

# The Metaphysical Underpinnings of Prayer

By Philip Connaughton

**T**he opinion which would deny that Absolute Being is the source of manifestation cannot claim to be more than mere opinion since, by precluding 'absoluteness' it reduces all knowledge and truth to the domain of relativity, where any statement can be counterbalanced by its opposite. When agnostics or atheists claim that only the world of relativity is certain and real because it is 'demonstrably so' they clearly opt for only one aspect of relativity, and one hardly needs a demonstration to see that relativity is, in virtue of its obvious transience, likewise 'demonstrably *unreal*': "how can that be a real thing which is always passing away, and is first this and then that?" (Plato, *Cratylus*, 439,e). What atheism and agnosticism actually demonstrate is a negative subjectivity rather than a capacity for objective truth, since relativity, by definition, depends on the Absolute which, for its part, is not so much demonstrably, as *self-evidently* Real. Worldliness in general, if called to task, is thus obliged to cling to the absurd assumption that relativity is self-sufficient — or in theological terms — that the world is more real than God!

Contradiction is inherent in all worldly 'philosophies' because they are firstly predisposed to (earth-bound) limits, and then presume to 'pluck the stars from the sky' as, for example, when agnostics claim that man cannot have certainty and are then at pains to oppose those who would *believe* in the Beyond. Contradiction is also obvious in the predisposition of atheists who — simply because Transcendent Reality is beyond sensory perception — *believe* in its absence! Worldliness precludes that which by definition cannot be disproved, and then refuses to acknowledge its self-imposed limits.

To claim that reality consists only of transience and flux, is pure contradiction, for transience could not even be observed or remarked upon without some awareness of the *underlying* presence of its opposite, just as one could not observe or remark upon darkness without the assumption of light. Moreover, just as the capacity to observe transience as such is possible only on the assumption of an underlying continuity, so too, the *actuality* of transience is possible only on the basis of the *actuality* of its underlying Substance.

The underlying thread of continuity, which pervades all of manifestation and upon which it depends for its existence, is not other than the Heavenly or Creative Ray traditionally known as the *Axis Mundi*. Though the discursive intellect has, of course, the capacity to discern continuity, it is faith which spontaneously sees continuity as an *expression* of the *Axis Mundi* which is essentially 'beyond measure'. Prayer, as the expression of faith, is the microcosmic affirmation of the 'thread of life' or of the *Axis Mundi* by which man may return to his Source.

The fact that faith may appear as a 'mere intuition' is a reflection, not so much of the Reality to which it relates, but of its assimilation *within the limits of the discursive intellect*. Faith is measured, not by empirical demonstration, but by the degree to which it 'transports' man beyond his passive identification with the transient world. The essentially transcendent nature of faith is verified by the fact that it also characteristically manifests as a 'flash' of insight — in contrast to man's habitual 'darkness' — and conveys certitude that is appropriately 'beyond' question.

Ultimately Knowledge is strictly personal and incommunicable, not because of a lack of 'objectivity' but because it transcends the limits of manifestation. It is for this reason that faith — being knowledge of Transcendence — is not subject to demonstration since it relates to that which is 'beyond measure'. The content of faith is thus only 'subjectively verifiable' since its criterion of validity corresponds to St. Anselm's, "I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand" (*Proslogium*; Chapter 1). In other words, in saying that the content of faith is "subjectively verifiable" one means that it cannot be 'demonstrably verified' because of its essentially Transcendent nature; "He's a Blockhead who wants a proof of what he can't Perceive, And he's a fool who tries to make such a Blockhead believe" (William Blake, *Epigrams*: 16). In this context humility corresponds to the 'objective'

criterion of truth for, like Knowledge itself, it allows man to transcend himself and could also, by that fact, be regarded as the ‘aesthetic’ hallmark of truth.

The uncompromising opposition between worldliness and religion, or between this world and the Beyond, or again, between appearance and Substance is irreducible on the plane of duality and is crystallised in the statement, “He that is not with me is against me and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad” (Matt.12:30), or in the very notion of Transcendence. Since this opposition in effect constitutes the fabric of duality it is reflected throughout manifestation and consequently imposes itself on man so much so that even the attempt to avoid it results in ‘choice by default’ and represents a passive recapitulation of the ‘separation’ which reigns between the Absolute and the relative, or between God and man. The *raison d’être* of human intelligence — to discern truth by seeing beyond (transient and insubstantial) appearances to the underlying substance — is ultimately that man may choose the Truth and embrace the Real. It is thus in the nature of things that the avoidance of choice, is to choose the insubstantial by default since *not* choosing that which is Real is in effect to choose that which is *not* Real.

It is because worldliness restricts itself to sensory perceptions and the rational and discursive intellect that it is blind to the lack of common measure between continuity — which as the underlying Substance gives life — and transience which consumes man. Blindness to the significant difference between the intelligibility of continuity and the unintelligibility of flux epitomises worldliness and is equivalent to saying that the very notion of *significance* is without significance!

Passivity rests on the inability to see continuity *as a reflection* of Substance. Prayer, on the other hand, is an *active* ascendancy which results from the intuition or faith which transcends the sensorial or passive intelligence. Prayer, being the active affirmation of *continuity*, is opposed to worldliness which is passivity in relation to *transience*.



Since faith, as an intuition of the Source, and ultimate unity of manifestation, is commensurate with Transcendence, it is in opposition to the specific nature of the discursive knowledge which is commensurate with

the manifested world of duality. Faced with this opposition between faith and mere discursive reasoning — which as mentioned, not only corresponds to the ‘separation’ between God and man, but is irreducible on the level of manifestation — faith necessitates a ‘retreat’ from the outward world of duality with which the discursive intellect deals. In other words, in light of the opposition between worldliness and the Beyond, saying “Yes” to God (the Real) is preconditioned by the capacity to say “No” to the world. If prayer can be thought of as a ‘dying to the world’ or if “true philosophers are half dead” (*Phaedo*, 64b) it is because prayer is actually a “dying to [the illusory nature of] the world”.

The necessity of saying “No” to world, or the ‘retreat’ from outwardness is graphically confirmed by the fact that the Luminous Ray or *Axis Mundi*, which descends from the Transcendent, has its direct point of contact at the centre of the plane of existence whence it radiates horizontally or, as it were ‘indirectly’, to that entire plane of existence. Despite the fact that all creation depends on it, the horizontal radiation of this Luminous Ray — as opposed to its vertical descent — represents an ‘indirectness’ and is thus the ‘outward’ or ‘fallen’ refraction of the Vertical. It is for this reason that man, in reversal of the fall, is required to retreat to the (microcosmic) centre where he and his perception of relativity become as it were (humbly) concentrated into a single point *directly* beneath the *Axis Mundi*.

The fact that this retreat is susceptible of such graphic illustration highlights its essentially ‘universal’ nature, which is seen again in the direct correspondence between the physical retreat from the outward world, and the spiritual/Inward goal. The physical retreat which prayer typically entails is not only the material reflection of Centrality, but also represents a ‘support’ whereby man can realise Inwardness; “when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret” (*Matt.* 6:6).

Likewise, prayer “without ceasing” (1 *Thess.* 5:17) being a constant affirmation, is like a holy monotony that opposes the temporal flux and distraction of the world; “since...fallen man inevitably tends to become the slave of habits, the religions meet this necessity by the regular performance of rites, which become as it were sacred habits. Thus, through the Divine Mercy, the very limitations of fallen man are made the vehicles of spiritual influence” (Abu Bakr Siraj Ed-Din, *The Book of Certainty*, p. 84).

The retreat from this world to the Inward point beneath the Divine Axis is in effect the realisation of humility. Humility is essentially the *concrete* assimilation of the ‘unreality’ of relativity *vis a vis* the Reality of the Absolute, and the realisation that there is no common measure between the two. Humility corresponds to the devotional sacrifice of oneself, while prayer corresponds to the *active* devotion which then extends, from this central point, upwards along the vertical life-line.



Prayer has the capacity to bridge the unimaginable chasm between man (the relative) and God (the Absolute) in virtue of its ‘universality’, for while it consists of faith which aspires to the highest possible Reality, its necessary point of departure is humility.

Faith — which aspires to the ‘*abstract*’ heights of Transcendence from the ‘*concrete*’ depth of humility — is realised by prayer which corresponds to the *practical* embrace — ‘with both hands’ — of its *theoretical* content.

Faith and humility together transcend the dichotomy of the ‘abstract’ height and the ‘concrete’ depth, and are thus, *in principle*, the conditions of universality. The *practical* or actual synthesis of the two (faith and humility/*abstract* height and *concrete* depth) in prayer is possible in virtue of the latter being the subjective/microcosmic realisation of the *Axis Mundi*.

While prayer is thus the hallmark of universality, or microcosmic integrity — the degree to which the aspiration of one’s theoretical knowledge coincides with the depth of one’s concrete being — it is also the spontaneous expression of integrity, and the discipline whereby it continues.

In other words, if the ‘fall of man’ is characterised by a passive lack of integrity, prayer is the active re-integration of one’s *being* with one’s *knowledge*. Man’s (spiritual) integrity, or true microcosmic status — aspirational *height* combined with humble *depth* — is, in principle, possible by virtue of the *Axis Mundi*, and is realised, in practice, by its subjective counterpart prayer.

As seen above, the outright denial of the Beyond stems ultimately from blindness of the fact that there is no common measure between worldly transience and its underlying continuity. There is also a ‘lesser blind-

ness' which consists of having a theoretical awareness of the Beyond but which does not bring forth prayer. Though this lesser blindness corresponds to a belief in the Beyond, it is not accompanied by a correlative assimilation of the 'unreality' of manifestation and results in the Beyond being assimilated in specifically human terms or as merely an 'abstract extension' of the material world. Though this state represents a lesser blindness it is in a sense 'neither here nor There' for while it claims to have some inkling of the Beyond it remains more or less passive in relation to the flux of the world.

A true assimilation of Transcendent Reality entails the corresponding assimilation of the 'unreality' of this world, which is to say faith in the Beyond, properly speaking, entails a corresponding humility. Faith in the 'abstract' height of Transcendence presupposes 'concrete' depth of humility; just as saying "Yes" to God and saying "No" to the world are essentially simultaneous aspects of the same spiritual journey.

Just as the beauty of a flower is clearly 'from Heaven', its upward tendency or aspirational splendour cannot be realised without its roots in the earth. The vertical stem or life-line between the roots and the manifestation of Beauty (essentially Divine and Transcendent) is the *Axis Mundi* and the sap within it is prayer. In other words while the fragile and ephemeral beauty standing at the summit of the vertical stem/axis is clearly 'not of this world' and recalls that Beauty in itself is Transcendent the particular realisation of its earthly splendour depends on humility or having realised its 'roots in the mundane' as it reaches toward its Heavenly Source. Humility which is the earthly correspondence of Divine Beauty, finds its expression in prayer, the aspirational life-force (or sap) which connects the two.



The fact that the greatest of saints frequently considered themselves the greatest of sinners exemplifies the coincidence of humility and Transcendence. The particular manifestation of humility that such saints represent is not so much a lack of objectivity as the realisation that, in contrast with their intimate sense of the Absolute, they, and the world, seem 'less, or worse than nothing'. Nonetheless, in metaphysical terms,

humility is not so much a self-abasement or sense of unworthiness, as knowledge of the ‘nothingness’ of relativity, just as conversely, the pride of imagining oneself to “be someone” is not so much pretence as *ignorance* of Reality.

It may seem impious to suggest that humility and prayer depend on knowledge rather than on the merit. In actual fact, it could be said that the reverse is true, for man’s merit is his humility and corresponds to the humble realisation that his knowledge at best represents a mere shadow of Knowledge as such, as when Plato, speaking on behalf of the Oracle at Delphi says, “The wisest of you men is he who has realised, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless” (*Apology*, 23 b). In other words, this humility, or acknowledgement of limits corresponds to the summit of human knowledge. Moreover, in virtue of being the “summit of human knowledge”, humility is “the objective criterion of truth” — as stated above — in the context of knowledge which is only “subjectively verifiable” or otherwise ‘beyond demonstration’.

In actual fact humility (extinction of the ego) corresponds not only to the summit of human knowledge but is also the ‘basis of Wisdom’ for it is where human knowledge meets — and is extinguished by — Knowledge as such. It is, again using graphic imagery, only at this ‘geometrical point’ or this isthmus that the Divine ‘directly’ meets the human. The ‘humility of Socrates’ represents therefore, not only the summit of human knowledge, but also the *basis* of Wisdom since only when the ‘unreality’ of relativity is acknowledged can the Reality of the Absolute be made known.

If prayer reaches from the ‘here below’ to the Transcendent Beyond, it also allows the Transcendent to reach man; for in prayer man not only meets God but *a fortiori* God meets man; “...and whoso seeketh to approach Me one span, I approach him one cubit: and whoso seeketh to approach Me one cubit, I approach him two fathoms: and whoso walketh towards Me, I run towards him; and whoso cometh before Me with an earth full of sins, and believeth solely in Me, him I come before with a face of forgiveness as big as the earth” (*hadith qudsi*). The superabundance of the Divine response confirms the content of man’s faith that there is no common measure between the Absolute and the relative, for prayer is actually not so much man’s gift of himself to God, but God’s gift of

Himself to man. It is the Divine that meets man, for human efforts — in accordance with the Transcendence of God — cannot as such stretch to the Beyond.



Knowledge, which is not aware of its natural limits, is not knowledge but folly, *manifesting* as pride, while humility — defined by an awareness of its limits — is the *implicit* foundation of knowledge.

The gift of intelligence is of value only in so far as it recognises its limits, which is to say that The summit of human knowledge paradoxically coincides with the (humble) recognition of its limits and only at this point or summit can the Divine, or true Reality directly meet man. Man's part, strictly speaking, is in saying "No" to (the world of) illusion, Reality says "Yes" to man. In retreating from the world to the central Axis the *direct* nature of the link between man — the last in the sequence of creation — and the Source, is re-established which is then clearly not so much a case of man saying "Yes" to God, as God saying "Yes" to man: "My slave ceaseth not to draw near unto Me by devotions of his free will until I love him; and when I love him, I am the hearing whereby he heareth and the sight whereby he seeth and the hand wherewith he smiteth and the foot whereon he walketh" (*hadith qudsi*).

Human knowledge, which is ignorant of its natural limits, is, by that fact, bound by them and will manifest its ignorance in pride. Without the insight which humility represents it remains a passive conceit which is blind to the ever-presence of Divine influence. Knowledge which, on the other hand, is conscious of its 'conditional' limits is thereby able to transcend them for the quality of humility coincides with the Activity of Heaven reaching down to man.

The change of emphasis from man searching for God, to God searching for man corresponds to a shift to the perspective which assumes the 'non-duality' of Reality (Source and manifestation) or the 'Oneness of Being' (*Wahdat al-wujúd*) and that consequently all 'conditional reality' or relativity depends entirely upon its *participation in* (unconditional) Reality.

As seen above when considering knowledge, the intrinsic 'universality' of knowledge depends entirely on its (humble) awareness of being



nothing in itself and that this awareness of its conditions or limits indicates that it is '*essentially above and beyond*' them. Ignorance of, or a proud refusal to acknowledge the 'natural' limits, on the other hand, ensures subjection to them. This paradoxical quality of 'conscious humility' as the *sine qua non* of true Knowledge illustrates precisely that all 'relative knowledge' is nothing apart from its (conscious) *participation in* Knowledge as such, for knowledge which is not *conscious* is not, properly speaking, knowledge. This is as much to say that the measure of veracity depends on the (humble) awareness of *active* or conscious *participation in* Knowledge itself, viz. the Logos or the Activity of the Creative Ray.

When the specifically metaphysical perspective of 'non-duality' or the 'Oneness of Being' is paraphrased in theological terms it is equivalent to saying, as above, that "man's merit is his humility" or that it depends on his *realisation* (knowledge) that he does not have merit apart from God who is the only Reality. All relative merit not only depends on, but is also measured by the *consciousness* of its dependence on the superabundance of God. In this 'definition of merit' it is seen that prayer *is* merit, for prayer is nothing other than the overflowing of this consciousness of dependence upon God.

When man, for the sake of the one and only (Transcendent) Reality, abandons himself and this world as being *nothing more than* a transient illusion 'his' knowledge is then essentially a participation in Knowledge as such (the Creative Logos) whereby Transcendence coincides with Immanence and the world is thus 'transmuted' into *nothing less than* the continuous participation in the Divine Source.

The superabundance of Divine response, "and whoso walketh towards Me, I run towards him" from the *hadith qudsi* quoted above, is also found in the Gospels: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things will be added unto you" (Matt.; 6:33). With this in mind, if sacrifice is saying "No" to oneself and the world, it can just as easily be seen as the first phase of God saying "Yes" to man, for that which we sacrifice is returned to us (*sacer-ficio*; literally "to make sacred") as the continuous Splendour of God — the superabundance expression of the only Reality. In other words, after the sacrifice of, or retreat from the false plenitude of the world, manifestation in all of its multiplicity is then transmuted

to its sacred aspect, the overflowing abundance of God's Immanence.

To the worldly, as it were intoxicated or overcome by duality, manifestation appears alternately as a seductive plenitude or a disappointing vale of tears, and is, in either case always assumed to be 'real'. For the spiritual traveller, on the other hand, this world is both an earthly exile *and* the Splendour of Divine manifestation which never seems quite real.

In light of the fact that worldly flux 'is not other than' Divine Splendour, the transmutation mentioned above, is really a 'subjective realisation' and while it may appear as a 'dramatic event', there is 'in Reality' no change. Objectively, or rather from the point of view of the 'Oneness of Being', manifestation *is* the Splendour of Reality for despite being 'outside' God's Absoluteness, it is contained Eternally within His Infinity.