

## NARCISSISM IN PRAYER

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### 1. Prayer: Authentic and Unauthentic

Prayer as a human endeavour may be described as an attempt of the human to get in touch with the Divine – the finite reaching out to the Infinite. As such it can be analysed and understood from a psychological point of view, though the Divine itself transcends any psychological scrutiny.

From this perspective one can describe prayer as authentic and unauthentic. If in this attempt that one describes as prayer, the human is reaching out to the really Divine, then prayer could be considered as authentic. If, on the other hand, what is reached out by the finite consciousness is not the really Divine, but something else, that prayer becomes unauthentic.

The perennial danger in prayer is the possibility of human mind reaching out to something less than the Divine and considering it as the Ultimate.

### 2. Reaching Out to Oneself or the Ultimate?

This is something like what happened to Narcissus in Greek mythology. Narcissus goes for a stroll in the woods with his girl friend Echo. They come near a still lake in the midst of the woods. Handsome Narcissus looks into the still waters of the lake and encounters a beautiful 'creation' standing there in the lake. Little does he realize that it is his own shadow, his own reflection! Narcissus becomes so convinced that the figure seen in the waters of the lake is that of the beautiful Goddess Nymph. He wants to reach her then and there. Echo cries out to him: "Narcissus, that is not any goddess, it is your own shadow." But poor Narcissus is so convinced that it is Nymph herself. In order to reach her, he jumps into the lake and dies in his own shadow.

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The modern Narcissus enters the solitude of his/her chapel, temple, prayer room or ashram, and in the stillness of that atmosphere, discovers Him whom his/her soul was longing for. Little does he/she realize that what is perceived there is often his/her own shadow. Prayer thus becomes a response, not to God, but to the image one has of God. God is supposed to be one's creator. One's image of God is, however, one's own creation. This image is often a reflection of one's own personality. In the beginning God created us in His own image, says the Bible. Today some of us seem to be returning that favour by creating God in our own image!

### 3. Narcissistic Prayer: Source of Intolerance

Spiritual Narcissism thus seems to be the greatest obstacle for a life of prayer. It is the root cause of the basic intolerance often visible among the so-called 'prayerful' persons. God is the source of unity. In real prayer one is united with 'the all.' The essence of all mysticism is this union with the all. In narcissistic prayer, one is united with oneself, one's own image of God, and estranged from others, especially others who are different. This kind of prayer begets fanaticism and fundamentalism and leads to intolerance.

Suppose that one person's image of God is that of an Almighty Power, and of another person's, that of a benevolent parent. The style of their prayer will be entirely different. The prayer to the Almighty Power God will be characterized by dignity, decorum and protocol, whereas the prayer to the Daddy-God will be one of informality and intimacy. These two persons can become intolerant of the other person's style of prayer. This intolerance often leads to attempts at spiritual conquests of other minds and a sort of spiritual colonialism. As the Bible says: "No man has seen God at any time..." (John 1:18). Claiming that one's image or idea of God is the only valid and exhaustive one is an expression of utmost spiritual arrogance; imposing it on others an expression of worst spiritual domination.

Prayer, many a time, instead of reaching out to the real God, ends in one's small image of God.

### 4. Tainted Images of God

It is true that no human being can relate to God without at the same time having a mental image of God. It seems to be a legitimate prerogative of

human existence. The trouble begins when one equates the reality of the Divine exclusively with one's puny image of God.

It is self-evident that one's image of God is often coloured by one's own history. A person who has had strained relationship with his/her father, may not like to think of God as a 'father'. If at all he/she has to address God as a Father, it is likely that God will be described as a 'different type of Father'. A male chauvinist would shudder at the thought of God being described as a mother. As the Hindu theology postulates, each person will have his/her own '*ishtadevata*' (the favourite image of God.) Problem arises only when this image is absolutized and universalised to the extent that anything different is considered to be totally erroneous.

### **5. Scriptural Images of God**

Scriptures of different religions do describe God in different ways. To the extent that a person accepts these images, he/she belongs to that religion. A member of a particular religion has to verify if his/her image of God corresponds to that offered by the Sacred Scriptures of that religion. Even within that religion, there may be different images of God and consequently an option to choose one of them. Depending on the type of image chosen by the individual, the spirituality of the person would be different even within the same religion. Consequently, there are different types of spiritualities in all religions which must be appreciated.

Even these images proposed by the Scriptures cannot be absolutized as exhaustive and comprehensive descriptions of the Deity. They are all human descriptions about the Divine - human attempt to express the ineffable. Scriptures are God's words translated into human words. They have their limitations coming from limitations of human existence.

Suppose that a man born blind would like to know how the 'blue skies,' look like. It would be impossible to describe the experience of beholding the vast expanse of the blue skies in visual terms to this man. If we can translate that experience into something he can comprehend in auditory terms, it may be possible to describe that experience to him at least to an extent: "Beholding the blue skies is like listening to 'soft music,' one can assure him. Experience of listening to soft music is part of the blind person's repertoire. This comprehension is evidently a limited one, and it is analogical. Suppose he absolutizes it? What will happen if

he gains his sight all of a sudden? Will he be able to recognize the blue skies above his head? He would probably fail to recognize the blue skies because he will be still looking for 'soft music.' He has identified the blue skies with soft music. He forgets the important word '*like*': "blue skies are *like* soft music," and they cannot be identified.

Similarly, the Sacred Scriptures seem to be using analogical terms to describe the ineffable Divine. When the Scriptures describe God as a 'Father,' 'Mother,' 'good shepherd,' 'rock,' 'atman,' etc., we should understand that it is analogical language: God is *like* a father, mother, good shepherd, rock, etc. People who argue about the sexual identity of the Almighty and quarrel about addressing the Almighty as father or as mother are oblivious of the fact that God is neither a father nor a mother, but *like* them. If we forget the important word *like* and begin to equate God with these descriptions, it would be like the blind man equating blue skies with soft music. As a result, it would be difficult for them to experience God except in their own terms and according to their fantasies. The young student of philosophy who is convinced that God is "pure being" is unlikely to have any God experience in this world, because in a world where even the mother's milk is adulterated with DDT it would be difficult to encounter any "pure being" anywhere.

If the image one fosters in one's heart, however, is in tune with the various images of the Divine warranted by the Sacred Scriptures, one may be sure of being on the right track of thinking about God. However, even those images have their limitations in representing the Divine.

There is an ancient Indian saying: "When the wise man points at the moon with his finger, the fool sees the wise man's finger." Similarly, when the Sacred Scriptures point to the Divine, often people get stuck with the images used, instead of going beyond them in search of the Divine.

The Second Lateran Council of the Church in the 12<sup>th</sup> century made a very meaningful statement in this connection when it said: "The image that we have of God is more unlike God than like God." The starting point of all relationship with the Divine should be this realization.

## 6. Images as Idols

According to Paul Tillich, idolatry exists there, where the ultimate concern is placed on penultimate realities. Image of the Ultimate too belongs to the category of the penultimates. Worship of that image is tantamount to

idolatry. Prayer that centres around the image of God, and not on God, is a form of idolatry. In idolatry, the human being becomes enslaved by a finite object which is given the status of the Ultimate. It is the human mind which forms the image of God. It is the creation of a human being not his/her creator. When it is given the status of the Ultimate, the human being becomes enslaved by the product of his/her own creation. Thus one becomes alienated from oneself. Prayer should lead one to integration and not to alienation.

### 7. Theology: Fantasies of the Theologian?

Prayer can become degraded into a sort of reaching out to glorified projections of one's own self. Theologies can become commentaries on the fantasies of theologians. When treading into the realm of the Divine, one has to remove the footwear from ones feet – so that the real Divine, which surpasses and transcends the equations of the puny human mind, is not trampled upon.

The Indian thinker J. Krishnamurthy once observed that the day we teach a child the name of a bird, that day we have interfered with its ability to enjoy it. Before the child knew the name of the bird, it was filled with wonderment and admiration at the sight of the bird. It could not take its eyes away from the attractive creature. Once the name of the bird is known, there is no need for looking at the bird anymore. The bird can be dealt with as a mere concept. From the time God is transformed into a concept, an image, there is no need for searching the Divine in reality! Once the Divine is encapsulated in a theological concept, there is no need of searching for him, experiencing him! Such a theology becomes an obstacle for the spiritual experience of the theologian!

This must have been one of the main reasons why image worship was strictly forbidden in monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The moment the Divine is depicted in the form of an image or name, it becomes a commodity that is in the custody of the person who possesses it. In a world where God is identified with any finite image, everything else becomes mundane and of little value. The predilection of psychologists like Erich Fromm for the Buddhist version of monotheism is because of its refusal to depict the Transcendent not as a God, but as a Goal – *sūnya*. The Transcendent Ultimate should not be equated with some limited concept of human imagination.

### 8. Silence: An Authentic Path to God

The ancient sages of India known as *munis* were people who experienced God. The medium through which they tried to understand God was *mouna* – silence. This silence does not refer to exterior silence or absence of noise. Rather it points to one's ability to go beyond one's own images, concepts and convictions about God in search of the real God. It presupposes one's realization of the fact that one is limited and one's understanding cannot exhaust the reality of the Ultimate. Interior silence demands humility – humility to acknowledge that one's understanding of the Absolute is not absolute. It is in one's attempt to transcend one's own fantasies and convictions that one seems to experience the genuinely Divine.

All great thinkers and mystics acknowledge this fact. Thomas Aquinas, it is said, could not complete the fourth volume of his *Summa*, because, it seems, he had a rare God-experience during that stage of life. The only thing he could write after that experience is said to be: "All that I have written about God is mere straw." The *via negativa* of knowing God seems to be one of the purest ways of knowing God – the *neti, neti* ("not this, not this") approach of the Hindu theology. Mystics knew that they can experience God only through "the Cloud of Unknowing." St. Paul stated clearly: "For now we see things in a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now my knowledge is in part; then it will be complete..." (1 Cor 13: 12).

Perhaps the greatest obstacle for us reaching the real God may be our theologies themselves. In the pages of the Bible we see some theologians called Pharisees looking forward to the coming of a Messiah. They claimed to be 'experts' on Yahweh and His Messiah with very clear understanding of their nature and all the nuances of the working of the Divine. But when the Messiah finally arrived, as we see in the Infancy narratives in the Gospels, they were the ones who failed to recognize the Messiah in the babe lying in the manger in swaddling clothes. This Messiah apparently did not correspond himself to their theologies! The only people who could recognize the Messiah in that babe were some poor shepherds in the field, who did not know much 'theology,' Mary His Mother, who was a silent woman, and the real wise men from the East, who still looked for stars in heaven. Only a silent mind may be open to the ineffable, overwhelming reality of the Divine. A silent mind is one which

is necessarily empty and capable of receiving the all enriching Divine irrupting into it.

### **9. Silence: The Milieu of Divine Encounter**

In any interpersonal relationship, respect for the transcendence, the otherness of the other is important. Once this basic respect disappears, one becomes an object possessed by the partner. This applies to prayer as well. The basic otherness and transcendence of the mystery that the Divine is, must be safeguarded in prayer relationship too. In a healthy relationship the mystery aspect of the other is always respected. The other thus remains a subject with which another subject interacts.

Some persons experience 'ecstasy' while in prayer, and 'agony' when they are back in the stream of life. Prayer which unites one with one's own 'shadow' could be very consoling and soothing experience – but it is unreal. Prayer which invites one to be united with the Divine in the stream of life could be a challenge. It is a challenge to rise from the slumber of existence into the full blossoming of life. Every challenge is painful, though rewarding. Therefore, there is a tendency to avoid accepting the challenge and to take refuge in a sort of prayer which is a form of escapism.

### **10. Stream of Life: Acid Test for Authenticity**

Integrating life and faith seems to be the best way to escape from narcissistic prayer. Instead of creating a convenient God in the ghetto of one's imagination, it would be more salutary to seek the Divine in the stream of life. In the former approach, God becomes a creation of human imagination. In the latter approach, God is the master of one's destiny and future. The stream of one's life is not the creation of one's own imagination or fantasy. It is one of the 'givens' of life. Searching the Divine and relating to the Ultimate in that context helps integration of life and prayer. This contact with the reality of life seems to be the best norm for discerning the authenticity of any prayer experience.

John in his First Letter recommends this approach of discernment of the Divine Spirit. The question there is how to discern if a spiritual experience is genuinely Divine. People were claiming Divine inspiration to all sorts of exotic experiences they were having. Some of them were clearly divisive and destructive. How to distinguish which of these is

genuinely from the Spirit of God? John suggests an acid test for discerning the Divine nature of spiritual experiences: "My loved ones, do not put your faith in every spirit, but put them to the test to see if they are from God... By this you may have knowledge of the Spirit of God: every spirit which says that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God." (1 John 4:1-2) The place to search for Jesus Christ, the revelation of God, is not in some exotic experiences, but in the 'flesh' of human history. Contact with the down to earth reality, the flesh, of human history is the acid test for discerning the authenticity of the Spirit.

Any God-experience which is not intimately related to the flesh of one's life commitment, one's history, should be, therefore considered to be unreal, illusory or narcissistic. Any prayer which becomes an obstacle to the duties of one's life commitment should be considered an escapism. As a result of reaching out to the Divine in the context of one's life and its commitments, the quality of that life itself enhances. Then there is very little danger of narcissism in prayer. The God one meets in this type of prayer is not one's own creation, but one's Creator. This God beckons us from the comforts of "Ūr of Chaldees" to a more exciting and challenging world of unimaginable blessings, as in the case of Abraham in the Book of Genesis (Gen 15:7).

### 11. Life Affirming Prayer

There are different types of coping mechanisms in the context of the frustrations of life. Some of them are constructive and life-affirming; others are attempts of escaping these challenges. A life of prayer, which is not at all related to one's life-commitments, one's struggles in life, is such an expression of escapism. Like alcohol and drugs, this type of prayer too works as a narcotic for the time being. This type of 'prayer-holism' in the long run becomes more counterproductive in coping with life and its tensions. Alcoholics becoming converted to 'prayer-holics' cannot be considered as a genuine conversion. It is transition from one addiction to another addiction. Contact with the Divine in the context of one's life commitment seems to be the antidote for this addiction.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayer was one of integrating life and faith – of meeting His God in the midst of the trials and tribulations expecting him in the course of fulfilling his mission. He did not go to the solitude of that Garden to escape from those challenges by entering into



some fantasy exercises, but on the contrary, to prepare himself to face them.

Viewed from this perspective, the so-called 'distractions' during prayer should be considered as something salutary. A closer analysis of the 'distractions' would prove that often these are related to one's duties and commitments in life or part of the tensions and challenges one faces actually. They may be considered as invitations to relate faith to day-to-day life. It must be 'messages' or 'messengers' from God. They may not correspond to our ideas or expectations about the Divine. So the tendency is to dismiss them and stay with one's own project and designs. For a real contemplative, the so-called 'distractions' are cues for prayer. Avoiding them and 'concentrating' on one's own mental projects may be the best way to avoid encounter with the Divine whose revelation takes place through these day to day realities of life. Carlo Carretto's contention in his book *Desert in the City* to see farmers and mothers as role models for real prayer is pertinent here. The worries of the farmer are simmering at the back of his mind even when he is at prayer. He will be looking into the skies to see if it is going to rain. A mother will never be able to concentrate on 'beatific vision' forgetting her baby or household chores even when she is at prayer. It is only people who are irresponsible and who have no sense of responsibility in life who can get immersed in the so called 'heavenly' realities and forget the tensions and worries of life, and one's commitments and duties to people in their lives. In the life of Jesus we always see that even when he is at prayer in lonely places, his attention is, for instance, on the boat in which his disciples are facing a storm. One must go to secret places to pray in order to come back to the market place and meet one's God there.

## 12. Authentic Prayer: Letting God and Living Together

In trying to reach out to God in prayer, the best bet therefore is to reach out to the ineffable as ineffable, the unimaginable as unimaginable. All the props one uses in this process, such as various concepts and images, must necessarily be considered as just 'props.' It is better to use them as a tent for one night's rest on one's pilgrimage. Any attempt settle down in any of them forever and exclusively is futile. Instead of a tent on one's pilgrimage, they are likely to become our tombs (J. Balfour)! The best

image we can dream up of the Divine is still far short of the reality of the Transcendent God.

The more open people are to this Transcendent God, the more united they become with one another. The more we cling to our own petty images of God, the more estranged we become from one another. The images of others do not necessarily tally with those of ours. Especially it is true of different religious traditions. The more this search for the Divine takes place in *mouna*, in interior silence, the more the religions are likely to coexist peacefully with one another. God unites, idols and images divide. The role of each religious tradition is to help its adherents to go beyond these images they propose regarding the Divine into real *mouna* where the real Divine can be experienced and where all become one in that experience.