any prayer form in order to be effective and valid, it should be capable of opening up the devotee to something or somebody (with or without a name, or even in terms of the *nothing* or *void*) other than the self itself. It is here that we come across with the transcendental dimension in prayer. The self is capable of

transcending itself so that a relationship can be established; the shell of selfishness is removed so that the self can attain the capacity to open itself up in transcendence, either a vertical transcendence (towards the divine) or even a horizontal one (towards the human), for that matter. It must be borne in mind that in most of the world religions, it is the vertical transcendence, a transcendence that can establish a contact between the human devotee and the divine Absolute, that is considered to be strictly religious prayer. At the same time, however, from the perspective of the central role of prayer as a mechanism to establish relationship among the members of any particular religion or, better, among the members of various religions, its horizontal dimension is also of essential importance.

The vast and rich experiences of different religions have given rise to different traditions of prayer depending mostly on their understanding and approach to the Absolute. Indeed, some of them have stressed the vertical to the exclusion of the horizontal dimension. However, if we analyse different periods in the development of the religious thought we find that the emphasis always oscillated from time to time or from people to people between these two extremes. At times we also find the beautiful blending of both in a very meaningful and holistic manner. Given the fact that there are numerous methods of prayer among the living religions, with varying degrees of effectiveness, it is unbecoming of a believer to brand a prayer tradition of another person as ineffective and *demonic*, especially when the former has never had any knowledge or experience of the religious perspective and tenets of the other.

The methods of prayer, having their foundation in the tradition of any particular religion, do require a great deal of proximity to the cultural patterns and living situations of the believing community, an absence of which will certainly make them obsolete, at least as far as initiating and catering to the central mission of religions, that is the establishment of relationships. It is necessary that the internal dynamics of such prayer methods are suitable and capable of enkindling the flame of a warm bond between the devotees and the Absolute and among the devotees themselves. However, danger lurks in any attempt of religions if they, or any segment of the believers, tend to absolutize the external form of a prayer tradition at the exclusion of all others, sometimes endangering the very spirit and spontaneity of the religious adherents. It is highly probable

that over-emphasis accorded to the peripheral elements would gradually take away the dynamic inner spirit of any religious practice, including prayer, thus tending to make the latter irrelevant and meaningless to the persons of the living era. From this perspective, there is no point in blaming the lack of interest among the present generations in the traditional forms of prayer, which have been the product of the bygone ages. This is not a call to throw away all traditional forms of prayer, but a call to make them effective by retaining the valid inner spirit of religious practices, by restructuring, reforming and renewing traditions of prayer, and even attempting to pattern new but effective forms of prayer in the present-day times. The index of any effective prayer tradition shall be its continued and increasing capacity to bring about and creatively maintain divine-human and human-human relationships. What is primarily required for this purpose, therefore, is an openness towards the divine spirit and human existence. Openness of this sort has to begin from the interior of the individual, which shall gradually pervade the whole community of believers, thus making religious transcendence a reality for all. Although human effort seems to be at the beginning of the whole process, many religious traditions maintain that a response from and an accompaniment of the divine in the whole process are necessary for its successful employment.

Thus, from the perspective of world religions, prayer is an integral aspect of the realization of religious ideal. Its existential dimension indicates that a continued attention to various prayer forms and their dynamics would pave the way for a healthy religious perspective, where, although one or the other form would be preferred by individual devotees or groups, the uniqueness and value of the others would not be denied and looked down upon. It is with this hope that this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* addresses the general theme "Prayer in the World Religions." Deeply religious scholars from different disciplines, mostly from a Christian perspective, approach the issues involved in prayer, delving into its inner recesses so that an effective and healthy approach could be articulated and maintained among different religions.

Attempting to describe prayer as a human endeavour to establish relationship with the Divine, as the finite trying to reach out to the infinite, Thomas Kalam scrutinizes various prayer forms which fail to be authentic

and tend to be merely narcissistic approaches: some unauthentic prayer forms as attempts to create and worship God in our human image, whereby the relationship established tends to be only with oneself. Emphasizing the role of silence in authentic prayer, he proposes: "Integrating life and faith seems to be the best way to escape from narcissistic prayer." Moreover, he insists on the mutuality and relationship that result from any authentic prayer form saying that "The more open people are to this Transcendent God, the more united they become with one another."

Kurian Kachappilly, in his paper "Prayer as a Fundamental and Personal Religious Act," offers a critical reflection on William James' working definition of religious experience as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men (and women) in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." Rejecting the view that prayer requires God merely as a presupposition, he contends that "the affirmation of God's existence is essential to the actual life of religion, to an authentic life of faith and love in action."

Highlighting the need of a name in the human endeavours to relate to the Absolute, and drawing on the Indian traditions of *nāma-samkīrtana* and *nāmajapa*, Subhash Anand unveils the rich lore of chanting the name/s of God, so that an effective, warm and permanent relationship is established between the devotee and the Absolute, though the name and form may change from devotee to devotee, or from tradition to tradition. Thus, according to him, "A person, deeply in love, constantly thinks of his beloved, even when the beloved is absent, or when he himself is involved in some work. Constant *nāmajapa* is possible if the aspirant grows in love for the Lord. Continuous *nāmajapa* is the articulation of a mind that is fixed on the Lord, and, therefore, a man who in life constantly thinks of the Lord, can hope to die with the name of the Lord on his lips." In another article, "Jesus Prayer and Stillness of Heart," by James Aerthayil, we find the importance of almost the same style of prayer in the Eastern Christian traditions. Insisting that these prayer "methods are not merely a mechanical technique to achieve a certain spiritual condition," Aerthayil holds that "the heart [becomes] ready for the permanent indwelling of grace by constantly guarding its interior purity," and continued recitation of Jesus Prayer.

Antony Mookenthottam, an expert in Indian as well as Christian thought, in his article, makes a thorough investigation into the Hindu and Buddhist prayer traditions and arrives at the most salient features of them, thus, bringing forth the dynamics of prayer as such. He contends that whatever be the form, prayer should lead us to a profound experience of God or the ultimate Reality and a concern for the other, thus, paving the way for the realization of universal love, harmony and compassion as the common goals of all religions.

In another well-researched article, "The 'Lord's Prayer' and the Dynamics of Christian Living" by Paul Savio Pudussery, we find the clear articulation of the various dynamics of Christian prayer as reflected in the Lord's Prayer. In a very effective manner he arrives at his conclusion that "Only when we are in right relationship with God and with our neighbour, we could pray the Lord's Prayer in an authentic and meaningful way" and, thus, acknowledge "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of humanity." Another article from the Christian tradition is "Prayers of Jesus in the Gospel of John as Paradigms." Drawing on the three major prayers of Jesus in the Gospel of John to propose a paradigm for Christian prayer forms, Antony Edanad highlights Jesus' self-awareness and the intimacy, and the resulting confidence and total openness to *the Other and others* that should be part of any Christian prayer. He also maintains that the prayers of Jesus never have a self-oriented interest, instead they are always meant "for the well-being and benefit of others. Even when he seemingly asks something for himself, such as glory, it is ultimately intended for furthering the divine plan" in relation to the whole humanity. In another survey, demonstrating the importance and power of prayer in the Acts of the Apostles, and developing the communitarian dimension of prayer, Ignatius Jesudasan holds that "Our very prayer is too narrowly individualistic. The more we possess and privatise, the less can we feel the power of the spirit of Christ and of his resurrection, which heals the sick, as a sign of greater things to come."

All our contributors have delved deep into the dynamics of prayer from different perspectives, especially those of the living world religions, and have clearly shown that it is an inherent and inevitable element of the religious phenomena. The renewed interest of the *elites* in some of the

traditional prayer techniques, like yoga and meditation, seems to be certainly a welcome one in containing the stress and strain associated with the modern living. The contemporary movements like the New Age Religions, and the positive thrust of the secular, industrial and business societies seem to be very much in tune with the dynamics of prayer, although they may not be strictly *religious* according to the traditional standards. However, a healthy approach to prayer shall clearly be an effective index of a healthy and living religion. Indeed, religion devoid of relationship – to the Absolute and to the fellow human beings – is no religion, and prayer that does not cater to the establishment and maintenance of relationships shall be considered as *dead* prayer. As religion is the need of humanity, and as every living and genuine religious phenomenon is the need of the time, what is to be welcomed at this juncture is the constant attempt on the part of religions to inculcate and perpetuate relevant and effective means of prayer, thus becoming the catalyst of life lived in relationship to its fullness.

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