

The Well Amid the Waste

by Alvin Moore

One Moment in Annihilation's Waste
One Moment of the Well of Life to taste—
The Stars are setting and the Caravan
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing—Oh, make haste!

(*Rubāiyāt, Omar Khayyām*
Fitzgerald's first version)

In the following remarks we speak from both the Christian and universalist perspective: from the Christian because our own affiliation and praxis are those of the oldest branch of the Christian tradition. And we speak from a universalist perspective, because, as Eric Hansen very perceptively remarked: if one is true, then all orthodox revelations and traditions must be true. It is inconceivable that the Most Merciful would withhold from the greater portion of mankind that knowledge of himself and his ways which is necessary to salvation. And metaphysically, it is not in the nature of things that the Message of Heaven and its will to save should be reflected in only a single form, a single body of belief; knowledge is in the knower according to the mode of the knower. *Omnia veritas quocumque dicitur, est a Spiritu Spiritu.*

What is Prayer?

What is prayer? Popular definitions, like those of the better dictionaries, though obviously not without merit, nevertheless stop short at the outer perimeters and leave by far the greater part unsaid. If one consults standard reference works one may find even less satisfaction; instead, one may find authors handling material with which they are unfamiliar, frequently unsympathetic and occasionally even hostile. Fortunately printed

works are not our only resource for knowledge of the subject; there is a kind of *a priori* tropism in man ¹ that often disposes one to pray. One is “in trouble, sorrow, need, or sickness” or some other adversity and, acutely aware of his helplessness, he cries out for aid, “a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core...” Averring a counter view, the Victorian poet William Ernest Henly wrote:

In the fell clutch of circumstance I have not winced nor cried aloud... the menace of the years finds and shall find me unafraid.

Whatever Henly’s self-understanding, objectively he was a *poseur*. If we are mature and honest we *know* there are rather near limits to our intelligence, our strength, our endurance, our human worth, and that defiance and self-assertion are themselves based on a strength that ultimately is not our own. When poses fail, as fail they must, we cast about for something greater than ourselves, our own powers and talents. This “something” is nearer than we may think. Said Aristotle:

There is a life which is higher than the merely human; man will not live it insofar as he is man but insofar as he has within himself something Divine; and inasmuch as this Divine part excels the composite, so much does its energy surpass the energy of every other virtue... so far as possible we should immortalize ourselves... and live according to our most excellent part. ²

This something is, in the near term, a God-given life in and orientation of the soul; it is a life that is impossible apart from prayer, but which can be brought to birth and even to perfection through genuine prayer with all this implies. For prayer is conatural to man, a function of his essential nature; and, especially in its higher forms, it is his noblest activity. Without prayer man becomes delusional, for a living and conscious link to That which is above him, to That on which he is entirely dependent, is essential to spiritual, psychological, and even physical health. Formed and deformed by modern life, man is engaged in an accelerating flight from the Center of his being. This centrifugal movement has its roots in the cosmogonic process itself, so it is certainly not something easily overcome; but our task as men is precisely to undo this flight into ever greater exile. This complete other-directedness involves a denial of

1. It should not need mentioning that *man*, *men*, *he* and *his* in this paper refer not to gender but to the human race. According to the *Manusmriti* (ix,45), man is not the man alone; he is man, woman, and progeny.
2. *Come l'uomo s'eterna?*, asked Dante.

the ultimate Subject; moreover, this denial builds upon itself from which comes an increasing imbalance and instability in man's very substance and by consequence in all human works and activities. Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties, in spite of the inertia of man's present state, it is man's duty *qua* man to look within, to know himself, to dominate himself (for "there are two in man", *duo sunt in homine*), to "go back the way you came"; for "the Kingdom of God is within you". All this is to say that man's essential nature is not "out there" somewhere; not in craniometry, in measurements of footprints and skeletal remains, not in cultural or even linguistic anthropology, not in conventional or even depth psychology, but in a transcendent nature that "has nothing to do with time". In ordinary life man is an alienated creature, almost wholly exteriorized. Even so, from time to time in calmer souls something makes itself vaguely known; makes us aware of a need to rein in our faculties, restrain frenetic activity, redress the balance between an interior we fear or shun—if only from boredom—and our habitual extroversion, the paucity and intrinsic deficiency of which are only too well known. This small hint of our essential nature is both an opening and an invitation to something greater than one's empirical self. It is akin to a second factor in human life that disposes men to pray: namely, a modest contentment which descends when things go well with us—well, but not too well. At such times we may be gently moved to gratitude. We are not inebriated by good fortune which we know may go more swiftly than it comes; and we have an inkling that gratitude keeps open the channels of blessing. We want to preserve such conditions, knowing that the better part of our nature is our intelligence and that the mind, the vehicle for this intelligence, functions better when we are reasonably content. The relatively few who find motives for prayer in such conditions are truly blessed. No longer prey to that familiar "chaos of thought and passion all confused", they behold the early glimmerings of man's true estate; and some of them, blessed with insight, seize opportunity thus presented.

Still less numerous are those whose native constitution, the balance of their psychic components and faculties, their intelligence and spiritual dispositions, dispose to an ongoing contemplative effort. There are still such souls, *Deo gratias*, even in these last times; not only in monasteries and among the clergy, but in the work-a-day world, especially among those who gravitate to independent or solitary occupations. But

we also know there are souls with such inclinations who work in circumstances seemingly inappropriate to such noble pursuits, and we mention them to show that one must not await perfect and inviting circumstances to enter the Way. One can, for example, practice the Jesus Prayer, the Sufi remembrance (*dhikr*), or the Buddhist *nembutsu* in surroundings that might seem quite unfavourable to a spiritual life. Potentially, interior quality dominates exterior circumstance, and the longer and more intense one's interior struggle the greater the supremacy of that which is within over that which is without.

Kinds of Prayer

We do not suggest that these three groupings are exhaustive; but they may help in one's orientation and can serve to illustrate three principal kinds of prayer: personal, canonical, and invocatory, a ternary enunciated by Frithjof Schuon which, though admitting some modification, is nevertheless the most comprehensive schema known to us. In personal prayer man enters into his true vocation as interlocutor with God, for to this man is called and this constitutes a central element in human dignity. Man must tell God of his hopes, his fears, his needs; and he must seek God's favours for others. At the same time he must avoid thinking of God as a mere provider; it was Eckhart who said that some people love God as one might love a cow—for the good things she gives. God is not there merely for our convenience; He does not need us, but no poor man is more desperately in need than we are of Him. It is entirely legitimate to ask for favours and help, and especially guidance, understanding and virtue. Modern education, however, is largely inimical to prayer. So what should one actually say in prayer? How and when to pray? The *Psalms* provide good beginnings, for several reasons. For Jews and Christians they are inspired prayers that cover the spectrum of human needs and concerns, both positive and negative. Positive, for man also must worship the Divine, express his gratitude, and emulate Heaven-given role models.

But the *Psalms* also bridge the gap between personal and canonical prayer. Unmatched as expressions of individual needs, they also form part of the body of canonical prayer for Judaism as also for most Christian denominations, especially for Catholics and Orthodox. Schuon observed that in personal prayer we approach God as individuals with all

our private concerns. In canonical prayer, however, we approach God in the name of all humanity, voicing those recurring interests that are shared by all men simply because we are men. Both these attitudes are intrinsic to the *Psalms*. We should note also that canonical prayer and community prayer, though not entirely identical, nevertheless mightily converge. The words and formulae of canonical prayer are often of great beauty and *gravitas*, invested as they are with centuries of human aspiration and will to the good. One need think only of the *Schema*, the *Lord's Prayer*, or the *Ta'awwudh* and *Basmalah*.

There is a category of man's yearning for the Real which falls within the range of both personal and canonical prayer, and this is meditation. Frithjof Schuon has written luminously both on prayer and meditation and we recommend his *Station of Wisdom*, especially chapter 5, "Modes of Prayer" (to which we are indebted), to anyone interested in this arduous but noblest activity which is prayer. Meditation is the means whereby man can rise above himself and his individual biases to examine and contemplate truths—and Truth—with an unwonted degree of objectivity. Enjoined by all traditions as indispensable for the inward journey, it is discipline whereby the more recalcitrant components of our existential self can be opened to the Light and brought under the influence of Way, Truth, and Life. It is not sufficient to acknowledge truth only with the surface mind and will; one must assimilate it as thoroughly as possible to the point of having it permeate our reflexive nature.

The third mode of prayer in Schuon's ternary is invocatory or jaculatory prayer (a term used frequently in Latin Christianity, and one very suggestive in this context). Invocatory prayer is universal, used in one form or another in all the major traditions: the Hindu *japa*, the *nembutsu* of Pure Land Buddhism, the Sufi *dhikr*, and it is found in Orthodox Christianity in the hesychast Prayer of the Heart. Invocatory prayer is less well known but by no means absent in Latin Christianity (see *The Holy Name: the Prayer of Jesus in the Western Church*, by Rama Coomaraswamy, in press). The common and essential element in all forms of invocatory prayer is a Divine Name or a formula containing a Divine Name. Why the invocatory repetition of a Divine Name? Because there is a interior and secret (in the sense of ineffable) sense in which the Name is identical with the Named; in invocation, we assimilate ourselves to Him whom we invoke. Why the reiteration? Does this not run counter to the "vain

repetition” proscribed in the Gospel? No; what is proscribed is insincerity, parading one’s piety “to be seen of men”, thoughtless babbling; for “words without thoughts will not to Heaven fly”. The repetitive element in invocatory prayer is a very legitimate means for fixing in duration one’s attention on the “one thing needful”, moving thereby closer to the goal of praying without ceasing—indeed, of ourselves becoming prayer. The attention span of modern man is notoriously short, and there is very little in modern life that encourages concentration. In fact, the opposite is so true that we have forgotten what might be accomplished if our powers of concentration were not so thoroughly dissipated, a dissipation encouraged and abetted by the patterns of modern life formed as they are as if to thwart men from giving their attention to precisely those matters that concern them most.

In spite of these unpromising circumstances to which almost everyone in the modern world is more or less subject, it is still possible to advance in the degrees of prayer. But before going further we must mention very cursorily major differences in the forms of prayer developed respectively in Latin and Orthodox Christianity. Our comparison is basically with post Tridentine Catholic and hesychast spiritualities, and if this does not do entire justice to the global picture it will, nevertheless, serve the points we wish to make. Western Christianity was heir to the *devotio moderna* of the late Middle Ages which found its greatest expression in *The Imitation of Christ*, with its emphasis on the humanity of Christ, the events of the Life and the agonies of his Passion. It was an individual and even a “sin-centered” piety and marched in step with the growing sense of individuality developing in western Europe. The religious orders, for their part, developed systems of mental prayer which were in effect formal systems of meditation usually similar to the renowned *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola. In a contrast heightened by the Turkish occupation of Greece and the Balkans, the Orthodox were outwardly stagnant but inwardly their spiritual patrimony not only remained intact but flourished (especially in the development of hesychasm), relatively uncontaminated by contacts with Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe. A line can be drawn from the Orthodox Church under the “Turkocratia” to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the publication of the *Philokalia*, and the flowering of the *staretz* movement in the Russian Orthodox Church, a movement the last ele-

ments of which extended well into the twentieth century, marked in part by the appearance of the anonymous *The Way of the Pilgrim*, first in Russia, then in Germany, and then in western Europe and North America. And this brings us back to the present moment. The elaborate and formalized exercises employed in the mental prayer of Renaissance and Post Renaissance Catholicism, for a number of reasons, can no longer be prescribed for people living active and busy lives in the modern world. A monastic or at least a clerical context for their efficacy must be presumed. In a kind of irony, however, Orthodox hesychasm, older by far in its roots and universal in form is found to be much more adaptable to conditions of life in the modern world. This is certainly not to say that the quiet and serenity of the cloister do not present desirable conditions for prayer, and for someone living in the world it is particularly desirable to retreat from time to time to surroundings more dispositive to recollection and the divine remembrance. But once one has a certain basic formation the Jesus Prayer or Prayer of the Heart can be pursued as a background to exterior activity in the manner of the drone familiar in Byzantine chant and in classical Indian music. Moreover the Jesus Prayer, like the *dhikar*, can be utilized by those not disposed to elaborate mental constructs, somewhat as Aristotle observed: that there are men who have the habit of first principles but who are not proficient in discursive thinking. With enduring use the Jesus Prayer or Prayer of the Heart can become ingrained in the psyche to the point of becoming self-operating. *The Way of the Pilgrim*, mentioned above, is one good introduction to this way of prayer, and a good complement is *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain* by Hierotheos Vlachos.

But we must do justice to Post Reformation Catholicism, which produced many outstanding saints from the time of Trent onwards until the early twentieth century. But during this time there seems to be a quality that characterizes most of these *beati*, namely a declining prominence of the theological and speculative virtues and a growing preponderance of the social virtues in those whom the Roman Church canonized. Nevertheless, it is unquestionable that there were many saints-to-be in the Roman Church who found their way to the holy and blessed silence of *hesychia* (a quiet or stillness beyond discursive thought), even if they did not call it by this name. And if they often lacked adequate theory beyond the moral and psychological order, nevertheless there were

Catholic saints such as St. John of the Cross who in his writings not only dissected the human psyche in excruciating detail but, judging from the literary evidence, passed well beyond the formal order.³

Motives for Prayer

What are the motives for entering a Way centered upon the Prayer of the Heart or the Jesus Prayer? What is demanded of one coming to this practice? What are the goals? The motives, first of all, must be God-given, for “without Me you can do nothing”. If we simply wish to “try” the prayer, this is frivolous and entirely insufficient. Someone once said to us: “Oh, I have tried the Jesus Prayer and it didn’t do anything for me!” Of course it would do nothing for anyone taking up the practice with such inadequate motives; in fact, an experiment of this kind might well be counter-productive and detrimental, for an orthodox (note the lower case initial letter) context is presumed for the legitimate practice of the Prayer of the Heart. We read in the *Acts of the Apostles* of certain itinerant Jewish exorcists who undertook to invoke the Name of Jesus, saying “We command you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth’...The reply of the evil spirit to them, however, was ‘Jesus I know and Paul I know, but who are you?’. And the man possessed by the evil spirit sprang on them and mastered both of them so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.” One must not handle sacred things casually or without the requisite dispositions. The Jesus Prayer is comparable to the Eucharist in this respect, namely that it is surrounded with requirements and conditions lacking which what is meant as a means of grace may become counter-productive. “Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain”. Further, it is well to observe that the minimum motives and criteria for entering the Way of the Jesus Prayer or, *mutatis mutandis*, the Prayer of the Heart in whatever traditional context are readily provided by the Tradition itself.

We will not discuss faith here beyond noting, with Schuon, that genuine faith is an unarticulated *gnosis* in the depths of the heart, which com-

3. That the saint’s writings went well beyond the formal order is attested by the case with his own Carmelite order which “doctored” his writings so as to avoid unwanted attention from the Inquisition, a fact ascertained by two contemporary Catholic contemplatives who followed St. John’s teaching. Indeed, someone who could write the poems *Noche Oscura* and *Entréme Donde No Supe* could not have been limited to the *bhaktic* realm.

pletes the Catholic notion of faith as an intellectual virtue. As to the much abused word *love*, it is unfortunate that English uses this single word to cover the spectrum of meanings from lust to agape. Properly speaking, however, *love* in Christian usage is not a passion, not a feeling or sentiment; rather is it a work, a continuing effort to focus all one's faculties on the Personal God, the Lord. In Christian ambience the concept *love* is transposed so that this focus is not upon the humanity of Christ alone but especially upon the Logos, Divine Intellect and Lord of the worlds.

Obstacles to Prayer

Almost everyone who enters this way of the Prayer of the Heart will face a variety of obstacles and difficulties. There is, for example, simple inertia which exists in the psychic as well as in the physical world; indeed, physical inertia is often more easily overcome than psychic inertia. There is also the fact, mentioned above, that the cosmogonic process itself abets modern man's extreme extroversion. Then there is the fact that an initiative such as entering a Way of prayer implies the rupture of at least a peripheral equilibrium, involving "concomitant actions and reactions". On another level, all Traditions agree there are celestial creatures, intrepid and fulgurant beings of the formless order whom the Semitic monotheisms call angels—not to be confused with currently popular fantasies. There are also malign creatures inhabiting the cosmos, working in the psychic or subtle realm. The Semitic monotheisms call them fallen angels; or they may be what Muslims call *jinn* (whence "genie"), again creatures of the subtle order, though not all *jinn* are malevolent. There are also what Guénon called "wandering influences", vagrant psychic entities often harnessed for magic. And there is the psychic detritus of once-living beings, individual or collective. The nether world and its Lord (the "Lord of the flies") may be the polar attraction for many of these entities, and they are intent upon making mischief for men. Further, as in organic life the individual is continually assimilating from and excreting into his ambience, so there are analogous processes in the subtle or psychic realm. The individual, taking his cue from corporeal individuality, is not so discrete as he believes. Any of these factors may have some influence on the "noble traveller" who sets out on the Way. The psyche, in its lower registers especially, is like a zoo; when we sit down to invoke every manner of unimagined beast comes forth to dis-

turb our effort. The cosmos, Schuon observed, does not want anyone to escape its grasp.

Goals of Prayer

In closing let us turn briefly to the goals of invocatory prayer. The immediate goal for most men will be to bring a measure of order and direction into their lives. Expressed in another way, it is to effect an “auto-exorcism”⁴, for *in nomine meo daemonia ejicient* (*Mk xvi*, 17). An intermediate goal is to win a better post-mortem destiny. Death does not effect instant conversion; *outré tombe* there will be continuity in quality of life if not in kind. To the perennial question, *cur Deus homo*, why did God become man?, the response of the Christian East from St. Ireneus (himself a Greek from Asia Minor though he served as bishop of Lyon) onward was: “God became man that man might become God”; or as others put it, “the Word became flesh that flesh might become Word”. Or again, as Schuon aptly paraphrased it: “the Truth became flesh that flesh might become Truth”. The Goal is *deification* or *theosis*; image must return to Archetype, to its Divine Exemplar, part from which it totally lacks reality. This is what Dante expressed in *The Divine Comedy* in his relation with Beatrice who represents his Exemplar *in divinis*. It is true, unfortunately, that most contemporary exegetes do their best to bypass or attenuate this doctrine, doubtless believing their attitude necessary for pastoral reasons. Catholics, eg., simply ignore deification as far as possible. The Orthodox, with a greater sense of continuity with the Fathers, endeavour to attenuate its import. Responsibility for this lies in part in the fundamentally *bhaktic* character of Christianity—a character which is nevertheless not total because the Tradition itself implies complete metaphysical amplitude. Deification or *theosis* is the corollary of Incarnation.

In any case, the Orthodox doctrine implies an ontological reintegration. If Catholics are more reserved in expression, yet their doctrine of the *lumen gloriae*, the Light of Glory, fully implies the fullness of salvation through the knowledge of God—which can only be God knowing Himself in us. Nevertheless, it is not as individual that man will know God; “human nature has nothing to do with time”, said Eckhart. Frithjof Schuon has written that man can (and must) enter into relationship with

⁴. See *La Vie en son Nom*, Michel Laroche, 1992.

God as Divine Person, but that the Divine Person cannot be realized; one cannot “become” the Divine Person. On the other hand, man cannot have a relationship with the Absolute or Godhead, for It is beyond all relationship, beyond even the highest dualities, but one can realize It—with God’s help and according to the Will of Heaven, to be sure. And why can one not have a relationship with the Godhead or Self? Because the Self is the ultimate and universal Subject, the ultimate Understander. As the Upanishads ask, by what understanding could one understand the Understander? Schuon has also written of the anomaly of multiple “I’s” imagining themselves to be eternal entities. Similarly, the late physicist Erwin Schrödinger⁵ wrote that “consciousness is a singular of which the plural is unknown”. And Plotinus spoke of God as “transcendently the Self”—God in Whom we are able to make legitimate distinctions but Who, nonetheless, is supremely One. Indeed, from the perspective of the Vedanta, “Unity is already a procession”, as Coomaraswamy remarked.

Man hungers and thirsts for Reality. His intelligence, his will, his affective nature are all fashioned to a divine measure. This deformity “is because the Intellect [both created and uncreated] is preeminent among our inner powers...”, according to St. Gregory Palamas. “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth...Light upon Light; God guides to His Light whom He will” (*Qu’ran*, xxiv, 35, *Surat an-Nur*). “In Him was Life, and this Life was the Light of men” (*John* i, 4); and “in His Light we see Light” (*Psalms* xxxv, 10). “One Eternal of all those that pass and are not. One Conscious in all consciousness...He alone is the great Source. Master of their works and home of all that liveth, the great Witness, the Well of conscious life, Absolute, without qualities [in the sense of being beyond qualification]” (*Svetasvetara Upanishad* vi, 13 & 11). God is infinitely present and near, “closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet”, more truly our Self than we are ourselves. But for His Presence and perfect knowledge of us we would be totally absent, that is to say, non-existent.

Man has paid a dreadful price for his wish to be totally independent, to forget and turn his back upon the Divine. More and more the modern world, man’s own creation, is being revealed as a wasteland, void of

5. To cite Schrödinger does not imply that physicists or any other scientists have special competence outside their rather narrow fields of expertise.

genuine values, void of any but the most peripheral satisfactions, void of ultimate meaning. Time is short and life is fleeting, but there remains a “Well amid the waste,” a “fountain of Living Water”; and this is prayer, a window on Eternity, constantly beckoning, constantly rewarding. *Carpe diem!* Seize the day, the opportunity.

A Moment's Halt—a momentary taste
Of BEING from the Well amid the Waste—
And Lo!—the phantom Caravan has reacht
The NOTHING it set out from—Oh, make haste!

*(Rubāiyāt, Omar Khayyām
Fitzgerald's fourth version)*

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