

# Is prayer just wishful thinking?

Introduced by David O'Rose

David introduced the topic by reading through his detailed handout, adding various supplementary comments throughout. He concluded by reminding us that he regards prayer as a deeply inward experience, and has intentionally focused on a variety of writers who portray prayer in this way.

David sees prayer as a method of attaining awareness and that in these troubled times when religions are clashing with each other, the capacity for this type of awareness may allow us to drop our attachment to any one religious path. We can cultivate an aware ego in relation to our religious self whence it becomes relativised. This approach can lead to the tolerance we desperately need in this divided world.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

John 8:58

Our "questions for clarification" time lasted longer than usual--over 45 minutes--on this occasion. It began with David clarifying in quick succession the following aspects of his position: even if there is no God, praying can still be a good idea, provided (as Kant argues) it empowers us to live a good life; the type of prayer being defended here is more or less the same as meditation; verbal prayer can be a helpful means to the end of establishing a meditative approach to life; ideally, such prayer should be a natural way of life, as ceaseless as breathing; such a view does not necessarily imply pantheism, but should be compatible with a variety of theological positions; if prayer is a form of communication, then it seems to require an "other", but in meditative prayer this "other" is conceived as being "in us" and perhaps even as being indistinguishable from the praying person; the purpose of prayer, therefore, is not to change God's mind, but to work on our own self- development, which might be thought of as making our own life as divine as possible; this seems impossible, yet it is a paradox that is affirmed by many great thinkers.

After David responded so well to this barrage of questioning, someone mentioned that, although his philosophy of prayer was now quite clear, he had said nothing about the question formulated in tonight's topic: is prayer, conceived in this way, just wishful

thinking? He responded that it does not involve wishing at all, but experiencing. More traditional approaches to prayer do involve varying degrees of wishing, he admitted, especially in the verbal prayers of children. However, the more a person matures in his or her view of prayer, the less important this element of wishing becomes. Later, he jokingly called this "naughty praying", in contrast to the mature prayer that says "thy will be done".

When a monk in attendance noted that he regularly prays for world peace and that this is a form of wish, David warned that praying for world peace is more likely to bring about war, at least in the short term. Wishful thinking can produce surprising and even harmful results at times, because we often fail to realize the unexpected turn of events that would have to occur in order for our wishes to come true. Praying for world peace, for example, appears to be a prayer directed toward the good of other people; but it will not necessarily lead the person praying to be a more peaceful person. The more aware we are of our own inner reality, through meditative prayer, the more peaceful we can be in our outer relationships with others.

Someone then suggested rephrasing the evening's question as follows: Do people deceive themselves when they pray? David responded that verbal prayer, especially when it involves the expression of wishes, can often be a form of self-deceit. However, if prayer is sincere it nevertheless often serves as a tool for the person's self-development; it encourages a person to develop a disposition that will set her or him on the right path. But what about people who devote their entire lives to verbal prayer and never succeed in developing such a disposition? For them isn't prayer more like an addiction, an "opium"? In response to these questions David admitted that for many people prayer is little more than a means of self-comfort. A good priest, however, will encourage worshippers to root their prayer in real-life experience in such a way that it will be much more likely to elicit such a change of disposition.

At this point I asked David to explain how we can think philosophically about prayer if, as he stated in his introduction, books such as *The Cloud of Unknowing* tell us we must suspend our powers of critical thinking if we are to understand prayer properly. He explained that such books are supposed to be tools leading us into a mystical experience; they are not supposed to be philosophical texts. But learning to have such mystical experiences of oneness and inner knowing does not in any way prevent us from understanding prayer philosophically, as in Kant's critical analysis, where the value of prayer is explained in terms of its moral usefulness. One person asked whether the mystical approach might lead to schizophrenia, since it seems to split the

rational mind off from the rest of our experience. David explained that this is highly unlikely to happen, because the mystical does not involve any such splitting, but rather requires us to develop an "aware ego" that enables us to experience both sides of the opposition together. It's a mark of maturity rather than a psychological problem.

After another brief exchange on the issue of pantheism, the monk in attendance asked us to reflect on what we actually do when we pray, and whether or not such prayer requires a belief in God. One person replied that we are looking for inner strength. Another said we typically resort to prayer when we need comfort, or when facing times of transformation, as in near death experiences. A third person distinguished between prayer as a form of communion, which seems possible without believing in a God "out there", and prayer as a form of communication, which does seem to require belief in an external God and is typically used for consolation. To these suggestions, the monk replied that we typically pray for happiness (for ourselves and others) and that prayer is always primarily an internal activity. Its result is to give us a healthy mind, and this in turn can have an immediately positive effect on our bodies. He added that in Tibetan tradition prayer is sometimes called the "wish path", and that its positive effects on the mind are taken to justify even prayers for world peace and the like. For in so doing, we project our good wishes from the world of mind into the physical world, where they then have a real effect!

David concluded by reminding us of his view that this whole issue can be explained as part of the inevitable dance of all opposites, including good and evil—a comment I felt adequately summed up an evening of extremely stimulating conversation and debate on a topic that is rarely discussed in such an objective manner.