

Modes of Prayer

The most elementary mode of orison—of contact between man and God—is no doubt prayer in the most ordinary sense of the word, that is, the direct expression of the individual, of his desires and fears, his hopes and gratitude. This prayer, however, is less perfect than canonical prayer, which has a universal character by virtue of the fact that God is its author and that the reciting subject is not a particular individual, but man as such, the human species; thus canonical prayer contains nothing that does not concern man, every man, and this is as much as to say that it includes “eminently” or in addition all possible individual prayers; it can even render them unnecessary, and in fact the Revelations permit or recommend individual prayer, but do not impose it. Canonical prayer shows its universality and timeless value by being expressed very often in the first person plural and also by its preference for using a sacred or liturgical and therefore symbolically universal language, so that it is impossible for whoever recites it not to pray for all and in all.

As to individual prayer, the reason for its existence is incontestably to be found in our nature, since individuals do in fact differ from one another and have different destinies and desires.¹ The aim of this prayer is not only the securing of particular favors, but also the purification of the soul: it loosens psychic knots or, in other words, dissolves subconscious coagulations and drains away many secret poisons; it sets forth before God the difficulties, failures, and tensions of the soul, which presupposes that the soul be humble and truthful, and this disclosure, carried out in the face of the Absolute,

¹ With the *Avatāras* every personal prayer becomes polyvalent and canonical, as is shown by the Psalms, for example; but these great Messengers give us at the same time the example of spontaneous prayer, since they seldom repeat the prayers of others, and they show us in any case that canonical prayer must be said with spontaneity, as if it were the first or last prayer of our life.

has the virtue of reestablishing equilibrium and restoring peace—in a word, of opening us to grace.² All this is offered us as well and *a fortiori* by canonical prayer, but the human spirit is in general too weak to extract from it all the remedies it contains.

The personal character of non-canonical prayer does not imply that it is free from rules, for the human soul—as the Psalms admirably show—is always the same in its miseries and joys, and therefore in its duties towards God; it is not enough for a man to formulate his petition: he must also express his gratitude, resignation, regret, resolution, praise. In petition man is seeking some favor, provided that it is of a nature agreeable to God, thus to the universal Norm; thankfulness is the consciousness that every favor of destiny is a grace that might not have been given; and while it is true that man always has something to ask, it is just as true, to say the least, that he always has reasons for gratitude, without which no prayer is possible. Resignation is the anticipated acceptance of the non-fulfillment of some request; regret or contrition—the asking of pardon—implies consciousness of what puts us in opposition to the divine Will; resolution is the desire to remedy some particular transgression, for our weakness must not make us forget we are free;³ finally, praise means not only that we relate every value to its ultimate Source, but also that we look upon every trial in light of its necessity or usefulness, or in its aspect of fatality and grace. Petition is a capital element of prayer because we can do nothing without the help of God; a resolution offers no guarantee—as the example of Saint Peter shows—if we do not ask for this help.

² The sacrament of penance is founded upon these facts, adding to them the particular, compensatory power of celestial grace. Psychoanalysis offers an analogous process, but in a satanic form, for it replaces the supernatural by the infra-natural: in place of God it puts the blind, dark, and inhuman aspects of nature. Evil for psychoanalysts is not what is contrary to God and the final ends of man, but what troubles the soul, even if the cause of disquiet is beneficial; thus the equilibrium resulting from psychoanalysis is basically of an animal order, and this is entirely contrary to the requirements of our immortality. In man imbalances can and must be resolved for the sake of a higher equilibrium that conforms to a spiritual hierarchy of values, and not in some quasi-vegetative state of bliss; a human evil cannot be cured outside of God.

³ Logically, regret and resolution are inseparable, but regret can be conceived without resolution, and this is lukewarmness or despair, as also resolution without regret, and this is pride, unless it is based upon wisdom. It is not a question here primarily of sentimentality, but of attitudes of the will, whether or not these are accompanied by feelings.

Modes of Prayer

* * *

Another mode of orison is meditation; contact between man and God here becomes contact between intelligence and Truth, or relative truths contemplated in view of the Absolute. There is a certain outward analogy between meditation and individual prayer in that man formulates his thought spontaneously in both cases; the difference, which is infinitely more important, is that meditation is objective and intellectual—unless it is a question of imaginative, even sentimental, reflections, which are not what we have in mind here—whereas prayer is subjective and volitive. In meditation, the aim is knowledge, hence a reality that in principle goes beyond the ego as such; the thinking subject is then, strictly speaking, the impersonal intelligence, thus man and God at the same time, pure intelligence being the point of intersection between human reason and the divine Intellect.

Meditation acts on the one hand upon the intelligence, in which it “awakens” certain consubstantial “memories”, and on the other hand upon the subconscious imagination, which ends up incorporating into itself the truths meditated upon, resulting in a fundamental and quasi-organic process of persuasion. Experience proves that a man can do great things even in unfavorable circumstances provided that he believes himself capable of accomplishing them, whereas another, more gifted perhaps but doubting himself, will do nothing even in favorable conditions; man walks fearlessly on flat ground, but imagination may prevent his taking a single step when he has to pass between two chasms. By this one can see the importance of meditation even simply from the point of view of autosuggestion; in the spiritual life as in other domains, it is a precious help to be deeply convinced both as to the things toward which we are tending and of our capacity to attain them, with the help of God.

Meditation—as defined in Vedantic terms—is essentially “investigation” (*vichâra*), which leads to the assimilation of theoretical truth and then to “discernment” (*viveka*) between the Real and the unreal; there are two levels here, one ontological and dualist and the other centered on Beyond-Being or the Self, and consequently non-dualist; this is the entire difference between *bhakti* and *jñâna*.

Pure concentration is also orison if it has a traditional basis and is centered on the Divine; this concentration is none other

than silence,⁴ which itself has been called a “Name of the Buddha” because of its connection with the idea of emptiness.⁵

* * *

We have distinguished canonical prayer from individual prayer by saying that it is a particular individual who is the subject in the second, whereas the subject is man as such in the first; now there is a form of orison wherein God Himself is the subject in a certain way, and this is the pronouncing of a revealed divine Name.⁶ The foundation of this mystery is, on the one hand, that “God and His Name are identical” (Ramakrishna) and, on the other hand, that God Himself pronounces His Name in Himself, thus in eternity and outside all creation, so that His unique and uncreated Word is the prototype of ejaculatory prayer and even, in a less direct sense, of all orison. The first distinction that the Intellect conceives in the divine nature is that of Beyond-Being and Being; now since Being is as it were the “crystallization” of Beyond-Being, it is like the “Word” of the Absolute, through which the Absolute expresses itself, determines itself, or names itself.⁷ Another distinction that is essential

⁴ “The Father spoke one word, and this Word was his Son, and this Word He utters without end in an eternal silence, and in this silence the soul hears it” (Saint John of the Cross, *Spiritual Maxims and Counsels*, 307).

⁵ *Shūnyamūrti*, “Manifestation of the Void”, is one of the Names of the Buddha. The silent prayer of the North American Indians, which presupposes a symbolist outlook and the framework of virgin Nature, offers striking analogies with Zen.

⁶ In his *Cudgel for Illusion*, Shankara sings: “Control thy soul, restrain thy breathing, distinguish the transitory from the True, repeat the holy Name of God, and thus calm the agitated mind. To this universal rule apply thyself with all thy heart and all thy soul.” The connection between metaphysical discrimination and the practice of invocation is one of capital importance. We find the same connection in this *Stanza on the Ochre Robe* (of *sannyāsins*), also by Shankara: “Singing *Brahma*, the word of Deliverance, meditating uniquely on ‘I am *Brahma*’, living on alms and wandering freely, blessed certainly is the wearer of the ochre robe.”

⁷ In the Torah, God says to Moses: “I am that I am” (*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*); this refers to God as Being, for it is only as Being that God creates, speaks, and legislates, since the world exists only in relation to Being. In the Koran, this same utterance is rendered as follows: “I am God” (*Anā Llāh*); this means that Being (*Anā*, “I”) is derived from Beyond-Being (*Allāh*, this Name designating the Divinity in all its aspects without any restriction); thus the Koranic formula refers to the divine Prototype of the pronunciation of the Name of God. *Anā Llāh* signifies implicitly that “God and His Name are identical”—since Being “is” Beyond-Being inasmuch as it is its “Name”—and for the same reason the “Son” is God while not being the

Modes of Prayer

here, one which is derived from the preceding by principal succession,⁸ is that between God and the world, the Creator and creation: just as Being is the Word or Name of Beyond-Being, so too the world—or Existence—is the Word of Being, of the “personal God”; the effect is always the “name” of the cause.⁹

But whereas God, in naming Himself, first determines Himself as Being and second, starting from Being, manifests Himself as Creation—that is, He manifests Himself “within the framework of nothingness” or “outside Himself”, thus “in illusory mode”¹⁰—man for his part follows the opposite movement when pronouncing the same Name, for this Name is not only Being and Creation, but also Mercy and Redemption; in man it does not create, but on the contrary “unmakes”, and it does this in a divine manner inasmuch as it brings man back to the Principle. The divine Name is a metaphysical “isthmus”—in the sense of the Arabic word *barzakh*: “seen by God” it is determination, limitation, “sacrifice”; seen by man, it is liberation, limitlessness, plenitude. We have said that this Name, invoked by man, is nonetheless always pronounced by God; human invocation is only the “outward” effect of an eternal and “inward” invocation by the Divinity. The same holds true for every other Revelation: it is sacrificial for the divine Spirit and liberating for man; Revelation, whatever its form or mode, is “descent” or “incarnation” for the Creator and “ascent” or “ex-carnation” for the creature.¹¹

“Father”. What gives metaphysical force to the Hebraic formula is the return of “being” to itself; and what gives force to the Arabic formula is the juxtaposition, without copula, of “subject” and “object”.

⁸ By “descent” (*tanazzulah*) as Sufis would say.

⁹ This relationship is repeated on the plane of Being itself, where it is necessary to distinguish between the “Father” and the “Son”—or between “Power” and “Wisdom”—the “Holy Spirit” being intrinsically “Beatitude-Love” and extrinsically “Goodness” or “Radiation”. This is the “horizontal” or ontological perspective of the Trinity; according to the “vertical” or gnostic perspective—ante-Nicene one might say—it would be said that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from Beyond-Being as All-Possibility and “dwells” in Being as the totality of creative possibilities, while “radiating” forth into Existence, which is related to the concept of “creation by love”.

¹⁰ It is absurd to reproach Creation for not being perfect, that is, for not being divine, hence uncreated. God cannot will that the world should be and at the same time that it should not be the world.

¹¹ In Japanese Amidism, there have been controversies over the question of whether invocations of the Buddha must be innumerable or whether on the contrary one single invocation suffices for salvation, the sole condition in both cases being

The sufficient reason for the invocation of the Name is the “remembering of God”; in the final analysis this is nothing other than consciousness of the Absolute. The Name actualizes this consciousness and, in the end, perpetuates it in the soul and fixes it in the heart, so that it penetrates the whole being and at the same time transmutes and absorbs it. Consciousness of the Absolute is the prerogative of human intelligence and also its aim.

Or again: we are united to the One by our being, by our pure consciousness, and by the symbol. It is by the symbol—the Word—that man, in central and quintessential prayer, realizes both Being and Consciousness, Consciousness in Being and conversely. The perfection of Being, which is Extinction, is prefigured by deep sleep and also, in other ways, by beauty and virtue; the perfection of Consciousness, which is Identity—or Union, if one prefers—is prefigured by concentration, and also *a priori* by intelligence and contemplation. Beauty does not produce virtue, of course, but it favors in a certain way a pre-existing virtue; likewise intelligence does not produce contemplation, but it broadens or deepens a contemplation that is natural. Being is passive perfection and Consciousness active perfection. “I sleep, but my heart waketh.”

* * *

Why is Being “Word” or “Name”¹² rather than “Thought”, “Act”, “Sacrifice”, and why is ejaculatory prayer not thought, act, sacrifice, and so forth? In the first place it is quite true that Being has all these aspects, and many others as well; these aspects are to be found in every Revelation. Nonetheless, speech realizes all possible aspects of affirmation, and it has a kind of pre-eminence in that it is the feature most notably distinguishing man from animal. Speech implies

a perfect faith and—as a function of that faith—abstention from evil or the sincere intention to abstain. In the first case invocation is viewed from the human side, that is, from the standpoint of duration, whereas in the second case it is conceived in its principial, hence divine and therefore timeless, reality; *Jōdo-Shinshū*, like Hindu *japa-yoga*, combines both perspectives.

¹² Meister Eckhart says in his commentary on the Gospel of John, “The Father neither sees, nor hears, nor speaks, nor wishes anything but His own Name. It is by means of His Name that the Father sees, hears, and manifests Himself. The Name contains all things. Essence of Divinity, it is the Father Himself. . . . The Father gives thee His eternal Name, and it is His own life, His being, and His divinity that He gives thee in one single instant by His Name.”

Modes of Prayer

thought since it is an exteriorization, but thought does not imply speech; in an analogous fashion speech, which itself is an act, adds to action a new dimension of intelligibility. Similarly, speech has a sacrificial side in that it limits what it expresses; and as for ejaculatory prayer—which, being speech, is at the same time thought, act, and sacrifice—it includes yet another sacrificial or ascetical aspect in that it excludes every other preoccupation of the heart and is thereby a form of “poverty” or *vacare Deo*. Or again: man, in being born, manifests his voice before any other faculty, and though this cry is undoubtedly unconscious, it is already a prayer insofar as it is a prefiguration or symbol; the same is true for the last gasp of the dying man or his last breath, since voice and breath refer to the same symbolism.

It goes without saying that every normal activity reflects in its way the eternal Act of God: thus a weaver could say that Being is the first divine “fabric” in the sense that Beyond-Being weaves into it the principal possibilities—the “divine Names”—and that Being in its turn weaves the existential manifestations, hence Angels, worlds, beings;¹³ not every man is a weaver, but every man speaks, which clearly shows that speech has priority over secondary and more or less “accidental” activities; such activities are too outward to be assimilated into “prayers”, and yet they can be the vehicle of prayer by virtue of their symbolic quality.¹⁴ In other words, any kind of occupation, whether a craft or otherwise—provided it is “natural”—can be a spiritual support, thanks not only to the symbolism inherent in it, which would not suffice by itself, but above all to the contemplative orison that is superimposed on it, which actualizes the value of the symbol.

* * *

The principle according to which “prayer of the heart” is able to replace all other rites—on condition of sufficient spiritual matu-

¹³ It is this second proposition that the artisan will adopt in fact, the first belonging to the province of pure metaphysics and not necessarily entering into the outlook of a craft initiation, the basis of which is cosmological.

¹⁴ It is thus that one ought to understand every fundamental and naturally “ritual” activity, the gesture of the sower, for example, or the work of the mason; is it not God who sows cosmic possibilities in the *Materia prima* and truths and graces in the soul, and is He not the “Great Architect of the Universe”?

rity—is to be found in Hesychasm, but it is emphasized much more in Hindu and Buddhist paths, where the abandonment of general ritual prayers and practices is considered normal and sometimes even a *conditio sine qua non*. The profound reason for this is that it is necessary to distinguish between the realm of the “divine Will” and that of the “divine Nature”; the latter “is what it is” and is expressed by the Name alone, whereas the former projects into the human world differentiated—and necessarily relative—wills and is expressed by complex prayers corresponding to the complexity of human nature.¹⁵ Rites, however—especially those having a purifying or sacramental character—can be looked upon as necessary aids for prayer of the heart; this belongs to a point of view deriving from a perspective differing from the one just envisaged and better suited to certain temperaments.

We would doubtless hesitate to speak of these things if others—Europeans as well as Asians—did not speak of them, and if we were not living at a time when all sorts of testimonies are demanded and when the compensating Mercy simplifies many things, though this cannot mean that everything will become easily accessible. It is obvious that a spiritual means has significance only within the rules assigned to it by the tradition that offers it, whether it is a question of outward or inward rules; nothing is more dangerous than to undertake “improvisations” in this field. This reservation will not fail to surprise those who hold that man is free in all respects before God, and who will ask by what right we seek to subject prayer to conditions and to enclose it in frameworks; the response is simple, and it is the Bible itself that gives it: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain” (Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:11). Now man is *a priori* “vain” according to certain spiritual criteria, those precisely that apply when it is a question of direct and “mystagogical” methods; man is thus not absolutely free, even apart from the fact that absolute Freedom belongs to God alone. Only what is given by Him has value for salvation, not what is taken by man; now it

¹⁵ Here is the whole difference between form and essence, which penetrates every domain. If “in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage”, this relates to mode or form, not essence; if on the other hand Paradise shelters the houris, this relates to essence and not to mode; and it is in relation to essence that Saint Bernard could speak of “torrents of voluptuous delight”.

Modes of Prayer

is God who has revealed His Names, and it is He who determines their usage; and if, according to the Apostle, “whosoever shall eat this [divine] bread unworthily eateth damnation to himself” (1 Cor. 11:27-29), the same holds true for the presumptuous use of ejaculatory prayers.

This being acknowledged, we can return to the positive side of the question: in whatever degree it may be opportune, according to circumstances and surroundings, ejaculatory prayer results finally from these two requirements: perfection and continuity. “Pray without ceasing,” says the Apostle (1 Thess. 5:17),¹⁶ and again: “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom. 8:26).¹⁷

¹⁶ Basing himself on the Gospel: “And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1); “Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things” (Luke 21:36). Saint Bernardino of Siena says in a sermon that “the name [of Jesus] is origin without origin” and that it is “as worthy of praise as God Himself”; and again: “Everything that God has created for the salvation of the world is hidden in this Name of Jesus” (Saint Bernardino of Siena, *Le Prediche Volgari*, ed. P. Ciro Cannarozzi). It is not by chance that Bernardino gave to his monogram of the Name of Jesus the appearance of a monstrance: the divine Name, carried in thought and in the heart, through the world and through life, is like the Holy Sacrament carried in procession. This monogram—I H S, signifying *Iesous*, but interpreted in Latin as *In Hoc Signo* or as *Jesus Hominum Salvator* and often written in Gothic letters—can be broken down in its primitive form into three elements: a vertical straight line, two vertical lines linked together, and a curved line; and thus it contains a symbolism at once metaphysical, cosmological, and mystical; there is in it a remarkable analogy, not only with the name *Allâh* written in Arabic, which also comprises the three lines of which we have just spoken (in the form of the *alif*, the two *lams*, and the *hâ*), but also with the Sanskrit monosyllable *Aum*, which is composed of three *mâtrâs* (A U M), indicating a “rolling up” and thereby a return to the Center. All these symbols mark, in a certain sense, the passage from “coagulation” to “solution”.

¹⁷ “At all times let us invoke Him, the object of our meditations, in order that our mind may always be absorbed in Him and our attention concentrated on Him daily” (Nicholas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*). What invocation of the divine Name is for other prayers, the Eucharist is for the other sacraments: “One receives the Eucharist last precisely because one can go no further, add nothing to it: for clearly the first term implies the next, and this in turn the last. Now after the Eucharist there is nothing further toward which one could tend: a stop must be made there and thought given to the means of keeping, to the end, the good acquired” (*Life in Christ*).

* * *

Divine Names have meanings that are at once particular, since they belong to a revealed language, and universal, since they refer to the supreme Principle. To invoke a Divinity is to enunciate a doctrine: he who says “Jesus” says implicitly that “Christ is God”,¹⁸ which means that God “descended” in order that man might “ascend”;¹⁹ moreover, to say that “God became man” means at the same time that man is fallen, since the sufficient reason for the divine descent is the fact that man exists “below”; God is “made flesh” because man is “flesh”, and flesh signifies fall, passion, and destitution. Christianity takes its starting point in the volitive aspect of man; it grafts itself so to speak, not upon the fundamentally theomorphic properties of our nature, but upon the “accident” of our fall, which in practice is decisive for most believers; but starting from this point of view—and this is of capital importance—the Christian tradition can open the door to *gnosis* and thus rejoin perspectives that are founded on the intellectual theomorphism of the human being, and this is because of the evident—and dazzling—analogy between Christ and the Intellect, as well as the idea of “deification” that is derived from it.

To say that “God became man that man might become God”²⁰ means in the final analysis—if we wish to pursue this reciprocity to

¹⁸ That is to say, “Christ alone is God”—not “God is Christ”—just as the sun alone is “our sun”, the sun of our planetary system. We need not here return to the question—non-existent in practice for the vast majority of ancient, and even modern, Christians—of knowing where the boundaries of that “planetary system” which is Christianity are drawn; this involves the whole problem of the refraction of the celestial in the terrestrial or, more precisely, the concordance between the divine Light and different human receptacles.

¹⁹ And because the Absolute has entered into man, into space, into time, the world and history have become as if absolute, whence the danger of an anti-metaphysical conception of the “real” or the temptation of involving God—the Absolute insofar as it has become in a sense human or historical—in the “current of forms”; this is not unconnected with a theological “personalism” that would seek to substitute the humanized divine for the Divine in itself, which is revealed to the pure Intellect. When we say “absolute” in speaking about the Word or Being, it is not through failing to recognize that these aspects belong metaphysically to the relative domain, whose summit *in divinis* they mark, but because, in relation to the cosmos, every aspect of God is absolute.

²⁰ Saint Irenaeus: “Because of His boundless love, God made Himself what we are in order to make us what He is.”

Modes of Prayer

its ultimate foundations—that Reality has entered into nothingness that nothingness might become real. If it is objected here that nothingness, being nothing, can play no part, we would respond with two questions: how is the existence of the very idea of nothingness to be explained? How is there a “nothing” on the level of relativities and in everyday experience? Nothingness has neither being nor existence, certainly, but it is nonetheless a kind of metaphysical “direction”, something we are able to conceive and pursue, though never attain; “evil” is none other than “nothingness manifested” or “the impossible made possible”. Evil never lives from its own substance, which is non-existent, but it corrodes or perverts the good, just as disease could not exist without the body that it tends to destroy; according to Saint Thomas, evil is there to allow the coming of a greater good, and in fact qualities need corresponding privations to enable them to be affirmed distinctively and separately.

But the Christic reciprocity has above all a meaning of love, considering its emphasis on saving effectiveness: the Name of Christ signifies that God loved the world in order that the world might love God; and since God loves the world, man must love his neighbor, thus repeating God’s love on the human plane. Likewise, man must “lose his life” because God sacrificed Himself for him;²¹ the cross is the instrument and symbol of this sacrificial meeting, the point of intersection as it were between the human and the Divine. Christianity presents itself above all as a volitive reciprocity between Heaven and Earth, not as an intellective distinction between the Absolute and the relative; but this distinction is nonetheless implicit in the reciprocity as such, so that the Christian perspective cannot exclude it: the Subject makes itself object that the object might become Subject, which is the very definition of the mystery of knowledge. *Gnosis* is based—“organically” and not artificially—on the polyvalent symbolism of the Incarnation and the Redemption, which implies that such a “symbiosis” is in the nature of things and consequently within the “divine intention”.

The Name of Christ is “Truth” and “Mercy”; however, this second quality is crystallized in a particular fashion in the Name of

²¹ In the Eucharistic rite, man eats or drinks God in order to be eaten or drunk by Him; the “elect of the elect” are those who drink and are consumed in a divine wine where there is no longer either “Thee” or “Me”.

the Virgin, so that the two Names appear like a polarization of the divine Light. Christ is “Truth and Power” and the Virgin, “Mercy and Purity”.²²

* * *

Before going further, we must insert a parenthesis: in one of our previous works we said that a Christian can only be either a child of his times or a saint, while a Muslim—or a Jew—can be either an exoterist or an esoterist, and that it is only by virtue of this second quality that he realizes sanctity; in Islam, we said, there is no sanctity outside esoterism, and in Christianity there is no esoterism outside sanctity.²³ To understand this properly, it is necessary to recall that the exoterism transcended by Christ, logically and in principle, is the Mosaic Law; now this Law, like every exoterism properly so called—and consequently like the Muslim *shari'ah*—requires essentially the sincere²⁴ observance of a body of prescriptions, whereas Christianity aims at replacing the “external” Law or the “letter” by a “personal” and qualitative attitude, while becoming dogmatist in its turn.²⁵ This partial and conditional “coagulation” is due,

²² In many icons the Blessed Virgin expresses mercy by the inclined and spiral-like movement of her posture, whereas the severity of her facial expression indicates purity in its aspect of inviolability; other icons express solely this purity, emphasizing the severity of the features by a very upright position; others again express mercy alone, combining the inclination of the body with sweetness of expression.

²³ “Contours of the Spirit”, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*.

²⁴ Without this element of sincerity, which results from faith, the observance of these prescriptions would be of no use.

²⁵ It is doubtless this dogmatization or “crystallization” of an initiatic “wine” that causes Muslims, who like the Jews are guardians of an exoterism *de jure*, to say that the Christian message (*risâlah*) became “corrupted”—a quite exoteric definition to be sure, but instructive from the point of view that interests us here. Let us recall that for the Sufis, Christ brought only a *haqîqah* (an “inward” truth), an idea that is in any case proper to Islam as such, since to the saying of Christ: “My kingdom is not of this world”, the Prophet in a sense “replies” when he says: “I bring you not only the goods of the other world; I bring you those of this world as well”, namely, definite rules for individual and social behavior. As we wrote in one of our previous works: “If esoterism does not concern everyone, it is for the reason, analogically speaking, that light penetrates some substances and not others; but on the other hand, if esoterism must manifest itself openly from time to time, as happened in the case of Christ, and at a lesser degree of universality in the case of al-Hallaj, it is, still by analogy, because the sun illuminates everything without distinction. Thus, if the ‘Light shineth in darkness’ in the principal or universal sense we are concerned with here, this is because in so doing it manifests one of its possibilities,

Modes of Prayer

not to unforeseen circumstances—which are excluded in such a case—but to the original intention of the divine Founder, who sent the Apostles to “teach all nations”; now sanctity brings this *de facto* exoterism back to its essence, which is an esoterism “by right”—on the plane of love and in opposition to the outwardness of the Jewish Law²⁶—and this is what allowed us to write that there is no Christian, “bhaktic” esoterism outside sanctity. But there is yet another dimension to be considered: Christianity also includes an esoterism in the absolute sense, and this is precisely *gnosis* or “theosophy”,²⁷ thus it is not only sanctity with a volitive and emotional basis, but also sapiential doctrine, and with all the more reason the sanctity connected to it, which we may describe as “esoterism”—if we have a reason for using this term, which in itself is irreproachable; and let us recall in this context the correlation between the “Peace” of Christ and pure contemplation.²⁸ *Gnosis*, while in a certain way transcending “faith” and “love”—since knowledge finally goes beyond thought and will—represents in another respect a mode of faith and love that is virtually divine.

* * *

In Islam, the implicit doctrine of the Name of God is Unity; by “Unity” one must understand that God is the Absolute and that there is only one Absolute; it is this aspect of overwhelming obvi-

and a possibility, by definition, is something that cannot not be, being an aspect of the absolute necessity of the divine Principle” (“The Particular Nature and Universality of the Christian Tradition”, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*). This exotericization of an esoterism was for the West the last hope of salvation, other traditional structures being for it either outworn or completely inapplicable; but this “anomaly”—although quite providential—was at the same time indirectly, and through a kind of “rebound”, the cause of the “offence which must needs come”, and this alone can explain the multitude and extent of errors in the West, or such paradoxical features as the habit of swearing and blaspheming, which is singularly widespread in Christian lands, but unknown in the East. This was what Islam, which seeks to be a normative totality and a timeless equilibrium, implicitly foresaw.

²⁶ What is in question here is not the Cabala, which, in being what *Moysi doctrina velat*, is a kind of “Christianity before its time”, at least in certain respects.

²⁷ Genuine “theosophy” is to theology what *gnosis* is to faith, although from another point of view *gnosis* and theosophy cannot be situated outside faith and theology respectively.

²⁸ We have treated all these questions in the chapter “Knowledge and Love” in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*.

ousness or absoluteness which “unifies”, that is, transmutes and delivers. He who says *Allâh* says, “There is no Truth or Absolute but the one Truth, the one Absolute”—to paraphrase the *Shahâdah*: *lâ ilâha illâ 'Llâh*—or in Vedantic terms: “The world is false; *Brahma* is real”; or again: “Nothing is evident except the Absolute.” And this amounts to saying that Islam takes its starting point not in our fallen and passionnal nature, but in the theomorphic and inalterable character of our humanity, thus in what distinguishes us from the animal, namely, an objective and in principle limitless intelligence; now the normal content of the intelligence—that for which it is made—is the Absolute-Infinite; in a word, man is intelligence at once integral and transcendent, “horizontal” and “vertical”, and the essential content of this intelligence is at the same time our deliverance: man is delivered by consciousness of the Absolute, his salvation being the remembrance of God.

Consequently, the simple fact that we are men obliges us to “become One”; we have no choice, for we cannot demand that destiny turn us into birds or flowers; we are condemned to the Infinite. A receptacle necessitates a content: if there were no water, milk, or wine, then jugs and waterskins would have no right to exist; likewise for our spirit, which is made in order that it might know the Evidence that delivers. The human state calls for a “knowing”, and this knowing calls for a “being”: to believe “sincerely” what the Name *Allâh* implies—that *lâ ilâha illâ 'Llâh*—is at the same time to assume the consequences of this conviction and to profess, by practicing it, Unity on all planes, social as well as spiritual; that which is normative, on whatever plane—namely, an element of equilibrium or union²⁹—reveals itself by that very fact as a manifestation of Unity or a participation in it. There is no *îmân* (unitary “faith”) without *islâm* (“submission” to the Law), and there is neither one nor the other without *ihsân* (spiritual “virtue”), that is, without profound understanding or realization; whoever accepts the One has already given himself (*aslama*) to Him, unless he is to lose himself in a

²⁹ Equilibrium as regards the collectivity and union as regards the individual; but there is no radical division here, for the individual also needs equilibrium, and the collectivity participates in its way, by religion, in union. To say that the collectivity is something other than the individual does not mean that there is a radical incompatibility, or that these two poles of the human condition do not influence each other. Morals are the asceticism of the collectivity, just as asceticism constitutes the morals of the individual.

Modes of Prayer

mortal hypocrisy (*nifâq*).³⁰ To admit the existence of some relativity may obligate one to nothing or may obligate one to a merely relative position; to admit the Absolute obligates a man totally.

But the Name *Allâh*, besides its aspect of Truth or Evidence, also includes an aspect of Mercy, and it is then equivalent to the formula of consecration: “In the Name of God (the Unique), the infinitely Good or Blessed (in Himself) and the infinitely Merciful (as regards the world)”: *bismi ’Llâhi ’r-Rahmâni ’r-Rahîm*.³¹ This Mercy God manifests by His Revelations as well as by the symbols and gifts of nature, the word “sign” (*âyah*) referring to both categories, the one supernatural and the other natural; the meaning of the formula of consecration is thus very close to that of the second testimony of faith: “Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”³² The testimony that God is One expresses the absorption of the human or the terrestrial by the “Truth”, whereas the testimony that Muhammad—and with him all the Revealers³³—is the Messenger of the One God marks the outpouring of virtues and graces into the world or the soul, and thus compensates for the negative character that the first testimony has in relation to the cosmos. If the first testimony bears witness that “the world is false; *Brahma* is true”, the second does not allow us to forget that “everything is *Âtma*”.³⁴

³⁰ The Mosaic revelation—“Judaism” properly so called—puts all its emphasis on the element *islâm*, or more exactly on the formal—or formalist—aspect of this element, so that the saving quality here is the “Israeliteness” of man, his attachment to a divine framework, and not *a priori* a character pre-existing in human nature.

³¹ In this formula, the *Basmalah*, the first phrase—“in the Name of God”—indicates the divine causality, whereas the first of the two divine Names that follow expresses the “divine Substance”—or the “underlying Bliss”—of the cosmos, and the second expresses the divine Mercy insofar as it enters into the cosmos by discontinuous influences and nourishes it “successively” with its gifts and graces.

³² The difference between the *Basmalah* and the second *Shahâdah* lies in the fact that the former proceeds “from above downward”, and the latter proceeds “from below upward”: the *Basmalah* is the formula of divine manifestation, creation, revelation, whereas the second *Shahâdah* indicates ascent, realization, the path.

³³ According to Saint Thomas, faith in the existence—the reality—of God and faith in Providence are indispensable to salvation: “In the existence of God are contained all the things that we believe to exist [to be real] in God eternally; and in faith in Providence are included all the dispensations of God in time that are concerned with the salvation of men” (*Summa Theologica*, Pt. II-II, Q.1, Art. 7).

³⁴ On the Christian side and from the point of view of *gnosis*, the assertion that Christ alone is God combines in its way the two testimonies of Islam, or rather two angles of vision corresponding to them metaphysically.

The Koran indicates the conditions—and outlines the framework—for the orison of the “solitary” (*mufrad*) or “supreme” (*a'zam*) Name in enjoining the invocation of *Allâh* “with humility and in secret” and also “through fear and through desire” (*Sûrah “The Heights”* [7]:55, 56); it says moreover: “Be steadfast and remember God often” (*Sûrah “The Spoils of War”* [8]:45), nor does it neglect the aspect of quietude: “Is it not through remembrance of God that hearts repose in security?” (*Sûrah “The Thunder”* [13]:28). From this is derived the following doctrine: we must fear God—and in fact it is Him alone we fear, without knowing it—and we must not “take His Name in vain” (*cf.* Exod. 20:7), that is, with an impure intention aimed at the approval of men or glory, or even at magic; we must desire God—and in fact it is Him alone we desire, without knowing it³⁵—and we must pronounce His Name “with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might” (*cf.* Deut. 6:5);³⁶ as for humility, it is indispensable, for it is the consciousness of our nothingness, which is determined by consciousness of the All-Reality; and as for secrecy, the divine Name demands it, for this Name is not suited for collective devotion, its domain being in no way that of the communal Law. But secrecy also has a quite inward meaning, and then it refers to the “heart” as the symbolical seat of the Self; finally, the resoluteness and frequency of “remembering” vanquish space and time, the world and life; and as for the “repose of hearts”, it is in God alone that we find Peace.

The Name *Allâh* contains all of these meanings. *Allâh*, who is the Unique, is thereby the great Peace: being pure Reality, there is in Him no disequilibrium, no narrowness. His Name is the Peace that silences all the sounds of the world, whether around us or within us, in accordance with this verse: “Say: *Allâh!* then leave them to their vain discourse” (*Sûrah “Cattle”* [6]:92).³⁷ Thus the Name casts as it were an immense blanket of snow over the things of this world or

³⁵ The love of God implies love of the neighbor just as the fear of God implies flight from sin, hence fear of its consequences.

³⁶ This is equivalent, despite the diversity of possible applications, to the Hindu ternary *jñâna*, *bhakti*, and *karma*.

³⁷ “The most noble of words is the utterance of *Allâh*,” says the Prophet, which means that this Name contains all words and makes all words superfluous. “Every creature”—sings Mahmud Shabistari—“has its existence from the unique Name, out of which it comes and to which it returns with endless praises.” “God has cursed everything on earth except the remembrance [the invocation] of God” (*hadîth*).

Modes of Prayer

of our soul, extinguishing all and uniting all in one and the same purity and in one and the same overflowing and eternal silence.

* * *

The Hindu who invokes Shri Rama abandons his own existence for that of his Lord: it is as if he were asleep and Rama were watching and acting for him; he sleeps in Shri Rama, in the divine form of him who is invoked, who takes on all the burdens of the life of the devotee and in the end brings him back into this divine and immutable form itself. The doctrine of Rama is contained in the *Râmâyana*: the myth retraces the destiny of the soul (Sita) ravished by passion and ignorance (Ravana) and exiled in matter, at the confines of the cosmos (Lanka). Every soul devoted to Shri Rama is identified with Sita, the heroine who is carried off, then rescued.³⁸ Radha, the eternal spouse of Krishna, gives rise to the same symbolism; and he who says *Krishna* expresses the wisdom hidden in the *Mahâbhârata* and expounded in the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*, which is its synthesis and flower.

* * *

The invocation of the Buddha Amitabha—the *Logos* inasmuch as he “transmigrates”, accumulating “merits” and returning “with full right”, being the *Logos*, to his original and nirvanic plenitude—is founded upon a doctrine of redemption, that of the “original Vow”. Amitabha—the Japanese Amida—is the Light and the Life of the Buddha Shakyamuni; by invoking Amitabha the devotee enters into a golden halo of Mercy; he finds security in the blessed light of that Name; he withdraws into it with perfect surrender and also perfect gratitude.³⁹ The whole of Amidism is contained in these words: purity, invocation, faith: abstaining from evil, invoking the Name, having trust.⁴⁰ Amida is Light and Life;⁴¹ his Name carries the devotee toward the “Western Paradise” (*Sukhâvatî*): the devotee follows the solar Name through to its consummation, “to the West”⁴²;

³⁸ The ordeal of Sita—Rama doubting her fidelity—refers to the discontinuity between the “I” and the “Self”, to the hiatus in the incommensurable dialogue between the soul and the Lord; the repudiation of Sita and her return to her mother, the Earth, means that the ego as such remains always the ego. But the eternal Sita is none other than Lakshmi, spouse of Rama-Vishnu, and she it is who is the prototype of the soul *in divinis*.

³⁹ In Amidism gratitude is what we could call the “moral stimulus”.

he follows it right into the hereafter, leaving the world behind him, in the night—following this sun which, having traversed the “round of Existence”, is “thus gone” (*tathâgata*), “gone, gone not to return, gone to the other shore” (*gâte, pâragâte, pârasamgâte*).

* * *

Prayer implies an inward alternative, a choice between an imperfection arising from our nature and the “remembrance of God”, which is perfection by reason of its prime mover as well as its object. If this alternative is above all an inward one—otherwise we would have no right to any outward action—it is because prayer can be superimposed on any legitimate action; likewise, if the alternative is relative and not absolute—otherwise we would have no right to any thought outside of prayer—it is because prayer, though it cannot be superimposed on every beautiful or useful thought, can at least continue to vibrate during the course of such thought; and then the mental articulation, while in practice excluding prayer—to the

⁴⁰ This trinity belongs to every path founded on the power of divine Names. Abstention from evil is the passive condition; faith or trust is the active condition.

⁴¹ It is the aspect Amitayus—issued from the forehead of Amitabha—that relates more particularly to “infinite Life”. When the historical Buddha speaks of “previous Buddhas”, it is as if he spoke of himself, in the sense that they incarnate aspects of his nature and are of his essence, or of the essence of the unique and universal Buddha, the *Âdi*-Buddha, who is the “celestial body”—the *Dharmakâya*—of all Buddhas. In Amidism it is Amitabha who is identified with the universal Buddha; from another point of view, as we have just said, the “mystical” Buddhas personify aspects of Shakyamuni, in the sense that Amitabha, Vairochana, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, and Amoghasiddhi—the five *Dhyâni*-Buddhas—each relate to one of the great moments in the life of the historical Buddha, but also *a priori* to one of the great cosmic cycles, as well as to the cosmic “regions” and to the aspects or functions of the universal Intellect, the regions being represented by the directions of space and the aspects or functions by the mental faculties. Outside the specifically Amidist perspective, it is Vairochana—inasmuch as he is Mahavairochana (Dainichi in Japanese)—who is identified with the *Âdi*-Buddha and who, remaining “at the center”, produces by his radiance the four other *Dhyâni*-Buddhas. In Hindu terms, the *Âdi*-Buddha or Vairochana—and Amitabha or Shakyamuni insofar as they are identified with them—correspond to *Chit* (the enlightening, but not creating, *Purusha*) and its cosmic reflection, *Buddhi* or Sarasvati.

⁴² As for the East, it indicates the Paradise of the Buddha Akshobhya (Ashuku in Japanese), conqueror of the demon (Mara); the East is attributed also—outside the sphere of the five *Dhyâni* Buddhas—to the Buddha Bhaishajyaguru (Yakushi), who drives away maladies just as the rising sun drives away darkness, and whose mercy more particularly concerns this terrestrial world, whereas that of Amitabha is manifested in the other world.

Modes of Prayer

extent that the mind cannot do two things at once—nevertheless does not interrupt the “remembrance” in the eyes of God. In other words, just as prayer cannot be superimposed on a base or illicit action, so the fragrance of prayer cannot subsist during a thought that is opposed to the virtues; of course it goes without saying that the vibration of prayer in the absence of its articulation—when the mind is engaged elsewhere—presupposes a habit of prayer in the subject, for there is no perfume without a flower; it presupposes as well the intention to persevere in prayer and to intensify it; it is thus that the “past” and the “future”, the acquired and the intended, participate in the unarticulated continuity of prayer.

Life is not a sort of space filled with possibilities offering themselves to our good pleasure, as children and worldly people believe; it is a road that becomes more and more narrow, from the present moment to death. At the end of this road there is death and the encounter with God, then eternity; all these realities are already present in prayer, in the timeless actuality of the divine Presence.

What matters for a man is not the diversity of the events he may experience as they stretch out along the magic thread we call duration, but perseverance in the “remembrance”, which takes us outside time and raises us above our hopes and our fears. This remembrance already dwells in eternity; in it the succession of actions is only illusory, prayer being one; prayer is thereby already a death, a meeting with God, an eternity of bliss.

What is the world if not a flow of forms, and what is life if not a cup that is seemingly emptied from one night to the next? And what is prayer if not the sole stable point—made of peace and light—in this dream universe and the narrow gate leading to all that the world and life have sought in vain? In the life of man, these four certitudes are everything: the present moment, death, the meeting with God, eternity. Death is an exit, a world that closes down; the meeting with God is like an opening toward a fulgurating and immutable infinitude; eternity is a fullness of being in pure light; and the present moment is an almost ungraspable “place” in our duration where we are already eternal—a drop of eternity amid the to and fro of forms and melodies. Prayer gives to the terrestrial instant its full weight of eternity and its divine value; it is a sacred ship that bears its load, through life and death, toward the further shore, toward the silence of light. And yet at a deeper level it is not prayer that passes through time by repeating itself; it is time that halts, so to speak, before the already celestial unicity of prayer.

Modes of Prayer

Features in

Prayer Fashions Man: Frithjof Schuon on the Spiritual Life
© 2005 World Wisdom, Inc.

Selected and Edited by James S. Cutsinger,
Foreword by Philip Zaleski
All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only
www.worldwisdom.com