

*THE NATURE OF PRAYER*¹

MARY WHITON CALKINS

WELLESLEY COLLEGE

Prayer is the intercourse of the human spirit with a reality, or being, realized as greater-than-human and either conceived or treated as personal. This definition, it will be observed, leaves open the question whether the object of religion is always reflectively known to be personal; yet it regards prayer, the characteristic religious experience, as a personal and personifying consciousness, the worshipper's awareness of superhuman reality in vital connection with him, the worshipper. As William James has said, "The religious phenomenon, studied as an inner fact, and apart from ecclesiastical or theological complications has shown itself to consist, everywhere and at all its stages, in the consciousness which individuals have of an intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel themselves to be related."² Or, to quote Jevons, "rites and ceremonies, sacrifices and altars exist" for the sake of "the prayer in which man's soul rises or seeks to rise to God."³

This paper considers the nature of prayer thus conceived as the expression of intercourse with God—or with the gods. Such a conception, it must be reiterated, does not involve an intellectualist view of religion and does not suppose that the worshipper has of necessity framed a metaphysical idea of God as personal being. It is the curious error of many contemporary writers to suppose that one cannot be conscious of a being as self, or person, without having formed such a speculative conception of the

¹ This paper, substantially as here presented, constituted the second of a series of four lectures, on the Psychology of Public Worship, delivered in July, 1910, at the Harvard Summer School of Theology.

² *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 465.

³ F. B. Jevons, *An Introduction to the Study of Comparative Religion*, 1908, p. 149.

self. Thus, Ames⁴ believes that he has refuted the spiritistic view of religion when he has proved that the child or the savage cannot attain the conception of "the closely articulated and unified self." The truth is that one may have a predominantly emotional or volitional consciousness of oneself and of other self, human and divine. The records of primitive religious rites and the expressions of developed religious experience alike confirm the belief that such a personal consciousness, however fragmentary and confused, is involved in prayer.

The teaching of this paper stands, therefore, in complete opposition to the view that a God is merely a "central object" of attention⁵ and to all the theories which identify religion with magic, sacrament with charm, and prayer with incantation or impersonal ejaculation. It may well be true that magic antedates religion, and it is certain that prayers may be combined with incantation⁶ but the historically later experience is not necessarily identical with that on which it follows; and prayer and incantation, though directed to the same object, are utterly diverse in nature,—in Leuba's words, "they combine but never fuse." The difference between magic and religion may be insisted on with the greater vigor since it is taught by scholars who differ widely in their views of the relation between the two. Frazer, who believes that religion arises later than magic through a tardy recognition of the inherent falsehood and barrenness of magic, naturally asserts "a fundamental . . . opposition of principle between magic and religion."⁷ But Lang and Leuba and Jevons, who reject this intellectualist account of the origin of religion, hold with equal vigor the belief that the difference between prayer and charm or incantation is "essential, fundamental, as little to be ignored as it is possible to bridge."⁸ The dis-

⁴ *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, 1910, p. 972, etc. Cf. Irving King, "The Differentiation of the Religious Consciousness" in *Psychological Review*, Monograph Supplement, 1905, pp. 2, 20, etc.

⁵ Ames, *op. cit.*, pp. 97 ff., 106, 120, 172 ff., 311.

⁶ See J. H. Leuba, *The Psychological Origin and the Nature of Religion*, pp. 65 ff.; and M. Jastrow, as cited below, p. 492, and footnote.

⁷ *The Golden Bough*, second edition, p. xvi. Cf. F. B. Jevons, who quotes these words, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁸ F. B. Jevons, *An Introduction to the Study of Comparative Religion*, 1908, p. 71. Cf. p. 104.

tion may be briefly formulated in the following statements:— An incantation is conceived as coercing the divine power for human ends, in a mechanical, non-personal fashion.⁹ For example, an incantation or the wearing of an amulet is supposed mysteriously and, as it were, mechanically, irrationally, without intervening conscious process, to influence the superhuman, controlling powers. Prayer, on the other hand, even though directed to the same end as that of the magical incantation, is the address of spirit to spirit; a personal attitude by which the divine self is conceived to be affected in essentially the way in which one person is affected by another.

The confusion of prayer with incantation seems to be closely connected, as effect or cause, with the very prevalent misconception which identifies prayer with petition. From this point of view prayer is synonymous with request or supplication, a begging, beseeching, besieging, demanding attitude of human self to superhuman power. This conception falsifies the history of religion and unduly narrows the meaning of prayer, which, as communion with God, may take on any form of personal intercourse. Unquestionably this has been the teaching of the church. "To speak boldly," says Clement of Alexandria, "prayer is conversation and intercourse with God."¹⁰ "Prayer," says St. Thomas, "is the ascent of the soul to God."¹¹ Sabatier repeats almost the words of Clement when he describes prayer as "intercourse with God, . . . intimate commerce, . . . interior dialogue."¹² And the outcome of that most penetrating study of personal religion, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is a similar definition of prayer as "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine."¹³

Thanksgiving and penitence, as well as petition, are forms of

⁹ See Leuba, *op. cit.*, pp. 12 ff., 49 ff.; Tiele, *Elements of the Science of Religion*, vol. ii, pp. 16, 135 ff.; Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie, Mythos und Religion*, 2ter Teil, pp. 182 ff.

¹⁰ *Stromata*, vii, 242 d.

¹¹ *Summa theologica, secunda secundae, quaest. lxxxiii, art. i, 2.*

¹² *Esquisse d'une philosophie de la religion*, pp. 24–26, quoted by James, as cited below, pp. 464–465.

¹³ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902, p. 464; cf. p. 477, note 2.

intercourse with God "common in the most primitive faiths." We may, therefore, profitably widen and deepen our conception of prayer if we bring together illustrations of its different forms from different stages of the religious experience. Fundamental to all is the prayer which expresses not petition, nor penitence, nor thanksgiving, but the mere sense of fellowship. A seemingly perfect example are the prayers, quoted by Tylor, addressed by the Samoyed woman on the steppes of Asia to the sun: "When thou risest, I too rise from my bed; when thou sinkest down, I too get me to rest."¹⁴ I know of nothing to compare with this except the naïveté, sophisticated to be sure in comparison with this utter simplicity, of what may be named the narrative portions of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Like the Samoyed woman, St. Augustine is, as it were, assured of God's interest, of his companionship, and talks to him as simply as to a sympathetic human hearer.

Next to these, and still at a far remove from prayers of petition, one may group the prayers of reverent contemplation, of adoration, prayers in which the emphasis falls, not on human need, or weakness, or satisfaction, but on the divine completeness and greatness, the prayers in which, to use Everett's fine phrase, the feelings of the worshipper centre in God. An example of such prayer is found in the opening lines of a Babylonian hymn to the Sun God:

O Shamash! out of the horizon of heaven thou issuest forth,
 The bolt of the bright heavens thou openest,
 The door of heaven thou dost open.
 O Shamash! over the world thou dost raise thy head;
 O Shamash! with the glory of heaven thou coverest the world.¹⁵

Countless illustrations of these prayers of confidence and adoration may be found in the Hebrew scriptures and in the writings

¹⁴ E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. ii, pp. 291-292. Cf. D. G. Brinton, *Religions of Primitive People*, 1897: "The earliest hymns and prayers do not, as a rule, contain definite requests but are general invitations to the gods to be present."

¹⁵ Quoted and translated from Sir H. C. Rawlinson, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia*, 20(2) K 3343, by M. Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, 1898, p. 301. Like all these hymns to Shamash, this hymn passes into an incantation,—in Jastrow's words (p. 293, etc.), a probable "concession made to the persistent belief in the efficacy of certain formulas."

of Christian saints of all ages. "Thou art the same and thy years have no change," says the psalmist. "Thou hast made us for thyself," is the prayer of Augustine, "and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee." And Thomas à Kempis, a thousand years later, prays: "Thou brightness of eternal glory, thou comfort of the pilgrim soul, with thee is my tongue without voice and my very silence speaketh unto thee. Come, oh come; for without thee I shall have no joyful day or hour; for thou art our joy, and without thee my table is empty." Taken together these prayers of fellowship and of adoration may be contrasted with those more egoistic prayers in which the stress falls not on divine greatness or strength but on human need or gratification.

Prayers of thanksgiving, however superficially related to these prayers of adoration, yet differ from them in requiring a less exclusive absorption in God, in starting from the sense of human satisfaction, human delight, which is then attributed to God as cause: "O that men would praise the Lord," cries the psalmist, "for his goodness and for his wonderful works to the children of men." Prayers of thanksgiving belong to very primitive peoples; and in sacrifice one often finds concrete expression of gratitude. Such sacrifices, exemplified by first-fruits, ceremonials, and burnt offerings, are most often accompanied by verbal expressions. "Even the savage," Jevons asserts, "who simply says 'Here, Tari, I have brought you something to eat' is expressing thanks, albeit in savage fashion."¹⁶

Equally egoistic in their emphasis are the prayers of penitence, the acknowledgments of sin. For in these the worshipper's keenest consciousness is of his weakness, his guilt, his unworthiness. "O my God, my sins are many, great are my transgressions," is the confession of the sinner in one of the penitential psalms of the Babylonians.¹⁷ "I acknowledge my transgression and my sin is ever before me," says a Hebrew psalmist. Yet always, mingled with the consciousness of his own sin, the penitent has the vivid consciousness of God, else this were no religious experience, and the consciousness of intercourse with God, else it were no prayer. In penitential prayer I am conscious of my

¹⁶ Jevons, *op. cit.*, p. 183; cf. pp. 186-187.

¹⁷ Jastrow, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

weakness, my failure, my sin, not as a merely individual experience, and not simply as a contravention of human law, an attack on society, a wrong to my fellow-men, but in its relation to God. I am conscious of my weakness as contrasted with his strength, of my sin as opposition to his will. And I cry, in the acuteness of this personal contact of sinning soul with divine self, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned."

Penitential prayers are clearly allied to one of the forms of petition,—prayer for forgiveness. Sacrificial offerings for sin are the concrete manifestations of this yearning for pardon. Even the effort to bribe the god is in essence a prayer for pardon, even though it evidences a cleft between religion and morality. So the savage who says, "Here is a bit of the pig, good Hiero, take it and say nothing of it," expresses at the least his sense of the power of the god to deliver him from the consequence of wrong-doing.

But one need not turn to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures only for illustration of prayers for forgiveness quite devoid of the flavor of bribery and of intrigue. Here, for example, is an Aztec prayer: "O merciful Lord, let this chastisement with which thou hast visited us give us freedom from evil and follies."¹⁸ The following is quoted by Tylor from the *Rig-Veda*: "Through want of strength, thou strong and bright god, have I gone wrong; have mercy, almighty, have mercy."¹⁹ A Babylonian psalm, cited by Jastrow, contains a passionate confession of sin:

I seek for help, but no one takes my hand;
 I weep, but no one approaches me.
 I call aloud, but no one hears me.
 Full of woe, I grovel in the dust without looking up;
 To my merciful god I turn speaking with sighs.

To the known or unknown god do I speak with sighs,
 To the known or unknown goddess do I speak with sighs.
 O lord, look upon me, accept my lament;
 O goddess, look upon me, accept my lament.

One can compare with this no other than the familiar words of the Hebrew psalms: "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee:

¹⁸ Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 106; quoted from Sahagun, *Hist. de Nueva España*, lib. v.

¹⁹ *Rig-Veda*, vii, 89, 3; quoted by Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. ii, p. 374.

O Lord, hear my voice. . . . Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness, according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgression."

Of a second and ethically even higher type of petitionary prayer are the prayers for moral strength. In the petition, quoted by Brinton, of a Sioux Indian the prayer to be kept from sin is combined with a petition of the material sort. "O my grandfather, the Earth," the Indian prays, "I ask that thou givest me a long life and strength of body. When I go to war, let me capture many horses and kill many enemies. But in peace, let not anger enter my heart."²⁰ Tylor quotes an Aztec prayer for a newly made ruler: "Make him, Lord, as your true image, and permit him not to be proud and haughty in your throne and court."²¹ The psalms abound in such petitions: "Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens. Behold as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress, so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that he have mercy upon us."

We come finally to the petitions for material good. Unquestionably, prayers of this sort are most frequent, not merely among primitive peoples, but throughout the ages of prayer. These are the prayers for food, for raiment, for success in war and in love, and for length of life. Thus, the prayer of the Nootka Indian, "Let me live, not be sick, find the enemy, not fear him, find him asleep and kill a great many of him," closely resembles the petition of the Hebrew psalmist: "Let his days be few, . . . let his children be continually vagabonds and beg; let the extortioner catch all that he hath. . . . Let there be none to extend mercy unto him. . . . Let this be the reward of mine adversaries from the Lord. . . . But do thou for me, O God, the Lord, for thy name's sake." And that of the Gold Coast negro, "Give me rue and yams, gold and agries, . . . slaves, riches, and health," could be matched by many prayers offered in Christian churches.

Now these are the prayers which are characterized, by those who

²⁰ Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 106; quoted from Clark, *Indian Sign Language*, p. 309.

²¹ Tylor, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 373; quoted from Sahagun.

oppose the practice of prayer, as irrational or even immoral. Petition, it is said, unless it is an essentially futile, ejaculatory exercise, a device for relieving emotion by the aimless expressing of it, must involve belief in the possibility of obtaining its end. And this requires the assumption that the eternal purposes can be altered for the caprice or the wish of the individual. How can I rationally pray for favorable weather, for riches, for personal success? Either the satisfaction of my wish is already inevitable, or I must believe that I can deflect the divine purpose. In full agreement with this protest, I hold that prayers for concrete and individual good are inconsistent alike with the deterministic hypothesis underlying all natural science, with any absolutist philosophy, and with the form of theism which conceives of God's purposes as eternal. Such prayers are, in fact, irrational forms of the essentially reasonable expression of the consciousness of our dependence on God and of his interest in our concerns.

But this unqualified acknowledgment of the crude and unjustified demand for material and selfish good involves no searching criticism of prayer as such. For, as we have found, historical investigation and psychological analysis unite in the demonstration that prayer is more than petition. Prayers of fellowship and adoration and petitions for spiritual goods, obviously assume no reversal of God's purpose, no opposition to the common good in the interest of any one person. And even petition for individual and material good is rational and morally justifiable if it be fused with the conscious submission of human to divine will. A prayer of the Khonds, a tribe of Northern India, reads: "O Lord, we know not what is good for us. Thou knowest it. For it we pray."²² This recalls the prayer of Fénelon, "Lord, I know not what I ought to ask of thee; thou only knowest what I need. . . . Behold my needs which I know not myself. . . . Smite or heal; depress me or raise me up; I adore all thy purposes without knowing them; I am silent. . . . I yield myself to thee. I would have no other desire than to accomplish thy will. Teach me to pray. Pray thyself in me."²³ So Socrates "prayed simply for things good, because the gods knew best what is good;"²⁴

²² Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 105; cf. Jevons, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

²³ Fénelon.

²⁴ *Memorabilia*, i, 3 2.

and St. Paul says that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the spirit itself maketh intercession for us." Frederick Robertson has said, "That prayer which does not succeed in moderating our wish, in changing the passionate desire into still submission, the anxious, tumultuous expectation into silent surrender, is no true prayer, and proves that we have not the spirit of true prayer. That life is most holy in which there is least of petition and desire, and most of waiting upon God; that in which petition most often passes into thanksgiving." In prayer like this, petition itself has become acceptance. I do not merely surrender my will, I identify my will with God's, if I pray, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight."

Petitions of this sort, the free expression to God, our heavenly Father, of those wishes and desires which we know that he knows and which yet we pour out before him in the great personal instinct of complete intercourse, petitions in which the passion of desire is fused with loyal adoption of God's purpose and with full submission to his will, most clearly show the essential meaning of answers to prayer. The term is usually taken to designate the instances in which prayer for material good is followed by the happening of the event prayed for. And discussions of the answers to prayer, on the one hand, heap up instances of material health and wealth and prosperity following on specific petitions, and, on the other hand, insist that the rational order of the universe cannot be conceived as broken to meet individual need, and that these alleged "answers" are one and all coincidences. With the whole weary controversy we have no concern. For it utterly mistakes the nature of God's answer to prayer. Answer to prayer is, essentially, the recognition of the human by the divine self, the reaction of the divine on the human, the response of God's love to human love and trust. In a word, God's answer to prayer is God's consciousness of the human self as turning to God. The conviction that prayer is, in this sense, answered is indeed an inherent factor in prayer. In the words of James, "The intercourse is realized as mutual. . . . The conviction that something is genuinely transacted is the very core of living religion."²⁵

²⁵ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 466, note 2; cf. p. 477, note 2.

The relation thus conceived between man and God is, it must be insisted, harmonizable with theistic religion—and, I may add, with personalistic philosophy of every type, pluralist or absolutist. For, granting the existence of divine and human selves, the analogy of human experience shows the possibility—nay, the necessity—of the reciprocal relation of spirit to spirit. Not, then, through any acceptance of a special revelation, but through the recognition of the inevitableness of the relation of intercourse between spirits, Tennyson cries,—

“Speak to him, thou, for he hears, and spirit with spirit can meet;
Closer is he than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.”

Up to this point, prayer has been discussed as relation of the single worshipper to God. But it is evident that this analysis of prayer is in no way opposed to the prevalent teaching that prayer and sacrament and religious rite are social in their origin. Thus Jevons asserts that “public worship has been from the beginning the condition without which private worship could not begin and without which private worship cannot continue”;²⁶ and more recently E. S. Ames argues that “these ceremonials are social and therefore have the massive and corporate value of the entire community consciousness.”²⁷ Not only, indeed, the primitive but the developed religious consciousness may be truly “social.” For in spite of the unassailable privacy of the relation between me, the worshipper, and God, there may yet be fused with my awareness of this individual relation the consciousness of other selves related, as I am related, to God. Of course, this feeling—the experience of sympathy or sharing—implies the recognition of a common God. Such an experience finds expression in the well-known prayer of Robert Louis Stevenson: “We beseech thee, Lord, to behold us with favor, folk of many families gathered together in the peace of this roof, weak men and women subsisting under the covert of thy patience.” This is the expression of feeling which one could not have toward one’s own particular guardian spirit, or *daimon*; the feeling, on the other hand, of a family to a household or patriarchal god; of the

²⁶ An Introduction to the Study of Comparative Religion, p. 176.

²⁷ The Psychology of Religious Experience, p. 72, note 2.

members of a tribe to a tribal god; in a word, of the members of a community to the community god. It is a feeling widening indeed with every enlarging conception of God until at last, it becomes a consciousness "of the union of the world of all spirits,"²⁸ and incarnates itself in the universal prayer to Our Father.

This consciousness of other selves in common relation to God is the essential mark of public worship. It may appear in various stages and grades of intensity and clearness,—as an emotional consciousness of myself affected by these other selves in common relation to God, or as a developed and reflective consciousness, a realization of myself as member of a social organization, of a church or religious community. "O God"—we pray in these moments when we are profoundly conscious of ourselves and of all mankind in universal relation to the divine self—"O God, who art and wast and art to come, before whose face the generations rise and pass away; age after age the living seek thee, and find that of thy faithfulness there is no end. Our fathers in their pilgrimage walked by thy guidance and rested on thy compassion; still to their children be thou the cloud by day, the fire by night. O thou Sole Source of peace and righteousness, join us in one communion with thy prophets and saints who have trusted in thee."²⁹

Such a reflective consciousness of the network of human relations may, it is true, conceivably crowd out the God-consciousness from which it sprang—and we have then ecclesiasticism and institutionalism without religion, husk without kernel. At the other extreme, the worshipper may be utterly inattentive to his fellow, primarily conscious only of his individual relation to God, yet even here he is affected in spite of himself by the emotion and the loyalty expressed in common rites, and even by the bare presence of his fellow-worshippers. The justification of public worship is, indeed, primarily this admitted contagiousness of emotion, this suggestibility of the individual through the social group.

But neither the vividness of the experience of public worship nor the possibility, or even probability, that purely social rites

²⁸ James, *op. cit.*, p. 231, note.

²⁹ James Martineau.

antedated prayers to a God, treated as personal, justify the conclusion of Ames and King and other contemporary writers, that religion is a purely social experience, "the consciousness of the highest social values, the social attitude of solidarity."³⁰ Such a conclusion unduly obliterates the widely recognized distinction between the merely social and the religious experience, and is with difficulty reconciled, even by its advocates, with the records of primitive religions.³¹ Let it be granted that the community-meal preceded and grew into the tribal sacrifice, and that the prayer resembles the earlier incantation. Yet neither form of words nor feast becomes religious until it involves "the very movement itself of the soul putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence."

³⁰ Ames, *op. cit.*, pp. 144, 168.

³¹ Cf. Ames, *op. cit.*, p. 134: "Prayer appears to justify the belief in supernatural beings." Cf. Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie, Mythos und Religion*, 3ter Teil, for the explicit distinction between the primitive social and moral consciousness and primitive religion. Wundt says, for example: "Die Keime des Sittlichen [liegen] zunächst ausserhalb des Gebiets religiöser Betätigung (p. 690). . . . Die [Wurzel] der Religion ist die . . . Idee des Uebersinnlichen; die der Sittlichkeit liegt zunächst in den sinnlichen Affekten (p. 751)."