



## **P for Prayer**

### **The deeper roots of interreligious dialogue and collaboration**

Some months ago I reviewed Abbot Timothy Wright's book on "No Peace without Prayer: encouraging Christians and Muslims to Pray Together". In "An 'A-Z' of inter faith relations: 26 short reflections for Christians" P is for peace but the Abbot, my cousin, suggested P should be for prayer: hence this paper.

The Bible shows that prayer and relationship with God are integral to the life of humankind. Jesus showed that love of God and neighbour strengthens our relationship with God to the point of saying, as he did "Abba! Father". Our appreciation of the prayerfulness of people of other faiths does not blur our Christian understanding but rather binds us more deeply to people whom God loves. Cardinal Basil Hume said we can learn something from every neighbour we meet; and this frees us to listen with love to others.

A number of Christian authors have identified prayer as a unifying element in inter faith relations. Marcus Braybrooke edited "1000 World Prayers", Laurence Freeman wrote "Common Ground: letters to a World Community of Meditators". Monastic Interreligious Dialogue continues <http://www.dimmid.org/>. Brother Daniel Faivre edited "Transcendence: Prayer of People of Faith", an anthology of excerpts from Scriptures and spiritual writers.

I asked some colleagues to share briefly what prayer means to them and in relation to their inter faith work. The contributions received are quite varied and of different lengths, but each of them gives clear and effective witness to prayer sustaining life in God and commitment to dialogue and peace. Where I have edited a text there is a link to the full text sent to me.

#### **Yousif Al-Khoei (Muslim)**

Prayer is the link to God that helps us to be more self conscious of our activities and transcend our selfish desires for material and worldly needs by recognising whom we are praying to. When we pray, we recognise and understand the Creator of this universe and the greatness of every creation that we should continuously strive to preserve including relationships between human beings irrespective of the faith to God. It makes you realise that human beings are like each other in creation, as Imam Ali (AS) has eloquently stated in his letter to the governor of Egypt.

This is a powerful driving force behind my interfaith work. The act of prayer can establish inner peace in one's self and take out the aggression often found in mankind. This could be a solid basis for creating environments where peace is predominant. Through prayer, we also find the comfort to dedicate time for self reflection and that helps us in achieving selflessness.

#### **Charanjit Ajit Singh (Sikh)**

Prayer for me is the golden opportunity to communicate with God. It is the invisible yet very real spiritual tuning into the Supreme which enables us to experience the inner peace. The Sikh faith tells us that we should get our minds open to the Divine who is in us all. Only then our mind will become still, otherwise it has a tendency to run in many directions. In the congregational setting, we can all be praying together and at the same time as individuals accessing God on our own. We feel

peace ourselves and with others, whether we are in our own religious community setting or in an interfaith setting.

The value of prayer is not in words but in the trust we have in God. That trust transcends different religions which according to the Sikh Gurus' teachings are different paths to reaching God. It is also said in our scripture that 'the prayer of the devotee who surrenders to divine is never left unrewarded', such is God's grace. I feel our task, indeed our responsibility is to pray. As Guru Arjan tells us in the hymn of peace: - Pray, pray, pray and be at peace

### **Malcolm Deboo (Zoroastrian)**

Prayer enables humans to gain access to a subtler dimension of reality, a dimension that takes humans beyond the sensate, tangible state. In other words prayer is a medium or vehicle of communication with God and between the seen and unseen worlds. Through prayer humans are able to recognize the inexplicable harmony of the three worlds, namely the physical, psychological and the spiritual.

Prayer gives humans innate happiness coupled with strength and power to thwart the forces of deceit. Prayer uttered with the right consciousness and motivation generates a power that helps humans to overwhelm the Lie.

Since ancient times Zoroastrian prayers have been used for the purposes of healing! It is believed through the power of prayer, one is able to combat evil and restore harmony and balance in the world.

Zoroastrians believe that there is only one God (cosmic force) who is the originator of truth, wisdom, light and goodness. Since all religions are created by this cosmic force, therefore by participating in inter faith work a Zoroastrian is teaming up with others to cumulatively generate goodness to achieve a common objective, namely the defeat of evil, and to bring about the last judgement. So we can all reside in endless light.

Acknowledgments: "Zoroastrianism: An Ethnic Perspective" by Khojeste P Mistree.

### **Barney Leith (Bahá'í)**

'There is nothing sweeter in the world of existence than prayer,' wrote 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Head of the Bahá'í community from 1892 to 1921. These words inspire Bahá'ís everywhere to turn our hearts to God morning, noon and night, and to deepen our love for Him. When I ask God through prayer to help me align my life with His wishes I experience the inner peace and contentment which only the power of prayer can bring. Prayer and reflection are food for the soul.

Prayer by itself is important, but incomplete. Personal prayer and community worship find their fulfilment in service to our fellow human beings of all faiths and none. One area of service to which I am deeply committed is the promotion of good relations, dialogue and collaboration between people of different faiths. Prayer is an essential foundation for this service. It opens and prepares my heart to hear and love the spiritual reality of all the souls I have the honour and pleasure of encountering, no matter who they are.

### **Rabbi Natan Levy (Jewish)**

There is a story told about a Chasidic Rebbe, a master of prayer. Each day this Rebbe would lead his community in the communal worship at the crack of dawn. With the Rebbe as their leader, his students and community reached never before levels of 'd'vekus', which is the spiritual connection

to the divine. Yet, the week before Yom Kippur, as the whole community fervently worked towards that crescendo of prayer, fasting and repentance that marks the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, the sainted Rebbe was conspicuously absent from his usual spot at the head of the synagogue. "Where does our Rebbe go each morning?" the students asked one another. There were even rumours that their sainted Rebbe, had reached such a pure form of prayer that he would literally ascend to heaven each morning.

One intrepid and very curious student, decided to follow the Rebbe early in the morning and see if he indeed journeyed into the supernal realms. The student watched through the window as the Rebbe woke before dawn, and instead of his rabbinical garb, he donned the tattered clothes of a simple woodcutter. In the chill of the morning the student followed his Rebbe passed the synagogue, passed the prayer house as well. He watched as the Rebbe knocked quietly on the door of an old and disheveled shack inhabited by a poor widow who lived alone. "Who's there?" asked the widow. "It is I, the woodcutter," responded the Rebbe, "here again with a few logs to light your stove." The widow opened the door to the freezing lean-to and the Rebbe soon got to work lighting the stove and warming the small home. The student watched silently through the cracked window. He watched his venerable teacher, the Rebbe, light the fire, and say the first prayers of the morning, he watched as his Rebbe, made a cup of warm tea, all the while praying and praying. The student smiled and returned to the synagogue.

"Did you find our holy Rebbe?" the other students inquired as soon as they saw the intrepid student walk through the door of the synagogue. "Does our teacher truly ascend to Heaven with his prayers each morning?" The intrepid student smiled again, "Our Rebbe goes much higher than heaven," he replied.

I love this story. Prayer - my vertical dialogue - has indeed been most alive, most meaningful, and most fully transformative, when it re-orientes and sensitises all of my small horizontal encounters with others.

### **Yann Lovelock (Buddhist)**

Personally I and most Buddhists in this country have no belief in a personal deity with whom one can be in relationship or that there is an unchanging human individual to relate to such an entity. That makes most definitions of what prayer is generally supposed to be highly problematical.

In Theravada there is a loving kindness (metta) practice where one sends out from the heart the wish that all beings should be happy and without suffering. This includes the 'self' among the whole and is ultimately a route to realising the interdependence of all beings. Also postulated is that one should not simply wish but also hold oneself open to becoming the channel through which amelioration of conditions may be effected. Buddhist compassion is not understood as feeling pity but as a proactive virtue. In addition, this form of mental energy can be directed towards particular individuals in sickness or distress, and also as a form of self-healing.

While I was in Taiwan my inborn scepticism was severely dented when I made a very rare call for help after my daily chanting and had it answered within the hour. I was very conscious as I made the appeal that it was completely open-ended - here was the problem and I was open to solutions by whatever means or route. At other times I have sat with a particular problem and simply 'listened'. I think in this case that what one 'hears' is going to be completely dependent on one's previous practice, training and understanding. Buddhism is not generally a revelatory religion, although there have been things remarkably like it claimed during its history.

Peace is an important component of Buddhist practice. Peace-making, yes, but it should start by purging one's own behaviour from bodily, verbal and even mental acts of antagonism. Peace of mind is a particularly important goal, not for purely personal reasons but because without that as foundation one isn't of much service to fellow beings. Meditation obviously contributes to that, but unless prayer is directed to stilling and purifying the mind as a preliminary, I don't see simple intercession as a lot of use.

### **Ramesh Pattni (Hindu)**

For me prayer has always been the portal through which I connect with the Divine. It reminds me of my relationship to the Divine and through that relationship to that which appears to be the other. It reminds me as a Hindu that at the one level of existence we share our essence, the Atman. It turns my attention to that which brings us together on life's journey and how we can relate to each other at the personal level within that Divine bond. It gives me patience, a capacity to forbear and an attitude of compassion and positive regard. Prayer is the giver of inner strength through the recognition of the Divine in each one of us.

### **Dr Natubhai Shah MBE (Jain)**

Prayers are important part of Jain way of life. Every Jain is expected to pray three times day. Jain prayers are for obeisance, praise for the exemplary souls and their teachings, introspection, forgiveness and friendship, happiness and peace. The prayers described below are the main daily prayers:

In the Obeisance Prayer Jains venerate the spiritual victors, liberated souls, spiritual leaders, spiritual teachers, and all saints throughout the world who practise non-violence and reverence for all life, truthfulness, non-stealing, sensual control & celibacy, and non-attachment in their conduct, and pluralistic viewpoint in their thinking.

In the Prayer of 24 tirthnkars (founders of simple path of spiritual liberation) they recite their praises and teachings. In the Prayer for Forgiveness they pray: "I forgive all living beings; may all living beings forgive me. All living beings are my friends; I have malice towards none"

In the Prayer for Bliss to all they pray: "May the entire universe be blissful; May all beings be engaged in each other's well being. May all weakness, sickness and faults vanish; May everyone be healthy, peaceful, and blissful everywhere"

In the Prayer for Amity: one prays: "May the sacred stream of amity flow from forever in my heart, May the universe prosper; such is my cherished desire. May the spirit of goodwill enter in our hearts,  
May we all sing in chorus the immortal song of human concord"

In the Prayer for Peace they recite: "Peace and universal love is the teaching of Mahavira; Equanimity is the dharma. Do not injure any living being; it is the eternal way of spiritual life; Violence causes all miseries in the world; it keeps the soul in spiritual bondage: Conquering oneself is the meaning of life, a pathway to the bliss and peace."

### **Rev. William Steele (Christian)**

I am no longer involved in interreligious dialogue, because of age and retirement, nevertheless I can certainly say that the experience of interreligious dialogue, and reflecting upon it, has had a lasting

effect on my prayer. In other words, I believe it was God working through the dialogue that influenced the prayer, rather than the other way round! At least that was the case to begin with.

In my own life of prayer I have long been aware of the danger of idolatry, of worshipping and petitioning a god of my own creation rather than reaching out in faith to “the God beyond”, the One who truly reveals himself at the Burning Bush and above all in the Cry of Abandonment on the Cross as the loving Mystery, yet the One for whom words like ‘love’ or ‘mercy’ are mere pointers, not descriptions. In faith we truly know him, but in the darkness, as the One we cannot know.

Archbishop Rowan Williams said this in a sermon in 2012: Every Lent we ought to be looking at the various ways in which we get involved in manufacturing the gods that suit us... [v. The Tablet, 14.2.15]. My experience of IR dialogue has acted as a kind of Lenten exercise in that sense, moving me beyond the images to the darkness, as I met and had dialogue (above all the ‘Dialogue of Life’) with those of other religions who I am sure were in touch with the true God, but along paths which were strange to me, and holding beliefs which in conscience I had to reject and say “not that, not that!”

In its turn, prayer was gradually teaching me to respect and trust, but without hope, or desire, to understand. So prayer was the guiding force behind the attitudes without which true dialogue is impossible.

A few words from Sister Isabel Smythe, a Christian inter faith practitioner, on silent prayer together with neighbours of other religions.

I have often used a quotation from Morris West’s book *The Ambassador* in which a Buddhist monk says to the ambassador ‘When we speak we are two, when we are silent we are one’. I think there is great truth in this. Each month I meditate with an interfaith group and in the silence there is real communion and an energy which we dedicate to world peace. As I enter into the silence of my own heart I am aware of an encounter with the God who is within but also the presence of all those who have become part of me. As an interfaith practitioner this includes my friends of many faiths and none.

There are many views about interfaith prayer and a distinction is sometimes made between coming together to pray (each in our own way) and praying together. This is seen as a way of keeping the integrity of each faith’s understanding of God and respecting difference with regard to worship and prayer. Praying in silence overcomes these difficulties. Differences or disagreements about doctrine or understandings of God fall away. Words are of no significance. The rapt attention of each one witnesses to their integrity, honesty and commitment to their faith. It is to see religion at its best. It is to experience a communion deeper than words and to hear the call of God, spoken in the silence of our hearts to further fellowship and relatedness.

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I feel profoundly edified by these reflections on prayer. They are an encouragement to me to deepen my own prayer life, to listen to God more, to set aside time to talk things over with God and hear in the depths of my heart a loving response. Prayer enables me to be available to others, to believe in God’s plan of love for humankind and each person, to cast onto Him all worries and discouragement, to be sure that goodness does truly overcome evil and that uniting with people of goodwill and people of prayer is the surest way to achieve true peace and equality in the human family.

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