

[The Nazarene Way of Essenic Studies](#)

~ The Modes of Prayer ~

The History, Philosophy and Practice of Communication with God

Prayer is an offering of communication or praise to a God or other deities. The existence of prayer is attested in written sources as early as 5000 years ago, and anthropologists believe that the earliest intelligent humans practiced prayer as we would recognize prayer today.

Prayer Practices: Introduction

The actual act of praying can take on many different outward forms. Most religions or religious subgroups have certain forms that they recommend, usually more than one; occasionally, there may be specific forms that are forbidden. Prayer may be done privately and individually, or it may be done corporately in the presence of fellow believers. Some outward acts that sometimes accompany prayer are: ringing a bell; burning incense or paper; lighting a candle or candles; facing a specific direction (i.e. towards Mecca or the East) or making the sign of the cross.

A variety of body postures may be assumed, often with specific meaning associated with them: standing; sitting; kneeling; prostrate on the floor; eyes opened; eyes closed; hands folded or clasped; hands upraised; and others. Prayers may be recited from memory, read from a book of prayers, or composed spontaneously as they are prayed. They may be said, chanted, or sung.

They may be with musical accompaniment or not. There may be a time of outward silence while prayers are offered mentally. Often, there are prayers to fit specific occasions, such as the blessing of a meal, the birth or death of a loved one, other significant events in the life of a believer, or days of the year that have special religious significance.

Details Corresponding to Specific Traditions.

The Sources of Hebraic/Christian religious traditions

In these traditions, prayer incorporates adoration, praise, petition, thanksgiving, intercession, and communion. These are all found within the Bible, which in both the Old and New Testaments contains many examples of prayer and various instructions and teachings about prayer.

Prayer in the Old Testament

In the life of the patriarch Abraham prayer seems to have taken the form of a dialogue--God and man drawing near and talking to each other (Gen 18, 19); developing into intercession (Gen 17:18; 18:23,32), and then into personal prayer (Gen. 15:2; 24:12); Jacob, (Gen 28:20; 32:9-12, 24; Hos 12:4). The patriarchal blessings are called prayers (Gen 49:1; Deut 33:11). Not very much prominence is given to formal prayer during the period of the Law. Deut 26:1-15 seems to be the only one definitely recorded.

Prayer had not yet found a stated place in the ritual of the law. It seems to have been more of a personal than a formal matter, and so while the Law may not afford much material, yet the life of the lawgiver, Moses, abounds with prayer (Ex 5:22; 32:11; Num 11:11-15). Under (Joshua 7:6-9; 10:14), and the judges (Book of Judges 6:7) we are told that the children of Israel "cried unto the Lord." Under Samuel prayer seems to have assumed the nature of intercession (Books of Samuel 7:5, 12; 8:16-18); personal (1 Sam 15:11, 35; 16:1). In Jer 15:1 Moses and Samuel are represented as offering intercessory prayer for Israel.

David seems to regard himself as a prophet and priest, and prays without an intercessor (2 Sam 7:18-29). The book of Psalms is composed of prayers, song verses and poems by various authors, with attribution to David, and has been used by Jews and Christians for centuries, in corporate and individual prayer. In the Psalms prayer takes the form of a pouring out of the heart (e.g. 42:4; 62:8; 100:2). The psalmist does not seem to go before God with fixed and orderly petitions so much as simply to pour out his feelings and desires, whether sweet or bitter, troubled or peaceful.

Consequently the prayers of the Psalmist consist of varying moods: complaint, supplication, confession, despondency, praise. It is in the Psalmist that is rooted the tradition of daily public prayer made within the Church: "Seven times a day I have praised Thee" (119:164); also "Evening and morning, and at noonday will I speak and declare..." (55:18).

The prophets seem generally to have been intercessors, e.g., Elijah (1 Kgs 18). Yet personal prayers are found among the prophets (Jer 20 — both personal and intercessory; 33:3; 42:4; Amos 7).

The neglect of prayer is grievous to the Lord (Isaiah 43:21-22; 64:6-7). Many evils in life are to be attributed to the lack of prayer (Zep; Dan 9:13, 14, cf. Hos 7:13-14; 8:13-14). It is a sin to neglect prayer).

Prayer in the New Testament

- To pray is a positive command (Col 4:2; 1 Thes 5:17); one is commanded to take leisure or a vacation for prayer (1 Cor 7:5).
- Prayer is God's appointed method by which we obtain what He has to bestow (Dan 9:3; Mt 7:7-11; Mt 9:24-29; Lk 11:13).
- The lack of the necessary blessings in life comes from failure to pray (Jas 4:2).
- The Apostles regarded prayer as the most important employment that could engage their time or attention (Ac 6:4; Rom 1:9; Col 1:9).
- Lengthy passages of the New Testament are prayers or canticles, such as Lk 1:46-55; Lk 1:68-79; Jn 17; and Eph 1:3-14.
- The Apostles frequently incorporated verses from Psalms into their writings. For example, Rom 3:10-18 is borrowed from Psalms 14:1-3 and other psalms.
- Jesus encourages the disciples to pray in secret in their private rooms partly as a corrective to the ostentatious show of the Pharisees (Mt 6:6).
- Prayer is a public office of the Church, seen from the earliest moments (Ac 3:1).
- Jesus frequently seeks to pray alone, for hours at a time, e.g. Lk 6:12.
- Prayer of petition is found e.g. "And whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive" (Mt 21:22).
- References to contemplative prayer are found e.g. "Mary has chosen the best part" (Lk 10:42).

Jewish Prayer

Prayers said by Jews are described in the entry on Jewish services. The prayers of the Jewish services are collected in a prayer book called the Siddur. The most important Jewish prayers are the Shema Yisrael ("Hear O Israel") and the Amidah ("the standing prayer").

Christian Prayer

Liturgical

- The Roman Catholic Mass is the oldest Christian liturgy.
- Seasonal prayers such as found in the Breviary, which provides prayer for each liturgical season including Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, as well as the other parts of the liturgical year. The Breviary developed over the centuries. Different religious orders sometimes have their own breviaries.
- Prayer to saints: in Catholic and Orthodox tradition, prayers of petition may be addressed to saints. This may be done at Mass, within the Breviary, or privately during vocal prayer (see below). It is understood that the saints answer such prayers by means of their own prayers to God on behalf of the petitioner. Catholics often refer to this in connection with the "treasury of merits"¹, and distinguish between latria, i.e. prayer of sacrifice due to

God alone, and *dulia*, or prayer of praise due only to a creature such as a saint. Other Christians, mostly Protestants, reject the notion of prayer to saints, and feel that it leads to polytheism.

- Prayer for the dead: Roman Catholics believe that prayers for the dead can diminish their suffering in Purgatory; for this reason, requiem Masses are offered for the repose of the faithful departed. Eastern Orthodoxy rejects the notion of Purgatory, but offers prayers for the dead asking God to have mercy upon them; in particular it believes that Christians who have fallen asleep remain part of the Church, and as such are both able to pray and to receive the benefits of prayer for them, whatever those may be. Protestants have historically rejected the notion of prayer for the dead, believing that such prayers cannot affect the fate of departed souls. The appeal of this sort of prayer to those in mourning exerts constant pressure on this theological position, however. It is also possible to pray for the dead in one's private vocal prayer, without the prayer being part of a liturgy.

Vocal

Vocal prayer, of course, is prayer made with the lips, normally producing sound. The Christian considers it necessary to make first some act of recollection. The sign of the cross is an important first step. Liturgical breviary prayer will normally entail prayers that (a) renounce distraction, (b) request to be worthy to be heard, (c) request enlightenment, and (d) request that one's prayers be united with the praises that Jesus offered, e.g. "whilst Thou wast on earth".

If one is engaged in private prayer, a moment of recollection may be a question of placing oneself in the right disposition; in all cases the Christian strives to avoid mechanical prayer. Some prayers may nonetheless sound mechanical, yet the Christian is normally pondering on various levels while praying so that the prayer itself is not simply a moving of lips. The rosary is a good example: while repeating the Hail Mary there are mysteries of Jesus to be contemplated. The saints enjoin their fellow Catholics to "consider who it is that you are addressing" (St. Teresa of Avila) to be correctly disposed in prayer.

Vocal prayer may be prayer of petition, perhaps the simplest form of prayer. Some have termed it the "social approach" to prayer. In this view, a person beseeches God for a need to be fulfilled; God is thought to listen to prayer and to be free to grant the request or not. Vocal prayer may also subsume prayer of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, intercession, and communion.

Particularly common vocal prayers include the Lord's Prayer; the Psalms; the Jesus Prayer; the Hail Mary; the Canticles throughout the Old and New Testaments; Grace, a prayer of thanksgiving usually before, sometimes after, a meal; and prayers associated with the rosary and the prayer rope.

Meditative

This is prayer of a more interior character than vocal prayer would tend to imply. Christian theology, e.g. St. John of the Cross, teaches that this type of prayer is intended to help "obtain some knowledge and love of God" (Ascent of Mount Carmel). In this prayer, "thought is subordinated to love" (Gabriel, p. 449, see References below). A Christian seeking to meditate may commence by reading from a holy book of some kind, perhaps the Gospels or any spiritual book that seems suitable.

Then, when a suitably affective recollection takes hold, the book will be gently laid aside, and the person will pray interiorly. The person may form sentences mentally, or may simply bask in what the Christian would consider the love of God. Christians are especially likely to select works written by the Saints, as these are people who have already led lives of prayer and left behind themselves writings intended to help others. Subjects for meditation include any of the mysteries of Jesus or the events described in the Gospels, or the presence of God in the subject about which one has been reading. The Christian may meditate on the condition of Man according to Christian theology: "Although I am but dust and ashes, shall I speak to You, O Lord? Yes, from this vale of tears...I dare to raise my eyes and fix them on You, supreme Goodness!" (St. Peter of Alcantara)

Christians believe that the Gospels are actually true, so that one is praying within the context of actual events and receiving actual graces. In other words, Jesus, i.e. God, actually did die to effect our salvation, and we really can be united with such a loving Father Who allowed His Son to be sacrificed in expiation for the sins of Man; so awful is the sinfulness of Man that such a sacrifice is necessary: these are the roots of Christian meditation.

In other religions, a more general conception of truth or creation may serve the same meditative end; the Christian would posit that the source and the long-term result are different. Other religious traditions have a meditative component, but the Christian believes that the source and subject of the meditation is fact, not philosophy; the philosophy flows from the facts for the Christian.

Prayer of Recollection

St. Theresa of Avila teaches that this is "the highest of the active forms of prayer" that "depends upon our volition"; that is, it is not a given state of prayer, as is contemplative prayer. In this prayer, we seek to "concentrate entirely on God present within us, and there at His feet will be able to converse with Him to our heart's delight" (Gabriel p. 457). Again, the Catholic Eucharist is essential to understanding Christian mystical experience.

The Catholic believes, with all the love his or her soul can open herself [the soul is feminine in Christian theology] to experience, that God literally comes to him or her in the humble form of the Eucharist. It is within that theological setting that this prayer can be understood: God's presence within us takes on a very real meaning for the mystics; and those mystics teach furthermore that we are all called to that union with God. The prayer of recollection, then, is the last volitional stage where the soul can endeavor to be still and know that God Is.

Contemplative Prayer

The progression from vocal, to meditative, to contemplative prayer is not a straight road, nor does the Christian travel in one direction. Rather, the soul enters into contemplation, then returns to reflect in a more discursive vein, and may suffer from distractions at any point along the way. This stage of prayer, the mystics teach, is one into which God conducts the soul. The person praying cannot will to enter into contemplation. A modern exponent of the details is Fr. Thomas Dubay, who has a number of books and videos about this subject.

St. John of the Cross teaches that this phase of prayer begins with purifying aridity that marks the beginning of infused passive love that is stronger than the love corresponding to the period during which the soul received consolations, i.e. the prior experiences of prayer. Here, God does the work of reaching to the soul, yet the soul must be sufficiently mature to grow without requiring constant consolations.

Many of the Saints experienced years of dryness and spiritual desolation, as God effectively tested their love for God. St. Pio, recently canonized, prayed deeply over how difficult faith is; St. Therese of the Child Jesus experienced years of agonizing dryness immediately after joining the convent: these people became saints because their love for God gave them perseverance, and they entered into contemplative prayer, and a state of "loving attention to God". The soul is not passive during contemplative prayer, but rather learns to keep that attention to God in a loving way.

Charismatic Prayer

In the past 100 years a form of prayer has regained popularity amongst Christians, called praying in tongues. According to practitioners, the Holy Spirit comes into the body of the person praying and speaks on the Christian's behalf in a celestial language. The person praying may later deny any knowledge of what they said while praying. If done in public, it may be followed by another person claiming to give an interpretation of the prophecy, also through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Some deny that this is a revival and suggest it is an innovation. A characteristic of this prayer pattern is that people will make unusual sounds or adopt unusual postures. For example, a person may emit shrieks, or may lie on the floor face-up with the hands in an askew posture. It is

a prayer pattern that resembles quietism.

Eastern Religions Other than Christianity

Islamic Prayer

Muslims pray a brief prayer service called Salah in Arabic, facing Mecca, five times a day. The Call for prayer is called Adhan or Azaan. Some of the early Christians whom Mohammed observed and from whom he adapted elements of his religion prayed in the posture for which Moslems are now famous.

Bahá'í Prayer

Bahá'ís are required to recite each day one of three obligatory prayers revealed by Baha'u'llah. The believers have been enjoined to face in the direction of the Qiblih when reciting their Obligatory Prayers. The longest obligatory prayer may be recited at any time of day; another, of medium length, is recited once in the morning, once at midday, and once in the evening; and the shortest is recited at noon.

This is the text of the short prayer:

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

Bahá'ís also read from and meditate on the scriptures every morning and evening. There are also many other revealed prayers in the Bahá'í scriptures, most for general use at the choice of the individual and some for specific occasions.

Hindu/Vedic Prayer

The Vedic faith system, known today as Hinduism, is known to stretch back to around 3000 BCE. Over its lifetime, it has incorporated all sorts of prayer systems from fire-based rituals to philosophical musings. Prayer was part and parcel of the Vedic lifestyle, and as such permeated their books.

Indeed, the highest sacred texts of the Hindus, the Vedas, are a large collection of mantras (sacred hymns of Hindus, later adopted by Buddhists) and prayer rituals extolling a single supreme force, Brahman, that is made manifest in several lower forms as the familiar gods of the Hindu pantheon.

Hindus in India have numerous devotional movements. Stemming from the highest Creator God called Brahma, prayer is focused on His many manifestations, including the most popular deities Shiva, Vishnu, Rama and Krishna.

Before the process of ritual, before the invoking of different deities for the fulfillment of various needs, came the human aspiration to the highest truth, the foundational monism of Hinduism, pertaining ultimately to the one Brahman. Brahman, which summarily can be called the unknowable, true, infinite and blissful Divine Ground, is the source and being of all existence from which the cosmos springs. This is the essence of the Vedic system.

The following prayer was part and parcel of all the Vedic ceremonies and continues to be invoked even today in Hindu temples all over India and other countries around the world, and exemplifies this essence: "*Asato Ma Sad Gamaya/Tamaso Ma Joytir Gamaya/Mrityor Ma Amritam Gamaya/Om Shanthi Shanthi Shanthi.*" This means: "O Lord Lead Us From The Unreal To The Real,/Lead Us From Untruth To Truth,/ Lead Us From Darkness To Light/ Lead Us From Death To Immortality/ AUM (the universal sound of God) Let There Be Peace Peace Peace." (Rig Veda)

The Gayatri mantra is Hinduism's most representative prayer. Hindus recite it on a daily basis, not only contemplating its straightforward meaning, but also dwelling and imbibing its sound, regarded to be pregnant with spiritual meaning. For this reason nearly all Hindu prayers and mantras are sung.

The Gayatri was first recorded in the Rig Veda (iii, 62, 10) which was written in Sanskrit about 2500 to 3500 years ago, and by some reports, the mantra may have been chanted for many generations before that. Having prayed for enlightenment and peace through unity with God, the transcendental and final goal of the Hindu religion, the Vedas proceed to lavish all sorts of encomia and praise of Brahman's many aspects, typified by representative gods and goddesses that stem from one source.

The Upanishads

Around 1500 BCE or so, the first of the Upanishads came into existence. These are also known as Vedanta (the end of the Vedas), informing all that the Vedas find their culmination in the thought of the Upanishads. For this reason, the Vedas and Upanishads, collectively known as the Vedas, form the core of Hindu religion. The Upanishads expanded on the monist framework and their terminology became more abstract, though not completely divorced from the earlier Vedas.

All Upanishads start with a prayer, - prayer to the guardians of the quarters, the deities or the manifestations of God, who rule the whole of creation, that we be blessed with health and understanding in order to go into the secrets of

the Upanishads, to meditate upon them and to realise the Truth proclaimed in them. *"Om. That supreme Brahman is infinite, and this conditioned Brahman is infinite. The infinite proceeds from infinite. Then through knowledge, realizing the infinitude of the infinite, it remains as infinite alone."* (Mandukya Upanishad)

The Hindu Prayer Aum

Hindus believe that Aum is the enigmatic, universal, divine sound. It is said to represent everything from the three (and ultimate fourth transcending) states of consciousness to the Trinity of Hinduism. It is analogous to the concept of the "word of God," but seems to transcend it by maintaining that everything emanates from Aum, exists in Aum, and ends in Aum. It is known as the pranava or root mantra of Hinduism.

Included in all prayers, from the Vedas and onwards, regardless of the nature of the prayer, it is the ultimate self-contained prayer for the Hindu mind. Many sages of the Hindu tradition claimed (and still do) that if nothing else, the lover of God could pray through that one sound alone. The Upanishads define it in depth, and one such definition is as follows.

Bhakti Yoga, or the Yoga of Devotion

Described in the Bhagavad Gita (a sacred Hindu and Yoga scripture from sometime between 500 to 200 BCE), Bhakti Yoga is the path of love and devotion. On Bhakti Yoga: "... those who, renouncing all actions in Me, and regarding Me as the Supreme, worship me... of those whose thoughts have entered into Me, I am soon the deliverer from the ocean of death and transmigration, Arjuna. Keep your mind on Me alone, your intellect on Me. Thus you shall dwell in me hereafter." (B.G., Chapter 12, Verses 6-8).

It is essentially the process of enlightenment found through worship of God, in whatever form one envisions. Prayer is achieved through pooja (worship) done either at the family shrine or a local temple. We can see from Krishna's injunction that prayer is fundamental to Hinduism, that to dwell constantly on God is key to enlightenment. Prayer repetition (through mantras) using malaas (Hindu prayer beads) are a strong part of Hinduism.

Hindus in India have numerous devotional movements. Stemming from the highest Creator God called Brahman, prayer is focused on His many manifestations, including primarily Shiva and Vishnu. Some other extremely popular deities are the Lords Krishna and Rama (incarnations of Vishnu), Ma Kali (Mother Kali, the feminine deity, or Mother Goddess, aka Durga, Parvati, Shakti, etc.) and Lord Ganesh (the famous elephant-headed God of wisdom). It is epitomised by the devotion of the monkey God Hanuman for his Lord Rama. Another major form of prayer for Hindus involves a heavy focus on meditation,

through Hindu yoga that stills the mind in order to focus on God.

Buddhism

The religion of Buddhism, well known for being non-theistic, for the most part utterly discards worship and places devotional emphasis on the practice of meditation alongside scriptural study. Although God and deities are recognized as present, Gautama Buddha claims it is mankind who by their own free will possess the greatest capacity and potential to liberate themselves and are urged to do so without exterior assistance.

Therefore, prayer is not as central to devotion as in its neighbouring Asiatic faiths. In some later Mahayana related practices, especially Pure Land Buddhism, there is an emphasis on prayer-like mantras that are recited by devotees.

Prayer in Jainism

Although Jains believe that no spirit or divine being can assist them on their path, they do hold some influence, and on special occasions, Jains will pray and meditate for right knowledge to the twenty-four Tirthankaras (saintly teachers).

Philosophy of Prayer

Christian Philosophy of Prayer

For the Christian, union with God is a paramount purpose of religion. A Christian believes that God Himself came to earth in the person of Jesus to provide a religion, for which the Hebrew faith was preparation. A Christian further believes that God is actually seeking union with His creature, Man. Within the religion given by Jesus, prayer is the expression of the soul seeking to speak with God as two friends may converse. As friends may converse in various forms, at times using words, at times in each others' silent mutual company, so may a person pray.

St. Therese explains: "For me, prayer is an uplifting of the heart, a glance toward heaven, a cry of gratitude and of love in times of sorrow as well as of joy" (Story of a Soul). The Christian seeks to raise the mind as well as the heart to God. Prayer, as discourse with a friend, is not constrained, but rather is spontaneous.

Certain prayer events are organized, of course, as in the case of the Breviary, or the Mass, or other liturgical events; yet even during such events the specific discourse between the soul and God may be spontaneous. A Psalm, for

example, may offer different meanings depending on the mood of the person praying. For the Christian, prayer is love, and to "Pray always" (Lk 18:1) is to love always.

The Christian grows spiritually through the life of prayer. A classic way to distinguish among phases of growth is three-fold: beginners start on the "purgative way", later comes the "illuminative way" with "affective prayer", and eventually one may experience the "unitive way".

Christians who have been especially helpful in developing an understanding of prayer include St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, both Doctors of the Roman Catholic Church. In the purgative way, the Christian attempts to leave behind a life of sin, for "sin is iniquity" (Jn 3:4). The Christian is enjoined to recall that "my sin is always before me" (Psalms 51:5). Growth toward holiness is ongoing, as the Apostle writes "he that is holy let him be sanctified still" (Apoc 22:11). Next, in the illuminative way, the soul seeks the imitation of Christ to "have the light of life" (Jn 8:12).

There is a famous book by Thomas A Kempis titled *The Imitation of Christ*. While in purgative prayer one is mostly engaged in vocal prayer, in the illuminative way one tends to be more affective along the lines suggested by St. Therese, above. Affective prayer of this sort may best permit us to fulfill the command "always to pray and not to faint" (Lk 18:1). Last, in the unitive way the soul now seeks to say "I live now not I; but Christ liveth in me!" (Gal 2:20). For Roman Catholics, the Eucharist is a key expression of this union with Jesus.

Other religions may share aspects of this seeking of union with God.

Inter-religious attempts to understand prayer

Over time a number of attempts to re-conceptualize prayer have evolved among philosophers and branches of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities. Medieval neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian philosophers influenced prayer, and their influence is felt to this day. One can find much intellectual cross-fertilization between Jews, Christians and Muslims during parts of the middle-ages, and some convergence among the philosophers of that era. A convergence is sought by modern philosophers, and indeed a number of philosophical questions emerge within Humanism and other schools of thought involving prayer to an omnipotent God, namely:

If a person deserves God to give him the thing he prays for, why doesn't God give it to him, even without prayer? And if a person is not deserving of it, then even if that person does pray and request it, should it be given just because of his prayer? Why should it be necessary to pray with speech? Doesn't God know

the thoughts of all people? If God is omniscient (all-knowing) then doesn't God know what we are going to ask Him for even before we pray? How can a human being hope to change God's mind? Why should human prayers affect God's decisions? Do human beings actually have the ability to praise an omniscient and omnipotent God? Praising God is difficult to do without describing God, yet how can a finite human being know anything about God's ultimate nature? This question was the subject of heated debate among many religious philosophers; one such debate took place in the 14th century between Gregory Palamas and Barlaam of Calabria.

Christian theology provides ready answers to such questions. For example, God doesn't simply give a person what he needs in such a manner as to obviate prayer because God is concerned that Man has turned away from God; God knows what Man needs, and the primary thing Man needs is to turn to the Creator, Who is perfect love and all good.

This idea has its roots in the Fall, that Man fell from grace through the sin of pride. God, in his mercy, continues the theology, has given Man a chance to return to God, and prayer is an act by which Man shows his good will to God. A similar answer is available to why God knows what we are going to pray before we pray: indeed He does know, but He has the right to insist that we orient ourselves rightly. And after all, we don't know what we are going to do until we do it, so we can make ourselves pray, as we act in time, such that we act conclusively in a way that shows our love for God.

Why should it be necessary to pray with speech? It isn't: Christian prayer subsumes affective and contemplative prayer that is effectively speechless. How can a human hope to change God's mind? God is outside of time and already knows the outcome, but we act within time, and must act with true charity, which we show through prayer. Do we have the ability to praise our Creator? Indeed, much as we might praise our own parents. Praise of God is praise of God's infinite glory and goodness; it is certainly true that we can never praise God enough.

For this reason one can always go further in the unitive way. Indeed, the theologians affirm that to stop going forward toward God is to commence slipping backward. All of the foregoing could be richly footnoted with points from Scripture, the Summa, Denziger, and the Church Fathers.

Nonetheless these questions have been discussed in Jewish, Christian and Muslim writings from the medieval period onward. The 900s to 1200s saw some of the most fertile discussion on these questions, during the period of Neo-Platonic and Neo-Aristotelian philosophy. Discussion of these problems never ceased entirely, but they did fall mostly from the public view for several centuries, until The Enlightenment reignited philosophical inquiry into theological issues.

All of these questions have been discussed in many Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious texts. Stemming from these discussions, one may glimpse various concepts or approaches to understanding prayer, in a way that may be thought to transcend any specific religious tradition.

Philosophical Speculation and Kabbalah

An educational conceptualization of prayer posits that it is not a conversation with God. Rather, it is meant to inculcate certain attitudes in the one who prays, but not to influence God. Among Jews, this has been the approach of Rabbenu Bachya, Yehuda Halevy, Joseph Albo, Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. This view is expressed by Rabbi Nosson Scherman in the overview to the Artscroll Siddur (p.XIII); note that Scherman goes on to also affirm the Kabbalistic view (see below).

A rationalist understanding of prayer is that it helps train a person to focus on God through philosophy and intellectual contemplation. This approach was taken by Maimonides and the other medieval rationalists; it became popular in Jewish, Christian and Islamic intellectual circles, but never became the most popular understanding of prayer among the laity in any of these faiths. In all three of these faiths today a significant minority of people still hold to this approach.

The experiential concept of prayer is to enable the person praying to gain a direct experience of God (or as close to direct as a specific theology permits). This approach is very significant in Christianity and widespread in Judaism (although less popular theologically). In Eastern Orthodoxy, this approach is known as hesychasm. It is also widespread in Sufi Islam, and in some forms of mysticism. It has some similarities with the rationalist approach, since it can also involve contemplation, although the contemplation is not generally viewed as being as rational or intellectual. It also has some similarities with the Kabbalistic view, but it lacks the Kabbalistic emphasis on the importance of individual words and letters.

People involved with kabbalah (esoteric Jewish mysticism) often reject rationalist reinterpretations of prayer outright, but they also reject the social approach, in which prayer is viewed as a dialogue with God. Instead, this approach ascribes a higher meaning to the purpose of prayer, which is no less than affecting the very fabric of reality itself, restructuring and repairing the universe in a real fashion. For Kabbalists, every prayer, every word of every prayer, and indeed, even every letter of every word of every prayer, has a precise meaning and a precise effect.

In Kabbalah and related mystical belief systems, adherents claim intimate knowledge about the way in which God relates to us and the physical universe in which we live. For people with this view, prayers can literally affect the mystical forces of the universe and repair the fabric of creation.

Among Jews, this approach has been taken by the Hassidei Ashkenaz, the Zohar, the Kabbalist school of thought created by the Ari, the Ramchal, most of Hassidism, the Vilna Gaon, and rabbis such as Yaakov Emden and Kalonimus Shapira. In the 1800s some European Christians were influenced by Kabbalah.

Epistemological Issues Raised by Christian Prayer

Geoffrey K. Mondello (see References below) writes that because mystical experience is a certain historical fact, and given the facticity and logic of writers such as St. John of the Cross, religious mystical experience is not irrational exuberance but is rather "a profoundly rational experience" with consequences for the structure of knowledge.

A dimension of this influence on knowledge is the extent to which the purgative process rectifies our relationship to God which "has become, as it were, eccentric; that is to say, God is no longer central to ordinary consciousness [after the Fall], but rather exists on its periphery as only one of a multiplicity of notions competing to varying degrees for primacy in consciousness..."

This implies that the theological story of Christianity has no disjunction with reality, that the Christian contemplatives reveal that knowledge is rooted in that story. For example, "the finite not only can be, but as a matter of course is accommodated to the infinite without engendering any contradiction whatever." Christian mystical experience, then, borne in a life of prayer as described above (purgative - illuminative - unitive), has a mutually validating relationship to knowledge.

Prayer and Alternative Medicine

Several alternative medicine studies have claimed that patients who pray for their health or are being prayed for recover more quickly or more frequently. One such study includes "Positive therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer in a coronary care unit population", a double-blind study that shows with a p-value of 0.0001 that intercessory prayer to the Judeo-Christian god had a positive effect on a coronary care unit population.

Critics have attributed this recovery to the placebo effect. Typically, the scientific establishment ignores studies of the occult and esoteric, but in 1999, media reports on prayer studies prompted a comprehensive review of such studies in *The Lancet*. The result: "Even in the best studies, the evidence of an association between religion, spirituality, and health is weak and inconsistent."

A 2001 double-blind study of the Mayo Clinic found no significant difference in the recovery rates between people who were (unbeknownst to them) assigned to a group that prayed for them (five people praying once a week for 26 weeks), and those who were not. In 2003, a second MANTRA study by Duke

University contradicted the first MANTRA study's findings that intercessory prayer improved recovery rates in heart patients.

A survey released in May 2004 by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, part of the National Institutes of Health in the United States, found that in 2002, 43 percent of Americans pray for their own health, 24% pray for others health, and 10% participate in a prayer group for their own health.

Historical Polytheistic Prayer

In Graeco-Roman paganism, ceremonial prayer was highly formulaic and ritualized. The Iguvine Tables contain a supplication that can be translated, "If anything was said improperly, if anything was done improperly, let it be as if it were done correctly."

The formalism and formulaic nature of these prayers led them to be written down in language that may have only been partially understood by the writer, and our texts of these prayers may in fact be garbled. Prayers in Etruscan were used in the Roman world by augurs and other oracles long after Etruscan became a dead language. The Carmen Arvale and the Carmen Saliare are two specimens of partially preserved prayers that seem to have been unintelligible to their scribes, and whose language is full of archaisms and difficult passages.

Roman prayers and sacrifices were often envisioned as legal bargains between deity and worshipper. The Roman formula was *do ut des*: "I give, so that you may give in return." Cato the Elder's treatise on agriculture contains many examples of preserved traditional prayers; in one, a farmer addresses the unknown deity of a possibly sacred grove, and sacrifices a pig in order to placate the god or goddess of the place and beseech his or her permission to cut down some trees from the grove.

References and Footnotes

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- ¹ See, for example, "*Unigenitus*", published by Pope Clement VI, 27 Jan., A.D. 1343.

