

DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

Prayer in the Islamic Tradition II

THE VERB 'to pray', it seems, does not take the preposition 'with' except on the strictest conditions of identity: conditions often fortified by massive prejudice or sheltering an introspective and self-regarding piety.¹ So writes the eminent islamicist Kenneth Cragg in the excellent introduction to his anthology of muslim and christian prayers, *Alive to God*. The present selection and the article previously published in *The Way*² are offered in a spirit similar to that of Cragg's book: in the hope that Christians and Muslims may begin to discover ways in which they can 'pray with' each other. It is not a question of pretending that our differences have suddenly evanesced in the crucible of twentieth-century cultural interaction. It is rather a matter of discerning a shared longing, at the level of our common humanity, to know and worship the living God. *Alive to God* provides a marvellous selection of prayers arranged under the headings of Praise, Penitence and Petition. The following miniature anthology presents some additional material gathered from a variety of classical sources, and attempts to steer a middle course between Cragg's arrangement by 'type' or 'attitude', and the approximately chronological scheme employed in our first selection. Prayers and anecdotes about prayer have been collected here according to four paradoxical themes: Intention (honesty with God and God's honesty); Expression (the importance of words and the insignificance of words); Occasion (special prayers for special times and prayer at all times); and Orientation (prayer to God within and prayer to God above all).

Intention. No muslim spiritual writer has attempted to make a serious statement about prayer without at some point speaking of the importance of right intention. It is most frequently mentioned in the context of ritual prayer and other 'communal' and/or required devotional practices; but intention is also central to individual 'free' prayer. However, four stories from muslim tradition point up the paradox of intention. They demonstrate both the necessity of honesty in prayer on the part of the one who prays, and God's utter lack of concern for perfection and purity in human intention, so long as one turns, at the last, towards him. In the end, God, 'The Hearer, the Knower', transcends and transforms every human purpose.

Honesty with God. The persian poet, Farid ad-Din 'Attar (d. 1220), tells a

¹ Kenneth Cragg, *Alive to God: Muslim and Christian Prayer* (London, 1970), p 3.

² *The Way*, vol 20 (January 1980), pp 68-76.

story of a pious but rather undiscerning man who prayed one day at dawn: 'O You who are above all, I am content with you both day and night. O Lord, I ask you also to be content with me'. Then came the reply: 'Your claim is a lie. If you were truly content with me, why do you insist that I be content with you?' The poet goes on to explain that God fully expects the one who prays to be forthright, and to know fully what he is asking for.³

God's honesty. One of Iran's most renowned purveyors of classic wisdom, Sa'di of Shiraz (*d.* 1292), recounts a number of fine tales about prayer. Two in particular tell of God's directness and even 'inability' to be coy or fickle, or to play word-games with his creatures, regardless of the inconstancy of the one who prays or the lack of focused intention in the prayer. The first anecdote speaks of a man who had been for many years totally devoted to worshipping an idol. In a time of severe distress, the man besought the idol all the more earnestly to give him relief. The statue maintained a stony silence. When sincere devotion proved fruitless, the man resorted to threats, saying: 'If all my years of fidelity to you do not move you to compassion, you leave me no choice but to turn to God!' Without a moment's delay, God responded, even though the man's intention could scarcely be described as of the purest. God's response was a source of more than a little scandal to a 'true believer' who later heard that tale. To that man God explained that if the idol-worshipper had offered the same supplication in God's own House, and had been refused a hearing, there would clearly be no difference between God and the idol.

Sa'di relates elsewhere how the prophet Abraham had the habit of postponing his own breakfast each day, until some hungry wayfarer should come along, and share the meal with him. After an entire week without morning visitors, Abraham decided to go out looking for a guest. He found a very old man in the desert, lost and hungry. As the two prepared to eat, Abraham began the prayer. But when Abraham noticed that the ancient fire-worshipper's lips did not pronounce the same prayer, the prophet was incensed and drove the old man away. God then spoke to Abraham: 'I have given this man life and food for a hundred years. Could you not take care of him for one day, even if he does homage to fire?'⁴

Sometimes the intention of the one who prays is perfectly laudable and straightforward, and yet it may not be broad enough to allow God all the scope he needs to be God. For example, the fourteenth-century Spanish/north African spiritual writer, Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda (*d.* 1390), tells his story about the celebrated eighth-century mystic Ibrahim ibn Adham. One dark and stormy night, Ibrahim was making his ritual walk around the Ka'ba (the sacred shrine at Mecca). The sanctuary was deserted, so he approached the door of the shrine and prayed, 'O God, guard me forever from being dis-

³ From John A. Boyle's translation of the *Ilahi Nama* (Manchester, 1976), p 198.

⁴ Other stories like these may be found in Sa'di's two major works, *Rustan* and *Gulistan*.

obedient to you'. From within the Holy House a voice replied, 'Ibrahim, you ask for protection from rebelliousness; and all my servants ask me for that. But if I were to protect them all, to whom could I then be gracious and forgiving?'⁵

Expression. Muslims believe that God himself has resorted to the use of human language to reveal his own ineffable word. But God has so much more to say than even the Qur'an can contain: 'If all the trees in the world were pens, and all the oceans ink, and seven times that, they would not suffice to record the words of God' (Qur'an 31, 27; 18, 109). Words are important in the believer's response to God as well, but are often quite inadequate or inappropriate by the standards of orthopraxy. God can make do in any case.

The importance of words. Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) has long been regarded as one of Islam's foremost instructors of the faithful in the devotional life. He was concerned that Muslims be taught the proper way to perform all their required religious duties, such as ritual prayer and its preliminaries. He was, however, equally interested in helping people with their individual devotions, and frequently recommends specific prayers for private meditation and adoration. For example, he suggests the meditative repetition of each of the following ten phrases, 'either a hundred times or seventy times or ten times', the minimum needed to total one hundred repetitions, in the very early morning:

- (1) There is no god save God alone, he is without partner, his is the kingdom and his the praise, he makes live and causes to die, yet he is ever living and never dying; from his hand comes all good, and he has power over all things;
- (2) there is no god save God, the king, the truth, the evident;
- (3) there is no god save God alone, the victorious, the Lord of the heavens and the earth and what is between them, the almighty, the forgiving;
- (4) glory be to God, praise be to God, there is no god save God, God is great, there is no power nor might save with God, the high, the mighty;
- (5) glorious and holy is the Lord of the angels and the spirit;
- (6) glory be to God, praise and glory to God the almighty;
- (7) pardon me, God almighty, apart from whom there is no god, the living, the steadfast, I beseech thee for repentance and pardon;
- (8) O God, none withhold what thou givest and none gives what thou withholdest, none opposes what thou ordainest, good fortune does not benefit its possessor, apart from thee;
- (9) O God, bless and preserve Muhammad and the house of Muhammad and his companions;
- (10) in the name of God, along with whose name nothing harms either in earth or in heaven, he is the hearing, the knowing.⁶

⁵ From the second of Ibn 'Abbad's 'smaller letters'.

⁶ From 'The Beginning of Guidance', trans. W. M. Watt, in *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali* (London, 1970), p 116.

Al-Ghazali is not alone in extolling the merits of pronouncing and repeating specific prayers and litanies. Such recommendations abound in Islamic tradition. The other side of the coin of 'expression', however, is equally prominent, especially in the writings of the mystics. In fact, al-Ghazali himself quotes a saying of Muhammad, to the effect that the only word prescribed for one who prays is precisely that which he understands as he prays.

The insignificance of words. Jalal ad-Din Rumi (*d.* 1273) tells two stories that beautifully exemplify this second aspect of expression and, at the same time, recall the importance of intention in prayer.

A certain pious man hurried to the mosque to take part in the Friday noon community ritual prayer. As he arrived, he saw people coming out of the mosque; and he asked why everyone seemed to be departing early. Another man explained that the Prophet Muhammad had just finished leading the people in prayer, and had already given the final blessing. The distraught latecomer heaved such a sigh of disappointment at having missed the formal prayer, that 'his heart smoked' (the persian expression for 'sigh' is 'heart-smoke'). But the man who had just come from the mosque, taking note of the sigh, said, 'I will trade you all of my formal prayer for that one sigh of yours'. The two made the trade, and the man who had bargained for the sigh valued it more than a hundred petitions. That night the shrewd man heard a voice say to him as he slept, 'You have purchased the water of life and healing. In honour of your choice, I will accept the formal prayers of all my people'.⁷ Rumi remarks elsewhere that where there is no sighing there is no ecstasy.

Earlier in the same book of his six-volume 'Spiritual Couplets', Rumi had told another story.

Moses saw a shepherd along the road
 who was saying: 'O God, you who choose freely,
 Where are you, that I might be your servant
 and patch your sandals and comb your hair?
 Let me wash your clothes and kill your lice
 and bring you milk, O Adored by all.
 Let me kiss your little hand and rub your little foot,
 and clean your little room at bedtime,
 You to whom I offer all my goats,
 You: when I think of you I cry hey and heyah!

The proper and lofty prophet Moses, who had already been given the distinction of the title, 'He who conversed with God', was horrified at the shepherd's

⁷ From the persian text of Rumi's *Masnavi-i Ma'navi*, II, 2771-79 (unless otherwise stated, translations are my own).

unduly familiar address to God. He berated the simple man and declared him an unbeliever. God then informed Moses that the prophet owed the shepherd an apology, for the shepherd's words were as eloquent as any prayer that is born of a loving heart.⁸ As Rumi suggests in several of his lyric poems, God himself is the Amen in the heart of the believer, regardless of the mode of expression.

Occasion. Every event, every season, every corner of the world is of God's making and is under his dominion and watchfulness. Muslims therefore have always proclaimed those happenings, times, and places holy, and have sanctified them with prayers fitted to the occasion. But because all creation is a 'sign' of God's mercy, all that human beings experience and perceive is one cosmic occasion for prayer.

Special prayers for special times. According to a saying of Muhammad, the following prayer, remarkably similar to the Lord's Prayer, cannot fail to bring healing to a sick person:

God Our Lord, you who are in the heavens, may your name be sanctified. Yours is the command in the heavens and on earth. As your mercy is in the heavens, so let your mercy be on earth. Forgive our sins and failures. You are the Lord of those who seek to do good. Upon this illness send down mercy from your Mercy and healing from your healing.⁹

Another tradition has it that Muhammad offered this prayer at the burials of members of his Community:

O God, forgive the living among us and those of us who have died; those present and those absent; the small and the great among us; our men and our women. O God, whomever among us you cause to remain alive, make him alive with 'grateful response' (Islam); and whichever of us you cause to die, make him die in the faith. O God, do not keep from us the reward he has in store for him, and, now that he is gone, do not put us to the test.¹⁰

Among many special prayers commended to Muslims as they make their pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the Prophet's favourites was this:

O God, indeed you know and see where I stand and hear what I say. You know me inside and out; nothing of me is hidden from you.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 172off.

⁹ From arabic texts compiled by A. H. Farid, in *Prayers of Muhammad* (Lahore, 1974), p 180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 185.

And I am the lowly, needy one who seeks your aid and sanctuary, aware of my sinfulness in shame and confusion. I make my request of you as one who is poor; as a humbled sinner I make my plea; fearful in my blindness I call out to you, head bowed before you, eyes pouring out tears to you, body grown thin for you, face in the dust at your feet. O God, as I cry out to you, do not disappoint me; but be kind and compassionate to me, you who are beyond any that can be petitioned, most generous of any that give, of all the compassionate most compassionate. Praise to God, Lord of the two worlds. Amen.¹¹

Prayer at all times. Everything in creation, says the Qur'an, knows its own proper prayer and praise, and thus prays without ceasing. God's people 'find God in all things', and thus require no specific occasion for prayer. The martyr-mystic al-Hallaj (d. 922) wrote:

O God, the sun neither rises nor sets
but that your love is one with my breathing.
Never have I sat in conversation
but that it was you who spoke to me from among
those seated round.
Never have I been mindful of you, either in sadness or rejoicing,
but that you were there in my heart amidst my inmost whisperings.
Never have I decided on a drink of water in my thirst, but that I
saw your image in the cup.¹²

A prayer of similar inspiration is attributed to the colourful ninth-century Egyptian mystic, Dh 'n-Nun (d. 859).

O God, I never hearken to the voices of the beasts or the rustle of the trees, the splashing of waters or the song of birds, the whistling of the wind or the rumble of thunder, but I sense in them a testimony to thy Unity, and a proof of thy incomparableness; that thou art the all-prevailing, the all-knowing, the all-wise, the all-just, the all-true, and that in thee is neither overthrow nor ignorance nor folly nor injustice nor lying. O God, I acknowledge thee in the proof of thy handiwork and the evidence of thy acts: grant me, O God, to seek thy satisfaction with my satisfaction, and the delight of a Father in his child, remembering thee in my love for thee, with serene tranquillity and firm resolve.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 217.

¹² From the *Divan* of al-Hallaj.

¹³ Trans. A. J. Arberry, in *Sufism, An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (New York, 1970), pp 52-53.

The theme of 'occasion' for prayer is, like the themes of intention and expression, paradoxical. This paradox of praying both on occasion and without occasion, at once sums up the previous two themes and leads us into the fourth, that of orientation. Constant recollection of God is achieved only when one is no longer aware of recollectedness as a discrete mode of being. As more than one muslim spiritual writer has remarked, a person who is forever having to remind himself that he is keeping God in mind is more forgetful of God than the person who is no longer preoccupied with recollection. Human intention pales before God's responsiveness to his creatures; of the ten parts of prayer, nine are silence; and 'the homeland of recollection is separation'.¹⁴

Orientation. Our final theme is often expressed in Islam as the paradox of nearness and distance, or of divine Immanence and Transcendence. The one is never entirely exclusive of the other. A friend of Dhu 'n-Nun once wrote the enigmatic Egyptian a letter in which he prayed, 'May God make you feel the intimacy of his presence'. Dhu 'n-Nun wrote back; 'May God cause you to experience his absence; for if he made you experience his nearness, that would be the sum and scope of your lot in life; but when he makes you experience his distance, that is a function of his overall plan for you so that he might leave you yearning for him'.¹⁵ As 'the homeland of recollection is separation', so the experience of God's immanence is found in a longing for God Transcendent.

Prayer to God within. A prominent mystic-teacher of Baghdad named al-Junayd (d. 910) prayed:

So I have come to realize that you are in my inmost being,
and I have conversed with you intimately.
We are in a way, then, united,
but in a way we are quite separated.
Even if your Sublime Grandeur has kept you
inaccessible to my eye's glance,
Still, loving ecstasy has caused me
to feel your touch within me.¹⁶

Al-Junayd also wrote the following prayer in a letter to a friend:

¹⁴ Sayings quoted in Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1975), pp 172-73.

¹⁵ From the arabic text of Abu Nasir as-Sarraj's (d. 938) *Kitab al-Luma'* (Book of Light-flashes); a compendium of sayings and teachings of the mystics of Islam.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* al-Junayd's thoughts are reminiscent of the opening of G. M. Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland* — 'Thou Mastering me God. . . . But dost thou touch me afresh? Over again I feel thy finger and find Thee'.

May he bring you near unto him, close to him before him, may he bring you nigh unto him. May he grant you the joys of familiarity in proximity to him and may he commune with you. May he choose for you his beauteous behests and be your intimate! May God grant you his aid in those significant stations, the state of proximity to him, through his gifts of strength, assurance, quietness, acquiescence, and composure.¹⁷

Al-Hallaj is unsurpassed in his ability to capture the sense of God's immanent presence, as the following prayer shows:

You flow between my heart and its sheath
 as tears flow between eye and eyelid.
 You enter into the recesses of my heart
 like the indwelling of animating spirits in bodies.
 Nothing that is still is able to move unless
 You, from your hidden abode, give it motion.
 O Crescent Moon that is born on the fourteenth day,
 You are the eight and the four and the two!¹⁸

Ibn 'Ata'illah of Alexandria (*d.* 1309) expresses the paradox in a way that will lead us finally to two hymns in praise of the Transcendent Sovereign Lord:

My God, how can you leave me to myself,
 for you are responsible for me?
 And how could I be harmed while you are my Ally?
 Or how could I be disappointed in you, my welcomer?
 Here I am seeking to gain access to you
 by means of my need of you.
 How could I seek to gain access to you
 by means of what cannot possibly reach you?
 Or how can I complain of my state,
 for it is not hidden from you?
 Or how can I express myself to you in *my* speech,
 since it comes from you and goes forth to you?
 Or how can my hopes be dashed,
 for they have already reached you?¹⁹

¹⁷ Trans. A. H. Abdel Kader in *The Life, Personality, and Writings of al-Junayd* (London, 1976), p 122.

¹⁸ From the *Divan* of al-Hallaj. About the enigmatic last verse: a variety of interpretations is possible, but one is that God is both the very essence of the crescent moon's appearance and crescendo, and that which exists before ever the crescent moon can come to be (i.e., the eight, four, and two that add up to fourteen).

¹⁹ Cf Ibn 'Ata'illah, *The Book of Wisdom and Kwaja Abdullah Ansari, Intimate Conversations* (New York, 1978), p 120.

Prayer to God above all. Nizami of Ganja (*d.* 1209) composed a series of remarkable poems in Persian, up to 10,000 lines in length, each of which begins with a song of praise to the Transcendent God. The one unifying theme in these encomia is the poet's awe at the grandeur of God, at the divine timelessness witnessed in time, at the visible beauty of the invisible. Beginning the *Seven Portraits*, Nizami prays:

O you who look upon the world that has its being from you,
 Before all things that are, you were.
 When you originated them, all things had their beginning;
 When you set their terminus, all will come to an end.
 O you who have raised the lofty vault of heaven,
 Who set the stars alight and gather them in a throng,
 Creator of the treasures of goodness,
 Inventor and fashioner of all that is;
 Artisan by whom every work is crafted,
 O All and Creator of all.
 You exist uniquely, and there is nothing like you in any way:
 The wise have always known that this was so.
 You shine before a sightless people;
 Without image though you are, you adorn the world with your image.
 All creation is alive with your life;
 Life is a spark from the flint of your being.
 O you who have fashioned the world from nothing,
 You are both sustainer and comforter.
 Your name is as the origin of every name;
 At first the beginning, at last the completion;
 First of the first, prior to all reckoning,
 And last of the last, after the final deed is done.
 And he whose head is not bowed in worship to you,
 Bolt upon bolt his door is locked shut.²⁰

As a prayerful prologue to his major work, the *Garden of Ultimate Reality*, the persian poet Suna'i of Ghazna (*d.* 1131) wrote:

O you who nourish the soul and ornament the visible world,
 And you who grant wisdom and are indulgent with those who lack it;
 Creator and sustainer of space and of time,
 Custodian and helper of dweller and dwelling;
 All is of your making, dwelling and dweller,
 All is within your compass, time and space.
 Fire and air, water and earth,
 All are mysteriously within the scope of your power.

²⁰ From the Persian of Nizami's *Haft Paykar*, lines 1-11, 16.

All that is between your Throne and this earth
 are but a fraction of your handiwork;
 Inspired intelligence acts as your swift herald,
 Every living tongue that moves in every mouth
 Has but one purpose: to give you praise.
 Your sublime and exalted names
 Evidence your beneficence and grace and kindness.
 Every one of them outstrips throne and globe and dominion;
 They are a thousand plus one and a hundred less one.
 Every one of them spells your response to a need;
 But to those who are outside the spiritual sanctuary,
 the names are veiled.
 O Lord, in your generosity and mercy
 allow this heart and soul a glimpse of your name!²¹

In that same name that is above all names, be it expressed a thousand and one ways or ninety-nine, may Christians and Muslims some day learn to 'pray with' each other.

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²¹ From the Persian of Sana'i's *Hadiqat al-Hadiqat*, I, lines 2-11.