

PRAYER AND RELIGION

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A SUBJECT so rich as religion and prayer demands a modest reach. The attempt here will be just to say what religion and prayer are fundamentally about and to suggest that, at this fundamental level, religion and prayer – and man too – are one and the same act and event. In doing this, we will be using, to a very significant extent, the thought and vocabulary of the religious thinker and spiritual director, Friedrich von Hügel.¹ But before beginning, a few preliminary remarks.

First, the reader will not find here any discussion of such rightly tortured, directly pastoral questions as: how is secular and religious man to enact and dramatize his own complex reality, and what are the forms and styles, the places and the times for both corporate and individual prayer as suggested or required by contemporary psychology and sociology, or by the great signs and calls of the Spirit's peremptory judgment on our times: our wars, our racism and our neighbour's poverty. Such matters do and ought deeply to determine the very possibility as well as the shape of our religion and our prayer. We shall pray only in terms of them. But the view here is that none of them *are* religion and prayer. And our intention is basic: to say what religion and prayer are about. This suggests that it is possible – without thereby seeming disinterested – to transmit consideration of those social and political situations (be they joys, or sorrows, or sins) in which religion and prayer get their blood (or lose it), and in which they find their body. It also supposes that to be basic is not thereby automatically to be abstract. For example, if to be directly, nakedly trinitarian – as we are at moments – is to be difficult (and it is), it is, we hope, not to talk geometry. Perhaps it is primarily not our ideas but our experience, not the state so much of our theology as of our spirituality, that decides whether the Godhead as Trinity is a notion we have, or a complex life we greet, and do, and become man by.

¹ Von Hügel (1852–1925) was a married lay theologian who figured prominently in the 'modernist' movement and enjoyed an international reputation in philosophy, biblical studies, ecumenism and mystical theology. All our unacknowledged citations are from him. His major works included: *The Mystical Element of Religion*, *Eternal Life*, *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion* (2 series).

A second initial remark concerns the vast question of the language itself: religion and prayer. We cannot possibly even begin to deal with it here. However, we can remind ourselves that these words speak to mysteries and realities which englobe us and in which we come to be; that they come to us even as language with rich histories of their own; and that we do not so much assign their meanings – much less pretend wholly to produce the realities of which they speak – as welcome them with the reverence due great gifts. It is better, with humility, to set a word aside, to let it rest a while in the silence of its secrets (when we cannot read its promise), than to tailor such a word to passing custom and so defuse its power to reveal, or to ‘clarify’ it beyond its power to amaze. At any rate von Hügel, and this article as well, take religion and prayer as words still vibrant with the holy ‘fact’ and the human adventure they have quite traditionally named.

Our final opening remark concerns prayer. We want to give a preliminary description of it now, so that it will be ready to hand when we discuss prayer in the context of our subject, that is, vis-à-vis religion. When read with sympathy, the old description does us very well: prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God. ‘Attending’ might do better than ‘raising’ (where copernican sensibilities feel threatened by the image of height). And the words ‘mind and heart’, of course, must be grasped as historical movement and flesh. They mean the whole man, as he is: consciously and freely aware of God from within and through the mediation of man himself as personal, social, wordly, material and changing. But that prayer is primarily consciousness of *God* and not of self, or world, or of brother either, continues to hit the nail on the head. This immediately excludes any least suggestion (not unheard of) that prayer, either in its whole reality or in its substance, is the middle term of some observe-reflect-and-act life programme. That is not what prayer means, and it might be better not to use the word if we cannot accept or admire what it does mean.

Prayer is not reflection, and it is not aimed at mental or emotional hygiene or health, or at social concern and action either. Any more than human love is. Nor is it aimed at self-help or conditioning, or at the constitution of human, even ecclesial, community. Any more than love is. Oh, we may pray *for* these things, and we may certainly hope to experience these things as valued by-products of our prayer and as paramount in *God’s* intention towards our prayer. And it is emphatically the case that the materials, events and per-

sons of our secular existence, that what we read or see, that what we and our fellow men suffer and need and laugh for joy at, are the very materials and times of our prayer, and that all these realities both effect and get shaped by our prayer and give to it its body and its history. They are, and they do. But they are not the heart of prayer's mystery. God is. And this is so, whether the prayer be adoration, thanksgiving, contrition or petition. Prayer is not *aimed* at anything at all. Like love, which it is, prayer is utterly for itself, without remainder. Though it *has* remainders – explosively so – since personality, and community, and world occur and come to be as gift of God especially through prayer. Further on, we shall be looking to see how the substance of mysticism and ecstasy (not their famous or infamous phenomena) name the being of prayer. We begin now, however, to present (with some few developments of our own) von Hügel's thought on our subject of religion and prayer.

Religion is the 'deepest of all experiences of the deepest of all facts'. This is the central statement of our article, and the effort will be to show that it is also a definition of prayer as who and what man fundamentally is. Several things are immediately in view. First, if religion is the experience of a fact, then religion is, in its own interiority, twofold: it is the Fact of God, and it is man's experience of that fact. Second, if religion is man's *deepest* experience of God, then there are other possible experiences of him. But we prescind from this consideration at once (though it has importance), since man as *religious* experience alone concerns us here. Third, if religion is the deepest experience of the deepest of facts, then there are *other* facts and other experiences: religion is not pietism. 'However much man may be supremely and finally a religious animal, he is not *only* that; but he is a physical and sexual, a fighting and an artistic, a domestic and social, a political and philosophical animal as well'. Secularity is in full view here, and a good thing for religion too. For only a mankind and a world given the space and time, and allowed the autonomy and interiority required to be and to become – just simply themselves – only such a mankind and world can be and do the suitably rich praise of God.

The point is that neither secularism nor pietism will do. Man is both secular and religious, and once and to the end. Dualism, then, but no dichotomy. Real distinction, but without separation (like God in his Trinity). Man is an organism, and his destined simplicity is never an 'empty oneness'. He is a 'harmony' given as gift and accomplished as task through the conflicts and tensions, the cross

and the peace, the rhythmic involvements and detachments of concrete and historical, both sinful and redeemed, existence. Too quickly to 'solve' man is to reduce his wager and promise, generally in one of two ways: either by a secularism which remands him and his world wholly into the custody of himself (who can survive self-love?), or by a pietism which leaves him a bloodless shadow on the earth. The old, central mystery of spirituality remains pressed: man comes to himself as man only in and through 'this wonderful world' and the 'good things of this life'. Yet 'how much decency, leisure and pay is the miner to have, till he is to be helped to love prayer and the thought of God?' But we are jumping ahead, and exceeding our subject.

Religion – to take up our point – is a fact and an experience. It is a divine fact and a human event. It is the sheer fact of God, and what happens to man, that fact, i.e. God, being so. It is dialogal, then, and has existence only as relationship. As *including* God in himself, it is clear that religion cannot be subject to any systematic criticism as idolatry, nor can christianity be had without remainder as religionless. Yet as also including *man's* experience, religion is the proper subject of continual purification, growth and change, and human freedom is a condition of its very existence.

But it is of course religion, and not God (and therefore religion only partially), which is so dependent on man. Here we want to press our reference to God as Fact and make our meaning very clear, indeed blatant.

Though religion cannot even be conceived as extant at all without a human subject humanly apprehending the Object of religion, the Reality of the Object (in itself the Subject of all subjects) and its presence independently of all our apprehension of it . . . its *Givenness* is the central characteristic of all religion worthy of the name. The Otherness of God, the onesided relation between God and man, these constitute the deepest measure and touchstone of all religion.

The basic structure of religion, then, is not suffering and desire, but the 'Joy of God', taken as that utter, and utterly successful and accomplished, giving, receiving, and having, that utter being-toward-the-Other of Father and of Son as lover and beloved which is Spirit – and all this as 'Given' and 'There', as 'Overagainst' and prior to man. Suffering and desire are religious too. They name *man* in his sinful being and his historical becoming. They structure

man's journey into God's joy. Not that man's joy is altogether future, or in no way his own. No, joy is the world too, now that the Spirit is given. But the Fact of God is profoundly history as Cross, and thus it is that our joy so often has the figure of a restlessness that conceals his lovely advance.

This 'fact of God' can certainly fail of encounter; it can certainly be denied and rejected too. Von Hügel's point here is simply that this is what religion is:

Try and prove, if you will, that religion is untrue; but do not mislead yourself and others as to what constitutes its power and its worth.

And again:

The experiences of religion always present their object as overflowingly existent . . . as perfect Self-conscious Spirit, as very source of all existence and reality. We can indeed argue against religion as mistaken in so doing; but that religion actually does so, and this, not in the form of deductive reasoning, but in that of intuitive experience, cannot seriously be denied.

'Experience': this completes our description of religion, and it takes us closer to religion both as prayer and as 'characteristic' of man, that is, as making him what and who he fundamentally is. Experience here is the conscious and free and emotional, i.e. human, *appropriation* of what is *given* and *there* as *offered* to conscious freedom: the fact of God. There is a dialectic here, descriptive of man's very being. For while experience does not make, or construct, or grasp this God (he is 'simply given, not sought and found'), yet he is there only as offered to freedom ('God himself is apprehended only if there be action of our own'). And *man* is given – he occurs and comes to be as man (it is a journey) – only in the freedom (itself a gift) by which he welcomes God. This is man as religious experience.

It is also prayer, and it suggests that man is prayer. For prayer is the attending of the whole man to God. It is the welcomed 'penetration of spirit by Spirit', mediated and expressed (without magic or mechanics) by and through man's mind and emotions and body, through history and things, through effort and training and habits and tears, and by interaction with and for the brother in community. It is history therefore, an incarnational and worldly event. But it is nevertheless a direct and immediate meeting with and a

wholly personal invasion by God himself in his Trinity.

Now if we stay with their substance, this is what mysticism is, and ecstasy too. They name man's being as prayer. And *given* the fact and gift of God, mysticism and ecstasy are what we may expect to do and to have happen: they pertain to the 'normal consciousness of mankind'. For mysticism is the 'experience (more or less clear and vivid) of God as distinct, self-conscious Spirit', 'the emotional apprehension of the already full operative existence of eternal beauty, truth, goodness, of infinite Personality and Spirit, and this independently of our action'. But this is nothing but religion, the heart of it, as prayer. And as consciousness of *God*, it is ecstasy too – which raises the whole question of 'active' and 'passive'. Of course, the first truth of the whole matter is gift: it is the love of *God* which revolutionizes man and brings him continually into both terrible crisis and harmonious growth. But the term passivity tells this truth at considerable risk and cost. For who has ever been successfully loved, except through his own freedom and action as well? Experience and prayer are love, or they are nothing at all. And for man as well as for God, while experience and prayer are *never* 'activity' or activism (a busy, distracted and distracting milling about, with the self and *its* plans and powers always in view), they nevertheless have their whole being as '*action*': the moving out into the gift, into the love and the lover, by which we become ourselves (as do Father and Son for each other, and as does man before God in prayer). This is ecstasy, and there is nothing odd whatever about it – though of course there is everything extraordinary. But that is because it is love, which is always a wonder: the moving out into and for the sake of the others and Other, by which man comes to be as man. It is a mighty deed and an explosive event, this accepting of great gifts, as Mary of Nazareth discovered. Where well done, there is ardent ease: that total involvement with the other without thought of self and at whatever cost to self which we call enthusiasm. There is nothing frantic here, but only gentleness, and the largely unremarked if terribly painful death of selfishness. It is ecstasy: the loss, not of consciousness, but of self-consciousness; the abeyance, not of choice, but of the choice of self. In prayer, it is the utter preoccupation with God, from which simply has to occur a total preoccupation with all that God loves: a world, and a world of men. Mysticism and ecstasy as prayer are freedom, the event we dream of, the adventure man was born for and the grace he is: to be a man.

Von Hügel's man is prayer, then, and his thought suggests we

shall find out at judgment that the story of man's prayer is the significant history of the world. For *man is what happens* when fleshed spirit is well met by and greets God in history. The paradox persists: if religion and prayer are the fact and gift of God, they are nevertheless a human event. And yet this human event which is man will fully occur only as prayer, as immediate encounter with God. Von Hügel's man is a journey from the isolated self into community; the forced march (it is not easy) from the impoverishment of self-occupation (whether the individual's or a culture's) into dialogue with the brother, the world and with God; a movement from the animal self, however clever or sophisticated, into personality. As prayer, personality is the conscious, free-willing spirit organized for self-surrender through invasion by the Trinity. St John assures us: it is both Father and Son who 'come'.¹ Man in the Spirit is the historical grace and freedom of both the Father's love of the Son and the Son's love of the Father. He is the *secular* movement wherein the larger, the total Son, fleshed for history as Christ and world and world of men, gets declared and effected. And he is the *religious* movement and cry, 'Abba, Father!' Here we glimpse the broader issue, far broader than the subject of this article. But it is the broader issue for *prayer* too. For if prayer as immediate union with God is always in itself religious, it is nevertheless *in* prayer (because in the Spirit) that man gets declared as secular and continually discovers the shape and extent of his mission in the world. This needs lengthy, precise development – but not in this article where we are looking at the specifically *religious* experience of man as prayer.

The basic structure of this religious experience as prayer and of prayer as man seems to be marian: let it happen to me according to your word. This woman provokes and enters upon her whole history as Mary and arrives in triumph upon herself as human through the humility of a creaturely but free and conscious welcome to and appropriation of the Fact of God as Other and as Gift. Precisely as prayer, therefore, she is the archetypal christian and fitting image of the Church: let it happen to me. Let it (the real, what is, and in the first place, He Who Is) be, be so, let him and all that's real, occur. Let (as an active, creative, 'costly', free-willing and personal appropriation, an ardent letting be), let the entire real, finally personal, initially and ultimately Personal, happen to me. The whole effort and argument here begins and ends with the *religious* ex-

¹ Jn 14, 23; Apoc 22, 17, 20.

perience of man in the world as that historical and evolutionary gift and deed of God's very own self, which in prayer comes to be man's own self too in his destiny as graced and free reply to God: hallowed be thy name: let God be God. Fundamentally then, man as personality is prayer as adoration. Maurice Nédoncelle therefore can rightly say that, for von Hügel, human personality 'is the final goal of the world, for which even the heavens wait'. And prayer as petition finally and at the last is nothing but a request that man may become and do this adoration: thy will be done (Jesus in the garden, as well as Mary before God as newly proposed Incarnate Fact: let it happen to me). Petition is profoundly a programme of struggle and purification. Deeply undertaken, it asks for the shattering of idols, that man may be adoration. Let God be God: therefore, let only *God* be God. And it is here perhaps that precisely religious man as prayer requests and wills his secularity. For only a vigorous purity in worship, theology and ecclesiastical polity allows man to emerge as man and lets the world be world: autonomous and with their own interiority. A valid man and a robust world, and not their shadows or stunted distortions, are the truth. And if only the real God is to be adored, only a real man can adore him. If it is in function of himself as freely, consciously appropriated trinitarian image and gift that man is love of both God and the world, then of course only religious man, the man who prays, can fully manage the terrors and accomplish the joys of his destiny as thorough secularity. But it nevertheless remains for this secular destiny to be managed and accomplished, if man is to be man. And this imperatively suggests that only man come to prayer with a deeply worldly heart is the full adoration of God.

By way of conclusion now, we will briefly acknowledge just a few implications and questions in connection with what has been said.

1. Religion is not ethics. If prayer as religion is primarily man before the 'Is-ness' of God, then only after and through and because of this does ethics ('ought-ness') occur as the journey man must take to do and become personality, that God may become what he is: *God for man*.

2. If the whole position seems to suggest that prayer is an incarnational preoccupation with *discarnate* transcendence, with God the Father (through Christ and the world and in community), and that this preoccupation is direct, immediate and personal, then the position has been understood. Von Hügel's christocentrism is an experience of brotherhood as *sonship* in the Son, and any untrinitarian

christocentrism thus becomes for him a cul-de-sac, the last, most subtle idol of all, and our most plausible (because splendidly humanist) escape from man's destiny which is the love, in Christ, of God in Christ.

3. The position may seem a veritable climbing of the mountain of God – a risky proposal to modern city-dwellers. Von Hügel cheerfully pleads guilty here. But the incarnational character of his theocentrism provides a counter to the charge that the climb is too steep or the air too rare and unwordly. Von Hügel's God comes 'all the way down' to man in Christ. Two points are made here, and both are stressed: God *comes*, and it is *God* who comes. And man as reply receives his structure from God's deed: he is a reply to God in *Christ*, and to *God* in Christ. There is the question of strain, of course, in the light of changing patterns of culture, nerves and occupations. But the very necessary moderation of modern man must not lack great ambition (under grace), 'unless, indeed, Dante is to disappear before Tennyson, and Beethoven before Sir Arthur Sullivan'.

4. There are the further huge and practical questions of *how* a man should pray (corporate, vocal, mental, 'formless'), and of *how much* a man (and different groups in the community) should pray, and when, and where. A developed answer would fight shy of generalizations. Yet to say that prayer must occur if the undiluted human adventure of man as person is to take place at all, is to say that prayer too, like everything human, must have its times. And there is use in asking, carefully, after its places and its gestures as well – at least if man as history, as spatial-temporal enactment of spirit, is taken seriously. Surely we know enough about human love for this. And if prayer is always more than human love, it is not only never less, but it is always human too.

5. Another question concerns why prayer should be so difficult (and it is, even when loved), if prayer is what man is. We cannot delay here, but we may ask at once: who would suppose, in our time, that it is easy, or even that it takes only moderate effort, to be a man? Sin and concupiscence (as both individual and cultural self-centredness) come however unfashionably to mind here. So do humility and 'creatureliness... the first term of every genuine spirituality'. And really, we sufficiently know the problems we have and the purification needed in assisting, and not manipulating or dominating – in 'letting' the world be and come to itself as world and in letting our friends, and strangers too, come to themselves precisely as other than us and with their own revered autonomy

and interiority – we surely know the difficulty of all this too well to be surprised at the effort (itself a gift) that we must manage if we are to welcome God as God. And then too there is the difficulty, that God in Christ is not found or given except in the world and through our fellow men. There can be little impulse for prayer – it is scarcely possible, in fact – where there is no brotherhood, or where hunger or racism inhibit and crush man's effective freedom and time to assume his vocation as self-surrender. We need to stay with and lengthily explore both the secular presuppositions of man as religious and the means and materials of his incarnational becoming as person. Yet the old question has to stay pressed while we do this: 'How much decency, leisure and pay is the miner to have till he is to be helped to love prayer and the thought of God?' And there is a similar question for those busy in seeking the miner's justice.

Friedrich von Hügel's man is a dynamic, continually novel adventure that happens when fleshed spirit consciously meets God in the world and greets him with the freedom of love. This is our definition of prayer, and it is what we have meant by religion. Von Hügel is well aware that his view of religion and prayer

has not, for the more strenuous of our educated contemporaries, become . . . a living question at all. A morally good and pure, a socially useful and active life – all this in the sense and with range attributed to these terms by ordinary parlance: this and this alone is, for doubtless the predominant public present-day consciousness, the true object, end, and measure of all healthy religion; whatsoever is alongside of, or beyond, or other than, or anything but a direct and exclusive incentive to this, is so much superstition and fanaticism.

We have not been especially concerned here to dispute this perhaps still current and moralistic, that is, exclusively ethical view of man. Not that there are 'proofs', anyway. It is a matter for experience, tested, and discerned. The intention has rather been simply to wonder if the difficult nobility of this ethic does not have its deeper ground and its fuller possibility in religion and prayer taken as man at a still more primary level of his career both as process and as gift: I mean his direct experience of, his conscious and free attention of mind and heart to, that 'Fact and Joy' who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.