

CONSCIOUS PRAYER

By CHARLES T. TART, Ph.D.

Prayer is not a fashionable topic in contemporary intellectual circles, partly because of its association with people's rejected Christian backgrounds. Meditation (preferably of an interesting and exotic Oriental variety) may be in, but prayer? That is left for the uneducated, who need superstitious practices to comfort them.

The terms prayer and meditation often cause confusion. An atheist can meditate, even if he or she cannot pray. Meditation properly refers to internal psychological practices intended to change the quality or state of consciousness of your mind. Its efficacy comes exclusively from the meditator. Prayer, on the other hand, is effective insofar as there is a "supernatural" or nonordinary order of Being or beings who might respond to it. Some practices—which may be commonly called meditation, prayer, or something else entirely—have both the qualities of meditation and prayer as we are using the terms.

The most typical kind of prayer is more accurately termed *petitionary* prayer, a petition to "someone" more powerful than yourself, someone who has the power to grant a request if they are so inclined. In our culture "someone" usually means God, Jesus, a saint, or an angel.

Scientism (science distorted by human needs so it has the worst characteristics of dogmatic religions), in its most charitable mood, sees prayer as nothing more than a subjective effort of possible psychological or psychiatric interest. Perhaps prayer occasionally does something psychologically useful for the person who prays. In its more typical mood scientism sees prayer as a degraded example of superstition and nonsense that we would be much better off without.

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I doubt that scientism's attitude toward prayer is based on what we would describe as extensive and high-quality scientific research on the effects of prayer. I know of almost no quality scientific research at all on prayer. A genuinely *scientific* (as opposed to *scientistic*) attitude toward prayer would be to admit that factually we know almost nothing about it. It doesn't fit in theoretically with the main body of scientific knowledge, but in genuine science facts take precedence over theories.

Personal Attitudes Toward Prayer

Attitudes toward prayer probably derive mostly from personal experience. We may pray to be granted something that we want very much. Sometimes we get it, sometimes we don't. If we think that prayer should be infallible—especially fervent prayer stemming from strong desires—we are terribly disappointed if we don't get what we want, and we may then reject prayer. Failed prayer can be a deep emotional hurt that colors our attitudes the rest of our lives. Answered prayer can similarly affect us in a positive way. Such experiences of apparent answers or lack of answers to prayer are especially formative in childhood, when emotional intensity is so high.

G. I. Gurdjieff's ideas about prayer are quite interesting. He looked at the efficacy of petitionary prayer in terms of the intensity and consistency of a person's desires, rather than just as a formal action conventionally defined as prayer. Although he did not spell out the psychic mechanisms of connection, he believed that our thoughts and feelings have effects on higher levels of reality. Thus a consistently held desire for something acts as an unwitting "prayer," a petition or direction of intention to higher levels of reality, whether that desire was expressed as a formal petitionary prayer

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or not. The man who thinks about getting money all the time is in effect praying for money with unwitting prayer, whether he thinks of himself as a religious person or not, whether he gets down on his knees and formally asks God for money or not. The woman who constantly imagines tragedies befalling her is effectively praying for them. Our habitual attitudes affect our life in many ordinary, psychologically understandable ways; but unwitting prayer is another way in which we create our life, sometimes with tragic (even if wished for unconsciously) consequences. As Gurdjieff frequently expressed it, your being attracts your life.

Effective petitionary prayer in Gurdjieff's view, then, is intense and consistent desire and thought. Most petitionary prayer, however—formal or unwitting—has almost no effect. There are several reasons for this, given Gurdjieff's view of ordinary consciousness.

First, because ordinary people are plagued by shifting identities with disparate and often conflicting desires, the unwitting prayers of various identities contradict and largely cancel one another. Gurdjieff argued that we all have many different identity states, and some of them are at odds with one another. Random alternations of "I desire X," and "I'm not interested in X, give me Y," and "I hate X," and so on, do not give any consistent message to higher levels of the universe.

Another obstacle to effective prayer is our inability to be *consciously* intense. Ordinary emotions, triggered by external events and reacting predictably and mechanically with our personality patterns, may temporarily produce strong desires, strong formal or unwitting prayers; but external events change and the instigating desires disappear. A person in a life-threatening situation may genuinely and intensely pray, "Dear God, save my loved one's life and I will never sin again!" The loved one recovers (which may or may not have any relation to this prayer), the stress disappears, and

the promise never to sin again fades away.

This lack of control over emotions is also related to the uncontrolled alterations in what Gurdjieff termed our "false personalities," or subelves, what I have called identity states. Most "false personalities" have specific emotional cores, so when a situation evokes different emotions it can cause a change from one "false personality" to another. The new on-stage subself isn't interested in the same things the previous one was. The thing that makes these subelves "false" personalities is that we unwittingly identify with them at the time they are active and thus mistake them for our whole personality, our whole self.

Effective petitionary prayer would be possible for a person who was genuinely conscious; who, at will and for extended periods, deliberately summoned up his or her intellectual and emotional intensity to consciously pray; and who prayed "from" his or her more integrated and constructive subpersonalities or from his or her essence.

Is Prayer Magic?

Some might object that this emphasis on controlling the quality of consciousness and emotion to achieve more effective prayer smacks of magic or some sort of power play: If I am *deliberately* intense, if I create an emotion, then can I force God (or something at some higher level) to give me what I want? Am I at least getting better odds by my actions? In one sense yes, in another no.

Gurdjieff made a somewhat paradoxical statement on this subject: "Work as if everything depends on work. Pray as if everything depends on prayer." What did he mean?

Gurdjieff felt strongly that we must work on understanding and transforming ourselves with no expectation of receiving any sort of outside help, natural or supernatural. Only I can transform myself, only *my* efforts count. The strength I have is the strength that comes from making efforts. I cannot grow stronger muscles by just wishing for them, nor can someone else magically make my mus-

cles stronger. I have to push and pull and strain, pushing myself to and a little beyond my limits over and over again: then I get stronger muscles. Why should psychological growth be any different? From this view it seems clear that wishing and praying are fantasies that divert us from what we actually need to do, so we are better off to just get on with the work.

Yet Gurdjieff also said to pray as if everything depended on prayer, to beseech help from a higher level, recognizing that our work efforts will come to nothing unless we are helped from above. After all, the ordinary self that makes efforts is something of an illusion from the mystical point of view, so it is the higher self that really works. In his practical teaching he emphasized work effort, not prayer, probably because he found that his students had so many distorted and incorrect ideas about ideas like prayer that there was no point in teaching much about it until they had done enough psychological work on themselves to clean out the aspects of false personality that would otherwise sabotage most efforts at genuine prayer.

Conscious Prayer

Gurdjieff dismissed most prayer as useless fantasy, but he described a process of *conscious prayer* that was effective. Conscious prayer is a process of *recapitulation*, in which you consciously remind yourself of your knowledge and intentions. The effectiveness of such recapitulation is a function of the degree of consciousness we bring to it.

Suppose you decide, "I want to be serious." Merely praying this over and over mechanically, while daydreaming about other things you'd rather be doing, is a waste of time. To be effective, when you say "I" you must understand what you know about "I." For Gurdjieff this would mean:

- realizing that you had many "I's" rather than a single unified "I"
- realizing that many of the identity states we accept as "I" when they are active have mutually contradictory desires and perspectives
- feeling your desire to create a single, unified "I"

When you say "want," you have to recall, for example:

- how these many "I's" in you have many wants
- how these wants come and go with your moods
- what you know about creating a want that carries more weight than these mechanical wants

When you say "to be," what does "being" mean? Is it only mechanical being, in the sense of simply existing, or is it the being of a person who can *do*, a "being" that has will?

How exactly do you define "serious"? How much of that definition is your own and how much is your superego's, forced on you in the innocence of childhood?

Gurdjieff believed that conscious prayer can be very effective, so you had better be very clear about exactly what it is you want.

In many ways Gurdjieff's description of conscious prayer fits the above mentioned definition of meditation

better than the definition of petitionary prayer. Indeed Gurdjieff states that the focused, conscious attention and recapitulation in consciously praying something like, "God have mercy upon me!" may well have the effects that God is being asked to provide. This throws us back to the paradox: Work as if everything depends on effort. Pray as if everything depends on prayer. From one point of view the effort of conscious prayer automatically, lawfully, produces beneficial results, including possible connections to higher levels of our selves. From another point of view our efforts may be pleasing to higher aspects of being and attract help and blessings. Probably both and neither views are true, depending on your state of consciousness and being.

Shall We Pray?

Prayer is not fashionable in today's modern growth circles; indeed it is ridiculous given the biases of scientism. The cultural rejection of prayer makes

it difficult for many of us to seriously try it. My own psychological, parapsychological, and altered-states studies, as well as personal experience, have convinced me that prayer is a valuable avenue for our growth, and I intend to spend more time in prayer. The "scientific psychologist" part of me winces as I write the above statement: Your colleagues will ridicule you for saying such a thing! But this is what I have learned in examining personal psychological growth, and that is what I will say. I do not know exactly what we should pray for, but I think we would do well to pray for further understanding of ourselves, and wisdom in what to pray for. ♦

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