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Christian Versus Heathen Ways of Praying: A Look from the Age of Postmodernity

Introduction

It is axiomatic that there is no religious life if there is not some kind of prayer. If religion is defined as “orientation to the ultimate reality” (Deming 2005:14), then prayer is probably the most important way people orient themselves to that reality, be it God, gods, spirits, something, or nothingness. In a sense, *homo sapience* is *homo orantes*. As David says in Psalms 65:2, “O You who hear prayer, to You all flesh will come.” A predisposition to pray is built into the human psyche. The desire to address yourself to a higher reality is an inalienable part of what it means to be human, to have a spiritual constitution.

Regardless of countless books on theology, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, and methodologies of prayer, regardless of myriad stories narrating personal experiences of prayer, prayer resists the temptation to be “figured out” and contained within magical fixed formulas. The church and every believer need to reflect on prayer for there is always something more to learn, more to experience, and more to be puzzled by. This is especially true today, in the age of postmodernity that presents a persistent challenge to the meaning and practice of prayer.

In his well-known book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard states: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (1979:xxiv). We too can simplify to the extreme and say that prayer is a metanarrative. The message of this metanarrative is very simple: *God hears prayers*. As David puts it, “The Lord will hear when I call to Him” (Ps 4:3). Accordingly, if postmodernity is suspicious towards metanarratives and prayer is a metanarrative, no doubt there is much skepticism in our age towards prayer. In the end, if “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche 1974 [1887]:181), so how can prayer not

also be dead? After Nietzsche's declaration, after two World Wars, after the Holocaust, the Gulags, and Hiroshima, faith in metanarratives has not increased.

The Problem

In what follows, I will deal with the question I consider very important for the theology and praxis of prayer: What makes a Christian prayer distinct from a heathen prayer? If one is to assume that the age of postmodernity is reminiscent of the age of paganism, then what does it mean that God *hears prayers*?

Thesis

In a sense, *Christian prayer is offered not to be "heard" or "answered" but to become an answer in itself.* Christian prayer is offered to transform the praying individual (or/and the praying community), to transform a person into the living response to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In other words, transformation of the praying individual in the image of the One who a person prays to is probably the most complete and comprehensive answer to the Christian prayer.

Some Examples of Postmodern Skepticism Towards Prayer

Here are a few examples of postmodern skepticism towards prayer taken from postmodern literary classics.

Joseph Heller, American author of the anti-war novel *Catch-22* (1961), puts in the mouth of Jossarian, a military pilot, the main character of the novel who protests the cruelty and absurdity of war, the following sarcastic words:

And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways. . . . There's nothing so mysterious about it. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about—a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed. Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation? What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did He ever create pain? . . .

Let's have a little more religious freedom between us. . . . You don't believe in the God you want to, and I won't believe in the God I want to. Is that a deal? (1961:149, 150)

Another character of the novel, a chaplain, being on the edge of relinquishing his faith and quitting his calling and mission, observed: "There were no miracles; prayers went unanswered, and misfortune tramped with equal brutality on the virtuous and the corrupt" (1961:241).

Notice another novel, *White Noise*, by American writer Don DeLillo. Jack Gladney, the narrator of the novel in his dialogue with a nun who worked for a Catholic hospital asks her, "Faith, religion, life everlasting. The great old human gullibilities. Are you saying you don't take them seriously? Your dedication is a pretense?" Answering the question, the nun says:

Our pretense is a dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. Fools, children. Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes. There must always be believers. Fools, idiots, those who hear voices, those who speak in tongues. We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible. You are sure that you are right but you don't want everyone to think as you do. There is no truth without fools. We are your fools, your madwomen, rising at dawn to pray, lighting candles, asking statues for good health, long life. (1985: chap. 39)

Then there is something with a different twist. In 1943 Georges Bataille, a French philosopher and writer in Nazi-occupied Paris, published a book called *Inner Experience*. In it, among other things, he lamented the absurdity of life, "Life will dissolve itself in death, rivers in the sea, and the known in the unknown. Knowledge is access to the unknown. Nonsense is the outcome of every possible sense" (1954:101).

But then he did something else. Imagining a dialogue with God, he inverted the terms of The Lord's Prayer. Here is what he came up with by turning the prayer literally inside out:

I sleep. Although mute, God addresses himself to me, insinuating, as in love, in a low voice: O my father, you, on earth, the evil which is in you delivers me. I am the temptation of which you are the fall. Insult me as I insult those who love me. Give me each day my bread of bitterness. My will is absent in the heavens as on earth. Impotence binds me. My name is lackluster. Hesitant, troubled, I reply: So be it." (131)

Against this background, and this is just a tip of the postmodernity iceberg of skepticism and ridicule towards prayer, the Christian practice of prayer requires more thought and theological reflection.

Heathen vs. Christian Theologies of Prayer

The rationale for looking at points of distinction between the ancient heathen and Christian ways of praying is based on the assumption that “the time of postmodernity has actually become the *renaissance of paganism*” (Bachinin 2007:165). What this means is, as we study the pagan mind, first, we become better aware of pagan imprints in our own religious life, primarily in the prayers we offer. Second, we seek for a deeper understanding of prayer as it was taught and practiced by Jesus and his apostles. Third, we become cognizant of prayer as an important tool of witnessing about the God we worship.

In the next section I will selectively focus on the writings of several philosophers, like Plato (428/9-348/7 BC), Seneca (4 BC-65 AD), Plutarch (46-after 119 AD). Some other sources will be cited, such as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (1550 to around 50 BC). These works will help us better understand how the heathen understood and practiced prayer. Against this background it will be easier to see the key distinctions between Christian and heathen theologies of prayer. I have singled out five such distinctions.

Praying to Gods vs. Praying to the Father

In his commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer, the apostle Paul uses the expression “Abba, Father” in Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6, showing that Christians are “children of God,” and if children, then “heirs of God” (Rom 8:16-17). Jesus taught his people to address God as Father (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2), thereby reinforcing the Old Testament image of God as a Father who is also the Creator (Deut 32:6; Isa 64:8; Mal 2:10; cf. 1 Cor 8:6), the Redeemer (Isa 63:16; Exod 4:22-23), and the Protector (Ps 68:5; cf. Jam 1:27). To call upon God as Father means to be co-responsible for the world that was created for humans to “tend and keep it” (Gen 2:15). It was a God-given responsibility for humans—those created “a little lower than God” (Ps 8:5; NRSV) who were given “dominion” over the works of God’s hands (Ps 8:3-8).

The metaphor of God as Father is more than a metaphor, it is a revelation about God’s cosmic household in which he is the Householder and humans are in the business of stewardship. To do the business of stewardship wisely and justly humans need the Holy Spirit. This is why when teaching about prayer, Jesus unambiguously pointed out what the greatest gift

of God is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), a “the good thing” from “your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 7:11) or “the heavenly gift,” the privilege to become “partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Heb 6:4).

In addition, the incarnation of God in Jesus as well as his death and resurrection demonstrated the reclaimed kinship existing between God and humans. By becoming “Son of Man” and “Son of God” and by experiencing death and resurrection Jesus opened for humans the door back to *Familia Dei*. No wonder Jesus said to Mary, “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God” (Matt 20:17). In this context, Jesus’s admonition, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven” (Matt 23:9). This fits the overall picture of the unparallel status of the Divine Father.

Reading Plato and other heathen philosophers, we see a different picture. Interestingly, Plato speculates about how the world was created by “the cause” and calls this cause “the ineffable father of all things,” saying that “God is the best of all causes” (*Timaeus*). Although Plato does use the word “father” in relation to God, clearly his was a non-relational father, a cosmic power, a non-personal Being playing with humans as the divine puppeteer. The religious life of people is a play; their role is the role of “puppets.” People better be “very careful” and consider well what they should pray about and what to leave unsaid for sometimes the Gods grant even foolish requests (*The Second Alcibiades*). And Plato concludes his conversation on prayer as a play by saying, “we ought to live sacrificing, and singing, and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the Gods, and to defend himself against his enemies and conquer them in battle” (*Laws*, Book VII).

Do the Gods play with people as children play with puppets or does God the Father “so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16)?

To be fair to heathen thinkers, in their writings there are some deep insights into the nature of God, including the metaphor of a father and the idea of kinship between God and people. Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus (55-135 AD) draws a somewhat eloquent analogy between kinship with Ceasar and kinship with God. He does so in with a string of three rhetorical questions:

He then who has observed with intelligence the administration of the world, and has learned that the greatest and supreme and the most comprehensive community is that which is composed of men and God . . . why should not such a man call himself a citizen of the world, why not a son of God, and why should he be afraid of anything which

happens among men? Is kinship with Cæsar (the emperor) or with any other of the powerful in Rome sufficient to enable us to live in safety, and above contempt, and without any fear at all? And to have God for your maker (ποιήτην), and father and guardian, shall not this release us from sorrows and fears?" (Epictetus 1904:27)

However, if read in a larger context of his *Discourses*, the God Epictetus describes is not the God that "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Greek philosophy, supported by magico-ritualistic subjection to spirit powers, did not have room for the reality of God incarnate, of God the Father that existentially, through his Son in human flesh and blood, entered the depth of human predicament and released humans from the bondage of sin.

The Greeks did try to unlock the mystery of God, but having at their disposal only the brilliance of intellect and being deprived of a revelation of the living God, they could not and did not succeed. As Plato confesses in *Timæus*, "amid the variety of opinions which have arisen about God . . . we must be content to take probability for our rule. Considering that I, who am the speaker, and you, who are the judges, are only men; *to probability we may attain but no further*" (italics supplied). Sounds almost like Paul who said, "now we see in a mirror, dimly . . . now I know in part" (1 Cor 13:12). The difference between them, however, is that Paul could continue by saying, "but then I shall know as I also am known," while Plato could not.

To Bribe vs. To Believe

Is there a way to cause God or the gods to act upon human requests, pleas, and even demands? Can God or the gods be bribed? Ancients knew more than one way to answer this question. To illustrate my point, I will relate two stories, one from Plato's dialogue *The Second Alcibiades*, a story told by Socrates. The second story comes from the Gospels, narrated by Mathew and Luke.

To put the first story in its context, I should mention that Plato's dialogue *The Second Alcibiades* is dedicated exclusively to prayer. The question discussed is, Why is it that the Gods partly grant and partly reject the requests made by the praying in public and private, and favor some persons and not others? Towards the end of the dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades, the former tells the following story that he heard from some elders.

The Lacedaemonians were at war with the Athenians, and Athens lost every battle by land and sea. The Athenians decided to send envoys to the

shrine of Ammon, with the question: "Why do the Gods always grant victory to the Lacedaemonians if we offer them more sacrifices and gifts than they do?" So the prophet of Ammon answered them: "The silent worship of the Lacedaemonians pleaseth me better than all the offerings of the other Hellenes." And as Socrates comments, by "silent worship" he meant "the prayer of the Lacedaemonians, which is indeed widely different from the usual requests of the Hellenes" (*The Second Alcibiades*). What was so special about the prayer of the Lacedaemonians? According to Socrates, justice and purity have much greater importance than costly processions and sacrifices (*The Second Alcibiades*; cf. Isa 1:15).

When another philosopher, Plutarch, watched what he describes as "the ridiculous actions and emotions of superstition, its words and gestures, magic charms and spells, rushing about and beating of drums, impure purifications and dirty sanctifications, barbarous and outlandish penances and mortifications at the shrines," he suggested: "it were better there should be no gods at all than gods who accept with pleasure such forms of worship, and are so overbearing, so petty, and so easily offended" (*On Superstition*, 12). With his astute mind the distinguished philosopher concluded that superstition is the seed of atheism.

The point is obvious: humans cannot count on bribing God or the gods no matter how sacred they believe their bribes are. However, if they behave justly and wisely there is more chance that their prayers will be heard by God or the gods. So can God be won over by "moral bribes," that is, by practicing justice and wisdom? If, according to the apostle Paul, godliness should not be a means for gain (1 Tim 6:5), can a prayer be such a means?

The second story is from the Gospel of Luke, and the question to be read between the lines of the narrator's script was (if I dare to express it in a provocative manner), Can God be bribed by love for the nation and by the construction of sacred buildings?

The events described in the story took place in Capernaum during Jesus's ministry in Galilee.

A certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, "for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue."

Then Jesus went with them. And when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You.

But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" And those who were sent, returning to the house, found the servant well who had been sick. (Luke 7:1-10)

The Jewish elders' theology of prayer was that of reciprocity. In their dealing with God it was normal to give *something* in order to get it back *plus something on top of it*. According to their theology of prayer, Jesus was to grant the centurion's request because the man was "deserving" (v. 4). The centurion, however, had a different view of God and prayer, "I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. . . . But say the word, and my servant will be healed" (vv. 6, 7).

The centurion came to the right understanding of how to approach God—not with the "bribe," be it the right religion, generosity and love for the chosen people, but by faith. His was the faith arising from the deep sense of unworthiness and out of deep appreciation of who Jesus was. The centurion's confession was that of an *attitude* rather than something produced by a *reasoning mind*.

In Plato's writings, however, faith is not a great virtue. In fact, the dialogue *The Second Alcibiades*, although discussing the nature of prayer, does not mention faith, not even once. This is a telling thing which sheds light on one of the key distinctions between Christian and heathen theologies and praxis of prayer. While Plato rejected the possibility of "bribing" Gods by sacrifices and ceremonies, but he favored the position that if humans were morally good enough, that was a reliable way to please the Gods and receive from them what the praying individual or community were asking. Interestingly, the request made by the Jewish elders (Luke 7:3) demonstrated that their thinking was more in line with heathen reasoning than with what Jesus sought to see among his people, that is, genuine faith and an attitude of trust (Matt 9:22, 15:28).

To Curse vs. To Forgive

Another distinction between heathen and Christian prayers has to do with the concept and virtue of forgiveness. What strikes a Christian reader of Plato's works is that the philosopher does not see any correlation between forgiveness and prayer. The concept of forgiveness is not found there at all. Nor do other Greek or Roman authors deal in a substantial

way with this ethical category. As David Konstan states, “The modern concept of forgiveness, in the full or rich sense of the term, did not exist in classical antiquity, that is, in ancient Greece and Rome, or at all events that it played no role whatever in the ethical thinking of those societies” (2010:ix). He restates his conclusion by saying, “To the extent that forgiveness involves a change of heart or moral state, the abandonment of one’s former ways, and sentiments such as remorse and penitence, it is all the more plausible that such an idea was absent in classical antiquity” (94).

In the pre-Christian world, prayers functioned neither to seek forgiveness from the gods nor to request their help for pardoning one’s neighbor, let alone one’s enemy. On the contrary, in some cases the gods functioned as a means to bring afflictions on the lives of those who did something wrong. The prayer requests inflicting curses on wrongdoers were “business as usual,” and illustrated the banality and normality of everyday life of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The magic formulas were “intended to influence, by supernatural means, the actions or welfare of persons or animals against their will” (Jordan 1985:151). Typically for those days, asserts Jordan, curses were expressed in so called *defixiones* or curse tablets that had been widely used in the Mediterranean during the millennium from classical time through the 6th century AD.

There was also another religious genre used to inflict vengeance on the wrongdoer, that of “prayers for justice.” Versnel defines them as “pleas addressed to a god or gods to punish a (mostly unknown) person who has wronged the author (by theft, slander, false accusations or magical action), often with the additional request to redress the harm suffered by the author (e.g., by forcing a thief to return the stolen object, or to publically confess guilt)” (2010:278, 279).

Here are just a few examples of inscriptions providing insights into the “pre-forgiveness” soul of Greco-Roman culture, all taken from Versnel’s research. An inscription from a grave stele of a fifteen year-old boy reads: “Lord the Almighty, you have made me, but an evil man has destroyed me. Revenge my death fast!” (305). A curse found in the sanctuary of Isis and Mater Magna (late 1st to early 2nd century AD).

Good, holy Att(h)is, Lord, help (me), come to Liberalis in anger. I ask you by everything . . . give him a bad mind, bad death, as long as he lives, so that he may see himself dying all over his body—except his eyes. And may he not be able to redeem himself by money or anything else, either from you or from any god—except a bad death. Grant this, I ask by your majesty.” (306)

Another example comes from a man pleading with god to curse a certain Epaphroditos who with the help of evil practices caused the complainant's slaves to run away. His "prayer for justice" reads:

Lady Demeter, O Queen, as your supplicant, your slave, I fall at your feet. . . . Grant that the man who has treated me thus shall have satisfaction neither in rest nor in motion, neither in body nor in soul; that he may not be served by slave or handmaid, by the great or the small. If he undertakes something, may he be unable to complete it. May his house be stricken by the curse for ever. . . . May no child cry (to him), may he never lay a joyful table; may no dog bark and no cock crow; may he sow but never reap . . . may neither earth nor sea bear him any fruit; may he know no blessed joy; may he come to an evil end together with all that belongs to him. (334, 345)

Another example of how the heathen understood prayer comes from the Greek fabulist Aesop. He narrates two prayers by two individuals. The first asks, "Lord God, show your benevolence upon me, my wife and my children, and upon nobody else." When his neighbor heard this prayer, he prayed, "Lord, Lord, Almighty God, curse this guy, his wife and his children, but nobody else" (СНОДГРАСС 2014:709).

Against this background of the pre-forgiveness cultures of antiquity it is easier to realize how radical Jesus was when he made forgiveness the key aspect of his moral teaching. In the carefully crafted prayer, traditionally called the Lord's Prayer, forgiveness is one of three petitions that comprise the second part of the prayer: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt 6:12). It was not by chance that in his Sermon on the Mount the very first thing Jesus explained after introducing the model prayer was the issue of forgiveness (Matt 6:14, 15).

It is important not to overlook the conjunction *for* (Greek *γὰρ*) which starts v. 14 and gives the reason of the prayer's petition about forgiveness, if not the prayer itself. In a sense, if there is no forgiveness, there is no point in praying; so too there is no point in worship if there is an unresolved conflict between people (Matt 5:24). As Jesus taught, "whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25, 26). In its very essence the gift of prayer is to be exercised in two directions, to *receive* forgiveness from God and to *extend* forgiveness towards other human beings.

Jesus reinforced his teaching on forgiveness by his famous words about the forgiving the sins of others "up to seventy times seven" (Matt 18:22; cf. Gen 4:24). The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-34) reiterated

the point that each follower of Jesus must forgive anyone's trespasses "from his heart" (v. 35). Finally and most importantly, Jesus exemplified his teaching on prayer by forgiving those who crucified him (Luke 23:34), a feat soon to be emulated by Stephen the Martyr (Acts 7:60). While on earth, Jesus exercised the power to forgive sins (Mark 2:10); and when he was lifted up from the earth (John 12:32) he "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24). His was the perfect and unsurpassed gift of forgiveness for he "was and is forgiveness itself" (Zündel 1884 [2015]:308).

Christ's teaching on forgiveness, the way he prayed and taught how to pray, his extraordinary example of a forgiving prayer offered from the cross, coupled with the early Christian exhortation to forgive one another, "even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:32), all stood in sharp contrast with ancient Greek and Roman *defexiones* and "prayers for justice."

Religious Sentiment vs. Grand Story

The next distinction between Christian and pagan ways to pray has to do with the nature of religious experience as it was lived out in the Greco-Roman world by adherents of two religious systems. What is meant by religious experience? Smith (1998) defines it as "both special experience of the divine or ultimate and the viewing of any experience as pointing to the divine or ultimate."

Almost two millenia ago, when the Christian faith was spreading throughout the Greco-Roman world, it offered not only new religious ideas but also new religious experience. What was new about it? In particular, what was the difference between the Christian prayer experience and that of pagan worshippers? Discussing the distinctive features of Christianity, Merkelbach points out four things that set it apart from the mystery religions:

[1] Mystery religions, as a rule, can be traced back to tribal origins, Christianity to a historical person. [2] The holy stories of the mysteries were myths; the Gospels of the New Testament, however, relate historical events. [3] The books that the mystery communities used in Roman times cannot possibly be compared to the New Testament. The essential features of Christianity were fixed once and for all in this book; the mystery doctrines, however, always remained in a much greater state of fluidity. [4] The theology of the mysteries was developed to a far lesser degree than the Christian theology. (Merkelbach 1998)

As Christianity entered the highly diverse and sophisticated world of the pagan religions, one of its tasks was to turn an individual from the *sensual experience of the unknown to the faith experience of the revealed*. Unlike

what occurred in all mystery cults which were characterized by requiring the initiation candidates to swear an oath of secrecy, Christianity was a faith focused on the Person who “spoke openly to the world” (John 18:20; cf. Matt 10:27).

As Christian faith advanced, the ambiguity of the Oracles’ messages was replaced by the certainty of God’s *evangel*, and the myths were ousted by the grand story of the Word become flesh (John 1:14). Dissimilar to the mysteries that evoked awe by impacting the bodily senses, in the Christian religion it was the story of the cross of Christ that elicited an unprecedented sense of awe and reverence for the crucified Christ and the God who sent him. After the ascension of Jesus, his followers’ encounters with the reality of the “wholly other” were experienced through the love-generating presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. New relationships marked the life of the communities of believers as they realized they were all part of the body of Christ (Rom 5:5, 12:4, 5; 1 Cor 12). The new experience of divine love glueing the community of faith together, the transforming power of the Christian *evangel* story—these were the things that made the spiritual experience of the followers of Jesus so distinct from that of the pagan worshippers. Notice a description of the new experience by the previous heathen in Thessalonica,

Religion was no longer a formal ritual, devoted to capricious spirits, material things, frightening omens or implacable cosmic forces, or their idols and supporting philosophies. Rather, they were pouring out their love and devotion to the Sovereign God, their new Lord, Ruler of the Universe, True and not counterfeit; God Himself, not human substitutes; the God, who had disclosed himself as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Hitchman 2011:169)

The initiation rites of the mystery religions were very elaborate, some were well thought through, thoroughly performed, and experienced with high emotions. It was common for them to have the whole array of fleshly mediums, including drinks, blood sacrifices, light effects, imitations of gods’ voices, music, and dancing—until the priests’ and priestesses’ “frenzied excitement found its culmination in self-scourging, self-laceration, or exhaustion” (Merkelbach 1998). In the emerging religion of the Gallilean Man however, the experience of God was nested in the realm of the human spirit rather than planted in the domain of feelings. It was in the context of prayer to “Abba, Father” that Paul spoke of the Spirit “bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:15, 16). On the other hand, with its emphasis on faith, the New Testament does not deemphasize the importance of the body in worship and prayer (Друми 2018:80-107). On the contrary, it repeatedly refers to the wholistic

and indivisible nature of religious experience that also included the bodies (sōma) of the worshipping individuals (e.g., Rom 12:1; 1 Thess 5:23).

Seneca, the great first century Roman stoic, in his famous *Letters* has insightful observation about prayer:

There is no need to raise our hands to heaven; there is no need to implore the temple warden to allow us close to the ear of some graven image, as though this increased the chances of our being heard. *God is near you, is with you, is inside you.* Yes, Lucilius, there resides within us a divine spirit, which guards us and watches us in the evil and the good we do. As we treat him, so will he treat us. (*Letters*, XLI; italics supplied)

There is a striking similarity between Seneca's point and Paul's observation from his sermon to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers that God "is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Paul asserted that God created the nations "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him" (Acts 17:27). However, there is also a compelling difference between the two views of God, namely, for his sermon in Areopagus Paul had a solid understanding of God's all-encompassing salvation story while Seneca did not and could not have one. His God was hidden in human sentiment while Paul preached about the God who revealed himself in the story culminating in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:31).

"I Am Right" vs. "I Am Wrong"

Since ancient times one of the functions of prayer was to help people have some kind of assurance on the day of the divine judgement. Thoughts about the afterlife found their way into prayers and magic formulas offered to the gods once the person's soul reached the place of judgement.

Around 1600 BC, Egyptian scribes produced the first copies of a funerary text that later became known as the *Book of the Dead*, a manual to help the social elite navigate in the afterlife. By the time of the New Kingdom (1570-1069 BC), the book was "extremely popular" (Mark 2016) and it remained in use until the beginning of the Christian era. The best known part of the book is Spell 125. It describes the Hall of Truth, the judgment of the heart of the deceased, and the process conducted by the god Osiris. The soul of the deceased was supposed to make a negative confession to address each of 42 cryptically named gods while saying a list of 42 sins the person had never done. For example, "I have not committed sin, I have not committed robbery with violence, I have not stolen, I have not slain

men and women” and so on and on (Mark 2017; cf. Budge 1898:191). Then, the deceased was to repeat four times, “I am pure.”

Once the Negative Confession was made, Osiris, Thoth, Anubis, and the Forty-Two Judges would confer and, if the confession was accepted, the heart of the deceased was then weighed in the balance against the white feather of Ma’at, the feather of truth. If the heart as found to be lighter than the feather, the soul passed on toward paradise; if the heart was heavier, it was thrown onto the floor where it was devoured by the monster goddess Ammut and the soul would cease to exist. (Mark 2017)

A life free of grave transgressions and, most importantly, a knowledge of the right spells was a pass for safe entry of the soul into the subterranean Duat, the realm of the dead.

Jesus, however, taught a totally different way of approaching God, not with an attitude that “I am right” but with a broken heart as was the case with the tax collector who prayed: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). This was an echo of another prayer, that of the prodigal son: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:11). Christ’s was a religion making the first last “for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14). Paul understood this well when he acknowledged that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Tim 1:15). According to Paul, self-righteousness or righteousness, which is from the law, is incompatible with faith in Christ (Phil 3:9; cf. Rom 1:17). The prayer of the tax collector repeats the first line of the prayer of repentance found in Ps 51:1 and as such it encapsulates the very core of the biblical teaching on how to approach God in prayer—with a humble spirit, by faith and grace alone.

Summary

The purpose of the previous sections was to point out some key distinctions between Christian prayer and heathen prayer. As was demonstrated, Christian prayer is offered to God as Father and not to God as “the best of all causes” or as to a puppeteer playing with humans. The God Christians pray to is a God who cannot be “bribed” or impressed either with elaborate worship, with eloquent prayers, or even with good behavior. Rather, he is to be approached by faith alone and in the spirit of humility. Prayer does not meet the criterion of being a Christian prayer if there is no forgiveness in the heart of the praying individual. Also, to be truly Christian, the person praying must be immersed in the story of God

and the Messiah as spelled out in the Scriptures. Finally, Christian prayer does not inform God of anything for true prayer is not about communicating information, rather it is about an *attitude*, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Luke 18:13).

What does this all mean today in the context of the postmodern challenge facing the Adventist Church and its mission?

Prayer as Metanarrative

As was mentioned in the beginning of this article, prayer is a metanarrative, and as such it has largely been rejected by people with a postmodern worldview. Could it be that that happened because Christians misinterpreted what God’s “answer” to prayer really is? Instead of focusing on a transformation of the heart and life of the praying individual, too many Christians have misplaced their expectations and focused them on results, meaning the list of wishes determined by sinful human will. To repeat the thesis of this presentation, *Christian prayer is offered not to be “heard” and “answered” but to become an answer in itself.*

Today, when we witness the renaissance of paganism, what is the image of God we demonstrate by our prayers? Is our God a God who “answers” according to the list of our wishes or He is a God who transforms our families, our communities, and us?

Is it possible that some pagan imprints still exist in the manner in which we pray? Have we become aware of the mission potential of non-magical prayer? Is prayer something we intentionally teach (cf. Luke 11:1)? And if we do, what kind of prayer do we teach? Are we helping students and church members “cultivate thoughts upon spiritual things” (White 1940:70) so they are better prepared to live in this postmodern age?

The youth in our institutions are deeply affected by postmodern philosophy, in most cases without actually knowing they are affected. However, the praxis of prayer is often diluted in our curricula under the vague term “spirituality.” That raises a pressing question: do we really *teach* our students how to pray? Are we even *taught* to pray? To rephrase the prophet Isaiah’s vision about God’s house being called “a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa 56:7), can we safely assume that every Seventh-day Adventist school is a school of prayer for all students and every house of prayer is a house of prayer?

What makes a prayer a Christian prayer is the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. And it is not about how to get from God what I want, rather it is about how to have a right attitude towards him, how to be right with him by seeking and desiring what Jesus outlined in the first three and in the second three petitions of his prayer. The Lord’s Prayer reprioritizes one’s

life for it extends an invitation to seek God's Kingdom first, and in itself that becomes the answer to the Christian's prayer. In other words, my life is my prayer, my life is my answer to God's call to pray and to seek first His kingdom, and my life is my living sacrifice to God. My transformed life is a metanarrative that postmodernism can neither deny nor disprove.

Conclusion

In many respects, postmodernity resembles paganism, but certainly it does not totally overlap with it. People around us are searching, but they do not search for answers and explanations as much as they are searching for people who are living answers. If prayer is a metanarrative, then my life must be a metanarrative too.

In this context, I find helpful the analogy drawn by Crossan between Paul's metaphor of spiritual maturation and that of an individual Christian growing in prayer. Paul says, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Cor 13:11). A Christian who wants to grow in prayer is a person "working more and more *from* prayers of requests (complaint and petition), *through* prayers of gratitude (thanksgiving or praise), and on *to* prayers of empowerment (participation and collaboration)—with God who is absolutely transcendent and immanent at the same time" (Crossan 2010:28).

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