# THE PHILOSOPHER WHO PRAYS

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A PHILOSOPHER IS A PERSON who thinks about everything. If a philosopher prays, he or she will eventually come to think about prayer, and will do so in a way that is perhaps more probing and thorough than the way in which non-philosophers think. Philosophers thinking about prayer will have to be very sensitive in their description of the experience of prayer, as well as their interpretation of or reflection on what they experience in prayer. When thinking about prayer, the philosopher might realise that there are also theologians who think in probing and thorough ways, but whose methods differ from those of philosophy. Philosophers do not purport to have divine guidance or authority in what they do as a matter of their method of thinking. Even so, philosophers may privately feel that God is guiding them in their reflections.

The philosopher who prays is indeed remiss if he or she neglects to reflect on prayer. To someone experienced in prayer, the person who has no experience of it is missing an important part of life. The philosopher has an obligation to neglect nothing in the way of evidence or experience in his or her attempt to live the examined life. There is a deficiency in the philosophy as such if the philosopher fails to give philosophical attention to the reality of prayer. Certainly, for philosophers who personally experience the realities of God, faith and prayer, there is a duty to philosophy that calls them to reflect on the spiritual life. Eventually, in this article, I will discuss the dark night of the soul, not as an abstruse topic or remote possibility for advanced mystics, but as a clue to understanding our basic human nature and the general state of human existence.

It is not a disputed claim to say that the aim and ambition of every Christian is to grow in the reality of prayer. Prayer is the condition of consciousness that is worshipfully aware of God. Prayer is a habit of

*The Way*, 49/2 (Aptil 2010), 55–71

faith and worship that forms or constitutes the horizon of consciousness at all times, and then becomes the focus of consciousness at certain specific times. Prayer involves a conviction about the reality of God. This conviction is sometimes at the focal centre and at other times on the far horizon of our awareness and attention. Christians aim to have their consciousness become an uninterrupted and continuous series of prayerful acts of awareness. We attend to the biblical passage that says we ought always to pray, or to pray without ceasing.[1]

Philosophy is thinking, but prayer also implies a manner of thinking about God or about other things with reference to God. If philosophy thinks about the meaning of life and the universe, prayer is a concern for these things that has reference to God and to the worship of God. Worship of God is in general acknowledgement of God's presence, love, sovereignty and beneficence. Prayer is not merely reflection on these realities, but an appeal to God in a personal way. It is a grateful response to a loving God who has addressed us first. This awareness of relationship forms the horizon of the believer's global awareness, and at regular intervals becomes the centre of awareness. It is part of the dynamics of prayer that it fades into the background when other concerns occupy our attention.

The reality of prayer involves the ubiquitous presence of God as it is available to our awareness and as it invites our acknowledgement of itself. Like any relationship, it abides and is always there, always available, even when not being thought about. In prayer, the person of faith submits or surrenders to this abiding reality, and lets it rush in upon his or her consciousness and experience. Prayer is the experience of God, of loving faith and of worship in this abiding way. Prayer involves the permanent self-offer of God to our minds and hearts as an enriching and transcendent dimension. This offer and this possibility of awareness are the horizon of all experience and of everything that happens.

Our experience of transcendence in prayer is such that God, who transcends us in all respects, transcends God's own transcendence, so to speak, and does so in our direction. I recall reading something written in this vein by Karl Rahner. This means that God self-manifests to us and offers us a share in God's glory. It means that God shares glory with us in the mystery of the incarnation. Glory is the

[1] 1 Thessalonians 5:17.


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reality of God shining forth in manifestation to and through creatures. In prayer, we give glory back to God. Our free, conscious acknowledgement of God as the one who gives us everything and who offers Godself to us as well, our acceptance of this, and our thanksgiving for it, is prayer.

Prayer is free on both sides; it is a relationship in which God freely self-offers in the dimension of grace. It is also a free acceptance on the part of the one who prays. It is a *surrender*, in the sense of a letting-be and an acquiescence to God's will. In prayer, one becomes free of self-preoccupation and inordinate self-interest. Prayer involves a freedom from *self* in the narrowing and restricting sense, and a liberation and enhancement of *self* in a widening and deepening sense. The term *surrender* can connote a loss of freedom, whereas prayer involves an increase of freedom, love and strengthening of the self. If called a *surrender*, prayer should be freed of the negative connotation of allowing an intruder or invader to impose upon us in a way that we would otherwise resist. As well as being a surrender in some sense, prayer is an empowerment.

In prayer, any fear that we may have of God's power threatening us because of our own unworthiness is swept away by the merciful love of God. Contrition is an important part of prayer, but, in the experience of prayer, our unworthiness is replaced by God's fatherly forgiveness and justifying grace. Compunction may include feelings of unworthiness that we have as sinful individuals, but that is not all there is to it. Thomas Merton reminds us that compunction involves being struck by the realisation that we are by nature inadequate as creatures to respond fully to the offer of grace that God makes to us. In

prayer we realise that we are children of God. To become mature in God's spirit is also to realise one's childlike dependence on God. Yes, we are unprofitable servants, but God also wills us to be heirs to God's kingdom. We are prodigal children, but our inheritance still awaits us. Acknowledging all of this is part of prayer itself for the Christian and for the philosopher.

### *The Experience of Prayer*

We think of Jesus going aside to pray, Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to pray, Jesus praying in the desert for forty days after he is baptized. Prayer is elevation of the self to a higher plane of reality. It is communion and conversation with God, which can suggest going apart from the world and its affairs to commune exclusively with God. The initiative in prayer always comes ultimately from God. We are called to prayer, set apart, or invited to be set apart with God for a while. In prayer we will be deepened and transformed, and then sent back into the world with a mission to perform.

In prayer we are permeated by the reality of God. It is helpful to think of God as the supreme reality. By comparison with God, everything there is, even the good things God creates, is relatively unreal. In prayer there is a polarization between reality and unreality, and we are pulled gently into the reality of God. As we live a life of prayer, God becomes ever greater for us, ever more real, ever more mysterious, ever more holy, ever more incomprehensible. Our capacity for God, finite as it is, grows to receive and accommodate infinity. Yet, however great our capacity becomes, ours is always a finite capacity, always transcended by the infinite reality of God.

Our prayer also belongs to the Church. We never pray alone. The Church as communion of saints is always at prayer. The multitudinous Church triumphant and the Church suffering are always at prayer, praying for us and with us in the Church militant. It has been a consolation to many Roman Catholics to know that the Mass is being celebrated and the divine office or monastic book of hours is being prayed somewhere throughout the world at every moment of every day. In our own prayer we are joined with the prayer of the Church. The monk who prays in deepest solitude is bound in communion with the entire Church, which is dynamically active with the unifying energy of

prayer at every moment. Our prayer radicalises us as members of the very corporate Body of Christ.

Growth in the life of prayer is the reason for our growth in Christian maturity. Maturity takes time and it takes growthful, mellowing experience. We grow in receiving and practising attention to the presence of God in the particularities of our unique existence. We are constantly being transformed by the inner reality of God, and by the habitual perception of God, in nature, society, culture and the circumstances of life. Prayer pauses to relish the consciousness we have of God as lovingly present at the core of our existence. We take special notice of God as the creative Reality at the basis of all created reality. It is impossible for philosophers to ignore the reality of faith and grace in their experience, even as they try to think philosophically with unaided reason. It seems that philosophical, or methodically independent, reason is always elevated by grace, even if only in a clandestine way.

***We are constantly being transformed by the inner reality of God***

Mystical or contemplative prayer is mature prayer. It is habitual, sometimes intense. The conversion process of the contemplative may not yet be complete, but it is far along the way. It has reached an advanced stage. Prayer has become psychologically integrated into our lives. It is something that is always going on within us, and something we return to frequently in order to be aware of it, to be grateful for it, to be sorry for having neglected it, to draw riches and refreshment from it. It is pure gift, but it is an assimilated gift. We may work at it a bit, just to focus on it and dispose ourselves to it, but it has become a largely unimpeded outpouring of the Spirit into our inner self. We have come to the point that the life we live would be utterly meaningless without the abiding reality of prayer. The philosopher must pass over nothing in describing what is real, and so must describe prayer as accurately as possible. The philosopher then finds it impossible to explain prayer without actually praying. To think about prayer is to pray.

Prayer is active faith. Faith is like friendship. It needs to be expressed frequently and in different ways. Sometimes it is like a birthday card or a thank-you card. Sometimes it is like a phone call made to a friend for no particular reason at all. Sometimes it is like a small gift that says 'I saw this and I thought of you'. Friendship can be

expressed in a compliment, a casual remark, a look of recognition or a long conversation. It needs to be cultivated, but you enjoy doing it, and to work too hard at it is to put a strain on it. It is a give and take kind of thing, and it has its ups and downs. Prayer is friendship with God, but there is also a friendship we have with prayer itself. It is a mature and comfortable friendship, never without its challenges, but something we could not live without.

### *Compunction in Thomas Merton*

Living in the reality of prayer puts us in a deeper relationship with ourselves as well as with God, and gives us a deeper sense of our own inadequacy and imperfection. In *The Silent Life* Merton defines compunction as 'a burning sense of our own imperfection'.[2] It is related, Merton says, to true humility, which is calm and peaceful. Humility accepts personal limitations and is not surprised at one's own imperfection or even sin. By contrast, says Merton, 'The proud man is astonished when he commits a fault, and because he is proud he cannot forgive himself any blemish'.[3] Merton reminds us that St Bernard said that humble people profit by their own weaknesses. If we remember that humility is truth, and that the truth shall set us free, then compunction is the truth about our own imperfections.

In the language of medieval asceticism, says Merton, compunction is 'the clear-sighted recognition and mature acceptance of our own limitations'.[4] If contrition, strictly speaking, is sorrow about our specific sinfulness, compunction may include contrition, but it is more about our own inability as creatures fully to experience what God is offering us.

> Compunction is a spiritual grace, an insight into our own depths which, in one glance, sees through our illusions about ourselves, sweeps aside our self-deceptions and daydreams, and shows us exactly as we are.[5]

Compunction makes us aware of the disjunction and disconnection between our elevated attitude when at prayer and the quick descent to

[2] Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999 [1957]), 107.
[3] Merton, *The Silent Life*, 107.
[4] Merton, *The Silent Life*, 111.
[5] Merton, *The Silent Life*, 111.


disquietude and irritability of which we are still sometimes capable. At the same time, compunction is a movement of love and freedom, and of liberation from false notions about the self, spirituality and even God. Compunction often involves having a sense of humour about our own quirks and imperfections.

The monk or mystic is struck, or even overwhelmed, by the reality of God. It seems that the mystery of God becomes more fascinating and more riveting as we advance in the spiritual life. Our inclination to spend more time with God increases as we advance in the life of prayer. Humility is a glad and grateful acceptance of the truth, with the resolution to live in ever-deepening contact with the divine reality which has been opened up to our contemplative vision. Compunction prepares the mystic for this relationship with God. It makes the contemplative a true self, who focuses on God, rather than a false self, who focuses on itself. Humility and compunction enable a loving surrender to God in whom alone is found the secret meaning of our own existence.

St Bernard says that the mystical perfection of humility is the sign of Christ's presence and action purifying the heart of the mystic from within. 'When you experience this power which totally changes you, and the love which sets you on fire, understand that the Lord is

present in your heart'.[6] The Lord changes us in our very self, turning us from the false self of confusion and distraction into the true self of humility and charity. Merton says: 'The fruit of humility and compunction is interior peace, which is nothing but the realisation of our true selves, as we actually are'.[7]

Compunction and humility establish us in solid faith and root our whole being, not in the shifting sand of our own talents and qualities, but in the deep soil of Christ's mercy. Compunction and humility are partners in Merton's thought; without them we cannot develop the discipline needed to ascend to the supreme, undisturbed tranquillity of mystical prayer. Compunction is not a morose dwelling on negative things about ourselves, such as our own sinful unworthiness and evil inclinations. It is a grace that actually changes negativity into energy for positive growth.

For the philosopher, compunction entails an intellectual humility. God is incomprehensible, although God can be known in the images and concepts in which God has revealed Godself. Compunction is necessary for the wisdom that knows God in God's transcendent incomprehensibility. Compunction is an idea and an experience that describes well for the philosopher a basic truth about human nature and the human condition. God is always more than we can know, more than we can grasp, and more present than we realise. We, on the other hand, are always invited to learn more, grow more, and become more than we are in relation to God. The familiar song 'Day by Day' puts it almost as well as things written by St Ignatius Loyola: 'to see Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, follow Thee more nearly. Day by day, day by day.'[8]

### *Poetry, Mysticism and Theology*

After an experience of intense and glorious prayer, the mystic or prayerful person may lapse back into relative darkness. The glorious experience cannot be sustained. It visits itself upon us and then recedes, leaving us with a longing for its return. Like sunlight, so bright at noon, it declines at dusk, and is gone at midnight. It evaporates,

[6] St Bernard, Sermon 57, n.7, quoted in Merton, *The Silent Life*, 112.
[7] Merton, *The Silent Life*, 112.
[8] From the musical *Godspell*, by Stephen Schwartz.

hides, abates, ebbs away, recedes. There is always a pain of loss after the transfiguration. The moment of transfiguration is eternal, and the ensuing darkness is the temporary victory of time over eternity. It will not last, this temporary victory; but while time wears on, the mystic waits. Words and images will never express what the prayerful heart has experienced. Mystics stutter and stammer to communicate their experience anyway. No matter how rich their poetic expression, its bedrock is poverty. The bedrock of plentitude is emptiness. This revelation is the pain behind every poem, the complaint in every celebration.

Much poetry, even secular poetry, is akin to natural theology, or 'dark' theology. After experiencing the brightness of transfiguration, the poet and the poem try to articulate the vision that has passed. They cannot effectively do so, and yet they can hardly stop trying. Victory comes only in the mere attempt at expression; there is no complete success, no satisfactory expression of the ultimate glimpsed as transfiguration. The glorious is always only something dimly remembered and hopefully expected. It is never fully present in words. It is never fully captured in concepts, descriptions or doctrines. The hope of the poem or prayer is to evoke the experience, to have its own words melt away as the eyes and ears of others open up to a novel experience of the infinite. The poem uses darkness to evoke the light.

We live in a destitute time, said the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, an idea taken up by the philosopher Martin Heidegger.[9] Words and language adequate for revelation and theology seem today no longer to exist or hardly to mean anything. The poet today, like the mystic of old, struggles to express the inexpressible. It seems to Hölderlin, metaphorically speaking, that the gods have gone into hiding. It seems that the bright and revelatory side of language no longer exists; what is left is only the dark and concealing side of language. Expressions that brought meaning, inspiration and enjoyment in the past have lost their poignancy and validity in modern times. We think of the long queues of tourists who visit holy places and view works of sacred art, but who experience little or nothing of what pious viewers in earlier times

[9] See Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper, 2001), 89, quoting Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Bread and Wine'.

*Desert Christ Park, Yucca Valley, California*

experienced. Heidegger looks for a remnant of adequacy, a minimal hint of sacredness, in the poetry of Hölderlin, in Rilke, and in Trakl. It may seem to some that, in being minimal and nearly eclipsed, the modern sacred is more authentic than the sacred of the deluded past, with its gullible taste for the mythic projections of the religious imagination.

T. S. Eliot links the vapidness and emptiness of the modern cultural 'waste land' to the desert experience of the great mystics. In his work the nausea, depression and anxiety of the atheistic existentialist is transformed into the pregnant aridity of the mystic. This mysticism is not particularly Christian; it belongs at once to all religions and to no religion. It is a condition that is transcendent of religion as a human cultural phenomenon, and it is the authentic moment within each of the world religions. The power that Christians call grace works anonymously in a world where grace is everywhere available. Perhaps there are people walking around on this earth who have achieved great authenticity and sanctity, although affiliated to no religion at all; and they, like the great saints, are overwhelmed by the feeling of aridity and abandonment that belongs, not to the atheistic existential vacuum, but rather to the mystical dark night of the soul.

### *'I Believe, Help My Unbelief'*[10]

This short quotation from St Mark's Gospel might be the watchword of the philosopher of religion. It is the duty of the philosopher of religion to examine the difference, and the relationship, between faith and unbelief. And the philosopher who can appreciate the poets and their ability to draw the ineffable into a position that is closer to articulation will be better able to discuss mysticism and to delineate this relationship.

Some poets, such as Eliot, Hölderlin or Rilke, are not necessarily people we would consider to be mystics or advanced in the spiritual life. However, in their poetry, they touch the nerve of the human mystical possibility, the elemental human condition in which the creature surrenders selfhood back to the creator as ground and source of all that is. The mystical experience is a grace-filled paradigm for understanding what is the most basic of all human experiences, the penetration by a higher power into every nerve and fibre of our finite being. This experience is what we are made for.

What poetry and philosophy share is the need and urge to get close to elemental experience. Heidegger refers to dwelling in the neighbourhood of being, getting as close as possible to the source of reality. We approach poetically and asymptotically to the place where being speaks in an authentic voice of its own. It is to *being* in this sense, necessarily and primarily, that the poet listens. The philosopher then listens to the poet and meditates on the self-speaking of primordial being. The idea is to travel back through the metaphors, distortions and circumlocutions to the pure utterance of being itself. Much of what Heidegger said was written to be meditated upon, as if to help us to grasp something that transcended the words actually written. What, and the way in which, Heidegger wrote about poetry in relation to philosophy, he might also have said about prayer. Language both conceals and reveals what is ultimately real. Again, the idea in praying is to keep concealing to a minimum, and allow revealing its maximum impact. This kind of spirituality is at the basis of both poetry and philosophy. Poetry and the kind of philosophy that is akin to poetry serve as natural foundations and analogues for prayer and theology.

[10] Mark 9: 24.

For poetic and paradoxical metaphors are needed to bring to illumination in language the dark noetic quality of mystical experience. In ancient times theologians distinguished between cataphatic knowledge of the divine and apophatic knowledge of the divine. Cataphatic mysticism is the kind that can express aspects of the divine because it speaks in analogies and comparisons with things and experiences we understand, such as life, truth, goodness and beauty. Apophatic mysticism expresses paradoxically the experience of ineffable divinity as beyond our capacity to grasp or express. Sheer divinity is more unlike than it is like the life, truth, goodness and beauty that we know. The mystery of the incarnation brings together the complementary aspects of both kinds of mysticism. Given the mystery of the incarnation, we know that our own basic humanity, as shared by Jesus, is an icon that takes us deeply into the divine mystery.

The language of mystical theology can assist the philosopher in articulating the difference between faith and unbelief. To the unbeliever, faith is based in delusion; while to the believing philosopher, unbelief is based in the mysterious way in which God hides from the believer in order to work more effectively in that particular unbeliever. There is an analogy to this in advanced states of prayer. We can take the Suffering Servant of Isaiah as a cipher for the modern and postmodern condition, because it is a cipher for the basic human condition in every age. This figure is totally self-abandoned to the awesome gift of the self-giving reality behind all realities. This figure is the chosen instrument of authenticating grace as it is poured out upon all of creation. The philosopher of religion is in a position to articulate the modern and postmodern condition of the believer in the world, and is thus able to help the mystic towards personal self-understanding.

### *Philosophy of Religion and the Dark Night of the Soul*

There is a relationship between faith and unbelief, as studied by the philosopher of religion, and the phenomenon of the dark night of the soul, as described by the great mystics of the Catholic tradition. The philosopher who prays undertakes this exploration despite a certain horizon of impossibility surrounding the task. Philosophy demands the articulation and explication of everything it considers, and the dark night of the soul is a mystical phenomenon that is basically ineffable.

The doctrine of the dark night of the soul comes out of the experiences and writings of the mystics in Christianity. We associate the term with the writings of St John of the Cross, but the theme is found throughout all of the history of Christianity, and in the Old Testament, especially in the four Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah.[11] The point of the doctrine is that there are special growth-related sufferings that occur in advanced stages of the spiritual life. They are profound, transforming, ineffable, and unavailable for adequate conceptualisation. Characteristic of the spiritual and psychological sufferings of the true mystic is that hope of deliverance and confidence in God are never lost.

Our thesis here is that the dark night of the soul is closely analogous to a state of affairs in the philosophy of religion, when the mind hangs in the balance between the possibility of faith and the possibility that what is offered to be believed in is delusion. The dark night of the soul consists in a lack of consolation in which the mystic's will is challenged to grow in its assent to the truths of faith and to grow in confidence in the reality of the presence of God, in dark circumstances when God seems to hide from him or her. The mystic is sustained through the dark night by the grace of God, but does not consciously experience this grace and sustenance as such. This state of affairs, although unique in its intensity in the life of the mystic, is not unique at all in the life of faith, but is basic to faith as such. There is an agony in faith as it abandons itself to what seems at times to be absurdity and delusion, hoping that this will bring transcendence to greater life and greater truth.

The dark night of the soul is a gift; it is related to a high quality of prayer and intimacy with God. It is a paradoxical gift in that it does not feel like a gift at all: it feels like a curse. The spiritual life becomes dry and insipid. It is a state in which the presence of God is not felt in a person's life, and this state comes only after the presence of God has become an abiding reality for that person. One spiritual director compared the dark night to drug addiction. There is no other value in life; the craving for heroin, or God, has replaced all other cravings. It has more power than all other cravings put together. The value of God's presence has become a constant awareness and a supreme value

[11] See Isaiah 42: 1–9; 49: 1–13; 50: 4–9; 53: 1–11.


in the life of the mystic. The person has become able to focus totally, lovingly, and without distraction upon God in prayer, has enjoyed these gifts for a long time, and then these consolations dry up entirely. Analogously, in advanced heroin addiction, the drug no longer satisfies; the craving rages on, but the satisfaction is gone.

In the dark night, it seems that God completely withdraws from the life of the mystic, leaving no trace of consolation or feeling of intimacy. The person seems to be thrown back upon his or her own inner resources of naked faith. Desolation or apathy in various modalities accompany the dark night as a symptom of this aridity. We may seem, even to ourselves, not to care any more, but we do care. Our growing faith never lets us abandon prayer, even though prayer seems to give us no joy. We feel abandoned by God in the way Jesus did on the cross. Advancing in the life of prayer brings an intensification of hope, even when experiencing a painful eclipse of the presence of God.

The dark night of the soul is best understood, not simply as a state of the soul experienced by people advanced in the life of prayer, but also as a dimension of the process of spiritual growth that is present to some degree at every stage. This is true because every stage of growth before the dark night of the soul, when we conceive of it also as a state of advanced perfection, is a state of growth towards the dark night. The dark night as a dimension of the whole spiritual life is a tendency

towards the dark night as a particular advanced spiritual state. The dark night is a spiritual analogue of death, when death is considered to be the ultimate state of growthful transformation and a transition to eternal life. The consciousness of death as permanently on the horizon of awareness helps to define human nature. So too, the dark night of the soul defines spiritual existence as a persistent aspect of the spiritual journey. Even in the so-called unitive way, when the dark night as a stage of growth is put behind the mystic, the dark night as a dimension of the ever-continuing spiritual journey takes us towards death as the ultimate encounter with God. The spiritual life is a process, and part of growth through this process is the will to detach from absolutely everything that is not God. This moment is at the heart of all spirituality, and it is the moment of death-to-self that in its full-blown phase will be recognised as the dark night of the soul. There is a secret knowledge in all who go on the journey of the spiritual life that the last and most difficult detachment will be the detachment from self undergone after one is detached from everything else.

The person in the dark night never gives up faith, hope or love for God, although the experience can last for years. The dark night is not ordinary depression. It is a test of faith, in which state alone advanced faith can grow and receive further nurture. The presence of God is actually increasing within the mystic, but there is no experience of this growth of which the person is conscious. It feels as though he or she has been abandoned by a best friend, lover and constant companion. The only salve to be given the mystic in the dark night comes from words such as those in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, the Book of Job or, best of all, the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah. Mystics can also read the passion of Jesus, and find that here they can receive a sustaining insight into their own condition.

Understanding the condition of aridity in the spiritual life is necessary for advancement in that life. There are many aspects to spiritual aridity, or the state of not being consoled by experiences of intimacy with God, and one of these is intellectual aridity. Reasons to believe no longer seem convincing. Mystics may find themselves in a crisis of faith in which they are tempted no longer to believe in God and the truths revealed by God. These truths may no longer seem convincing. The reality of God seems far to transcend the words and categories in which revelation takes place and now the reality of God is

obscured by a cloud of unknowing that may be mistaken for a cloud of doubt. The reality of God is something barely believed in, and God seems extremely remote. Furthermore, the lack of something once possessed as very important seems to hang like a shroud over everything else.

The mystic or contemplative is one who has practised faith avidly and profoundly for a long time, and has been faithful to prayer. But the Spirit no longer seems to pray within the mystic's heart; in the hour when the gift is most present it seems to be gone. All is extremely dark and the darkness is unrelieved. In spite of this inner distress, which has lost its initial acuteness and become a case of long-endured misery, the mystic is able to cope and even to excel in the ordinary activities of life. The loss is felt, and there is temptation to be impatient with God, but hope and humour are never completely lost. Some suffering may be necessary, the mystic feels, but why so much suffering and why for so long a time? The trust in God that is the hallmark of the advanced spiritual life may seem to be hardly any trust at all. The mystic prays with sincerity: 'I believe, help my unbelief'.

The intellectual inadequacy and isolation faced by the modern philosopher, who nevertheless prays, is closely analogous to the intellectual aridity that may be part of the dark night of the soul. Instead of constituting a rare and extreme crisis of faith, such darkness and aridity may seem to the philosopher to be typical of the spiritual condition of the modern and postmodern ages. The most typical and paradigmatic form of modern spirituality may be one that is close to the fringes of agnosticism. It is here that faith will be marked by authenticity, maturity, spiritual courage and the compunction that makes a spiritual home in a secular and materialistic age.

The philosopher who prays has a spiritual companion in the mystic. Philosophy is, at its finish, exactly what it was at its inception: a hungry but disguised yearning for God, grace and eternal love. Early wonder had become conceptualisation, and conceptualisation has come to its limit as it is called beyond itself to a truth that it cannot understand. Ineffability shines through that which is spoken about, and the language that speaks fails to express what it is that shines through. This transforming experience is in its early stages one of frustration, loss and confusion. It evolves into an experience of grace, glory and fulfilment. Every philosopher, not just the philosopher of

religion, can better understand the task of philosophizing about prayer as he or she learns to appreciate the reality of prayer and the writings of the mystics. At the core of an appreciation of poetry and the arts is a similar transforming experience.

The philosopher who prays is always concerned not to allow the things that he or she knows by faith to mix with the things he or she knows by reason alone. On the other hand, the duty of the philosopher is to explore every range and dimension of experience in quest of the best explanation of everything. The philosopher who prays also knows that his or her experience of natural things in the natural world is already indelibly influenced by what he or she knows by faith to be grace. To the philosopher who prays, philosophy itself would be incomplete without some exploration of the states of prayer that affect him or her most deeply.

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