

The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

The Journal of the Baptist Historical Society

VOLUME XXIV

JULY 1972

No. 7

A Further Journey for Contemporary Spirituality

ALTHOUGH the last ten or fifteen years have witnessed a remarkable ferment in theology which has changed the direction of thinking for many people, particularly in the field of spirituality, it is only fair to mention before considering this more fully, that the traditional approach has also been well advocated.

In the last decade Bouyer has produced a concise *Introduction to Spirituality*, and Urs von Balthasar has restated the importance of contemplation, giving amongst other things such an evaluation of Scripture as would warm any Protestant heart. Anthony Bloom has shown us more of his great gift of presenting the traditional approach to prayer in such a way as to make sense for the ordinary man.

On the other hand the impact of radical theology has led to a different appraisal of prayer which is felt by many to fit more readily the present style of living. It is something like the journey which many make to earn their daily bread, and requires much mobility, split second timing, packed proximity, and even noise. But it aims to get somewhere — and that's a comfort!

After a long period of lull when many have been non-starters in prayer, or at best have knowledge of a few stations without ever really getting out at them, contemporary spirituality is putting out the appeal to travel again because things aren't as they used to be.

The journey is pretty well defined. You go one way and then return in a daily commuting from one real point to another, the outward and the inward. Ian Fraser speaks of a rhythm of involvement and reflection, Martin Thornton describes the journeys as engagement and

withdrawal, and G. M. Schutte writes of the two moments of prayer, engagement and reflection.

In this way life and prayer are brought constantly in touch, life gains direction and prayer reality. Although there has always been some concern to relate prayer to life, present spirituality makes a special point of it. The emphasis is meant to correct the vague notions of withdrawal to God, or contracting out of the unpleasantness of life, which are so often associated with prayer. Some may think the point is over-made, but none can doubt the vitality and interest which have been aroused. All kinds of experiments have been initiated, and the prevailing mood is to press on, even at risk. When you look back on the comparatively small margin of variation in traditions of mental prayer, you can get a good impression of the bewildering variety of styles which are put forward today.

The outward thrust of prayer is more than an emphasis. It is a discovery. Whereas formerly many of us thought of the time of prayer as bringing us near to God and equipping us to go out into life, we now find that the outgoing may become the focal point of prayer experience. Representative of this view is the statement of John Robinson, "what enlightenment I have had on decisions has almost always come not when I have gone away and stood back from them, but precisely as I have wrestled through all the most practical pros and cons, usually with other people. And this activity, undertaken by a Christian trusting and expecting that God is there, would seem to be prayer."

The idea of working it out with others has been given expression in many ways, from the discussion around the Bible to a very free and relaxed interchange of thought. Some feel that in such circumstances noise has more value than silence, and Ian Fraser asks "whether there may not be a freedom for reflection and perspective made possible by a background of noise, which releases thought for certain types of people, particularly young people?"

The move to take prayer out into life is inspired by the understanding that God is the "beyond within" the stream of life, and those whose attitude is one of openness will discover His reality. Undoubtedly this is a real contribution of contemporary spirituality, for although such things have been said or thought in previous times, they have not been gathered or emphasized as now, nor have they been backed by such theological insight.

Another reason has also been put forward for taking prayer into life, namely, lack of time. Because of the pressures upon him the modern man must be encouraged to use those moments whilst driving or in the Underground. This idea is not new but the reason behind it is. Hitherto such prayer was regarded as additional to the set time of quiet, now it takes the place of such prayer which becomes the sum total of all such split moments during the day. Formerly people were too busy during the day to pray much, and left it for leisure, but

now folk are too busy in their leisure and leave their praying to the rest of the day.

Certainly we shall be able to get positive attitude if we maintain, as John Townroe suggests, the importance of affirming God in every moment of life, or follow the line of Basil Moss, "prayer in the thick of the turmoil has to do with this choosing, choosing to affirm the love and goodness of God."

When we turn to the inward aspect of contemporary spirituality we again find everything "in the melting pot". The traditional stages in the spiritual life through which we were encouraged to struggle, the purgative, illuminative, unitive, are dispensed with and we are taught to begin at the end. John Coburn asserts, there is a "blurring of the divisions into levels of prayer or kinds of prayer, and acceptance that life is 'all of a piece' before God."

Another great change comes in the attitude to moods. These have been regarded as the enemies of prayer, hindrances that must be overcome by faithful persistence in our devotional duty. But now the mood may be consulted and experience can fashion the prayer, resulting in variety and freshness. Along this line Alan Ecclestone speaks of the three moments of praying; the moment of gladness when gratitude is uppermost, the moment of need which inspires importunity, and the moment of exhaustion when we learn to "let go" and put ourselves in the keeping of the Other.

The same writer puts succinctly the aims of the journey inwards, and is representative of much present day thought. "The response made by man's growing consciousness of God's world is rightly required to pass from less to more adequate levels and it is the business of prayer to reshape that response — to digest new experience, to observe its qualities to appreciate its coherence, to resist any falsification of its nature."

This function of prayer certainly comes strangely to those whose chief idea has been to look for the sky above their heads, training themselves to grow in wonder before the Infinite and to feel more deeply their creaturely dependence, expressed by their attachment to petition.

It is interesting to find by contrast how contemporary spirituality puts petition aside and reduces intercession. Douglas Steere remarks, "In the more conventional Protestant denominations, apart from a small group of the devout, it is doubtful if there is any real belief in the efficacy and significance of secret intercessory prayer." John Coburn relates petition and intercession primarily to the effect of one's actions upon others, and this emphasis seems to be typical.

Whilst it is true that both these forms of prayer have been crudely used and understood by many folk, they do not deserve to be regarded as rudimentary practices which can now be modified or dispensed with. They may indeed be the mark of spiritual maturity, as will be argued later on.

It is well of course that we should be concerned with spreading our day out before God and considering to what degree we must be involved in the answering of prayers but in all these things we can take ourselves too seriously. The old idea of spiritual self-culture is out, but we have to watch that a new spiritual self-consciousness does not creep in, and bring a touch of Pelagianism.

All the same you cannot help admiring the earnestness of this inner examination, and the tendency now to ask, What use am I to God? instead of, What use is God to me? I am sorry it is not possible to stay longer and do more justice to the inwardness advocated in the prayers today, but we must go on to think about the necessity for a further journey.

Sometimes the tube train on which I occasionally used to travel did not go the whole way, and you had to change in order to continue the journey. An unwary traveller who did not wake up to the fact would remain in the carriage and then find himself going back again. That's the danger in prayer. We must be ready for a further journey inward — even if we are not able to make it frequently.

A current definition of God invites us. He has been called "the ground of our being." We have got to venture beyond our customary inner stop, and find out what lies in the darkness beyond. Perhaps we shall not like what we find. Perhaps there is all too much truth in the observation of Jung, "Too few people have experienced the divine image as the innermost possession of their own souls. Christ only meets them from without, never from within the soul; that is why dark paganism still reigns there."

Unless we truly find Christ within we shall never have the nerve to pray aright. Teilhard de Chardin's own experience, recorded in *The Divine Milieu* is one of the most significant things said on this subject in recent years. He tells of the descent into the darkness within, "If we plumb the depth of our being we shall find in the bottomless abyss a current which we shall dare to call our own life. This was set in motion by no effort of our own." The accompanying experience was one of dread from which he was finally delivered, "If something saved me it was hearing the voice of the Gospel, speaking to me from the depth of the night . . . 'It is I, be not afraid'".

We need some such encounter to bring order to the inner chaos. Only then can we meet our fellows with serenity and know that we've got something to say. The much recommended attitude of openness must be held inwardly, and there are some who aver that this is where the beginning is to be made. Emami Sambayya writing on Christian Spirituality in *The Indian Journal of Theology* makes this emphasis, "We cannot turn to God unless we first turn into ourselves. God is everywhere but not everywhere to us. God communicates with us in the depth of our being."

The reality of encounter with God awaits us in two directions, outwardly in contact with others and inwardly when we are alone. A fine sentence illustrating this truth is found in Petru Dimitriu's

Incognito, where he says, "For 'I' and 'me' are not more than a pause between the immensity of the universe which is Him and the very depth of our self, which is also Him."

We are led to this inward encounter by the word of God, in the way that Balthasar indicates, "We cannot grasp any particular word of God without hearing the Son, who is the Word; nor may we rummage about in the books of the Old and New Testaments hoping to pick on some disconnected truths. We must be prepared to place ourselves in direct contact with him, this free and personal Word who speaks to us 'with power'".

Through such speaking we are made to realise that inwardly we are not alone, and further, the process of praying is done with divine leadership and accompaniment. As Thomas Kelly puts it, "We are joyfully prayed through by a Seeking Life that flows through us into the world of men."

From such an experience many important consequences follow. We are given greater insight as the range of understanding is extended, and sensitiveness is increased. J. N. Ward states in his *Use of Praying*, "Religion is the attempt to live life according to the facts, according to how things are. The purpose of prayer is to train the mind to function in accordance with the facts." But what are the facts? Not simply the concrete realities which readily present themselves, nor even those which appear after earnest reflection. The facts may be deeply illusive, emerging only after the experience of being prayed through. Gradually we recognise the spiritual emptiness and misery beneath the satisfactory exterior of many situations. Then indeed our mind does begin to function very differently.

The sensitiveness will help us also to "recognise royalty in our midst," and perhaps to see that which in the midst of life will cause us to act in a manner not premeditated as we buy up the opportunity. This is worth much more than careful pondering as to what might have been done after the event. Reflection is of course valuable, and very necessary, but prevision is of greater worth in seizing the moment.

Another significant discovery is the tone given to our thinking, for as God prays through us He imparts His blessing. This may be understood as the capacity to think in God's way, to envisage something new, and hopefully to set our life and energies in that direction.

This leads on to something even more important. To pray with Christ, or to have Christ praying through you is to discover more of His victory. Much present day spirituality seems to have missed this out. Perhaps it is because of the famous Bonhoeffer dictum, "It is not some religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life." This is true as far as it goes, but it is still only half a truth. A Christian shares also the victory of Christ. The emphasis has been upon the suffering involved in discipleship, and the other half seems never to have been told.

The Apostle Paul knew the paradox of holding both halves toge-

ther, "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything." Whatever way we understand the phrase, "thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph" we cannot get away from the exultant sense of Christ's victory, nor can we forget the word "always".

Yet the triumph note is rarely heard among us. This is the impression I get from thinking about prayer at the present time. We owe a great debt to the sincerity and realism of the prayers of Michel Quoist, nevertheless I feel it inadmissible to have ended his book with a section "Christ laid in the tomb." Of course in this he is following a traditional pattern, and he does make mention of the resurrection. But it would have been worth a lot to have a whole section on the Resurrection, not to mention the Ascension and the Intercession at the right hand of the Father.

I believe there is a connection between this forgetfulness of triumph and the depressed estimate of petition held by many today. Far from representing a wheedling attitude, petition may be the sign of spiritual maturity as being the only adequate way in which a believer may express the elan he feels in the triumph of Christ. Asking becomes both possible and necessary because of the achievements of Jesus. The 16th chapter of St. John has a victorious atmosphere which opens the way to new ventures of asking. Petition not only affirms our conviction about the triumph of Jesus, but is a way of working it out in fellowship with Him.

Yet instead of encouraging the art of petition the writers to today seem to scale it down. J. Neville Ward makes the point, "And when it is argued that some Christian project (for example an evangelistic campaign) will be sure to meet with success because of 'the great backing of prayer' it is receiving throughout the country, there could hardly be a better way of teaching, by implication, an idea of prayer that amounts to misinformation.

"Somewhere behind these misunderstandings will generally be found the idea of prayer as a means of enlisting the help of God in the creation or alteration of external circumstances in some way or other than through human beings responding to his love."

I'm not sure how far circumstances are external. If we follow the insight of J. D. Robinson's 'pantheism' we could admit that God was in everything. But leaving the point aside we could surely maintain that the prayer and praise of those who have done the backing amounts to a response to His love. I know which campaign I would like to preach at if the choice were between one that was backed by prayer and one that was not. Any preacher would be able to feel the difference however misinformed he might be about prayer.

If God is inspiring the prayers, if He is praying through us, then why should petition not be regarded as His work? And why, anyway, should God not work independently of us? The great action of the Resurrection and Ascension did not have to wait on human response.

Petition ought to have more than marginal significance and should form an important part of a Christian's strategy, reaching far beyond the immediate area of his own influence and responsibility. True enough it is at the mercy of crude selfishness but even this does not do as much damage as lack of faith or nerve in the use of it. The saying of Kierkegaard could apply here. "If I venture amiss God will correct me. But if I never venture who then will correct me?"

Petition is also a mark of spiritual maturity because it ever emphasizes the attitude of dependence. The more we know of God the more we depend on Him. This does not agree very well with the prevailing conception of "man come of age," and finding room for God in the gaps. Much of this seems like adolescence rather than age.

The technological revolution may have narrowed the gaps in some sense so that what was originally a subject of petition has been dealt with by our own achievement. But anyone giving a single serious thought about himself knows that in other ways the gaps have widened—not the least in the matter of prayer itself. This is a sad fact admitted in the report from Uppsala in 1968. "Some Christians seek to maintain a rhythm of personal prayer, despite repeated lapses. Some are nostalgic for the reality of prayer, as the presence of God in prayer becomes less and less real to them. Most feel guilty about their lack of prayer. Some have almost given up the effort to pray."

It is time for us to face the challenge of that further journey.

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