

What Happens When You Pray?

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The topic of prayer is important to Christians and a number of recent books have been largely concerned with it. One of the latest is Hubert Richards' *What Happens When You Pray?*¹ a work that is likely to gain a lot of readers since Richards is now one of the most popular religious writers in Britain. Unfortunately, however, he is also somewhat misguided, and what follows is intended to say why. I do not want to write at length, and much of what I argue needs detailed development that I do not provide. But I still want to hold that more can be said of prayer than Richards allows. If you can begin to see why I am right, my purpose here will have been achieved.

To put things in perspective, it ought first to be agreed that much of what Richards says is, in fact, correct. Take, for example, the following remarks on God:

There is a sense in which God is apart from our world, beyond it, 'other' than and 'different' from everything else in our experience. He remains the transcendent mystery, and if we don't give expression to that sometimes, indeed often, we will make him into an idol in our own image and likeness. (p 43)

All of that is thoroughly in order. We have to talk of God in words which are normally applied to objects in the world, and, in doing so, we can often make statements that are perfectly true. But God is not an intelligible subject possessing attributes. He is not a member of a class or genus, not a being among beings. As Aquinas puts it, God 'is identical with his own godhead, with his own life and with whatever else is similarly said of him'.² Herbert McCabe has recently made the point in a more contemporary idiom:

If the question of God were a neat and simple question to be answered in terms of familiar concepts, then whatever we are talking about, it is not God. A God who is in this sense comprehensible would not be worth worshipping, or even talking about (except for the purpose of destroying him) ... God cannot be a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should add up to make two.³

God is the cause of absolutely everything, the reason why things exist at all. Take them away and there would not be a lonely individual called 'God'. There would simply be nothing at all.

Another good thing about Richard's approach is its attitude to the question of intervention. Does God *intervene* when prayer is answered? As Richards sees very well, the answer is 'No'. I can intervene to stop a fight, and you can intervene by replying to this article. But if God could intervene, he would not be God.

Instead, he would only be something like the 'magnified and non-natural man' whose followers were satirized by Matthew Arnold. In Richards' terms:

By definition, a God who intervenes only occasionally in human affairs is normally absent from them, and such a God is not worth having ... For the Christian the world and its people and their occupations are not things he has to turn away from in order to find God. On the contrary, he must turn towards them and understand them more deeply, for that is where God is. And therefore the progress of science is a source of joy to him, not of disquiet. When scientific discovery pushes God out of the area which pagans thought belonged exclusively to him – lightning, volcanoes, earthquakes, storms – he is delighted. It helps him to see that God is the God of the whole world, not just of extraordinary areas. He is not a God who comes into the world to do the occasional job. He is present as love in everything, even in disasters, even in crucifixion.

(pp 19 and 44-45)

But it is one thing to say all this, and another to give the impression that we cannot really ask for things from God, that we cannot address him as other than us and as able to provide what we want. Yet that is the impression that Richards conveys. Consider, for example, the following:

As one by one the alternatives are analysed and eliminated, the awful truth gradually dawns on us that the matter lies entirely in our own hands ... Then what on earth are we praying for? Why turn to God if he has really left the running of the world to us? ... What we do in prayer is formulate ourselves in God's sight, and in the hope of his kingdom, and we acknowledge the part we must play in bringing it about ... Prayer is caring desperately for our world, and hoping against hope that the impossible dream should come true ... To intercede therefore is not to stand back and wait for miracles to happen, but to declare ourselves willing to strive for what we ask. To pray is to formulate our needs and desires and fears in the sight of God, that is to say, at the greatest depth and with the utmost seriousness.

(pp 51-52 and 77-78)

Notice the word 'entirely' in the first sentence. And notice the suggestion that we run independently of God in a world that is left only for us to run. Richards is clearly anxious to counter the view that all we need to do is sit still and wait for God to act, and that view must certainly be countered. But, as far as I can see, in his attempt to do so Richards has now come about as close to a denial of the doctrine of creation as it is possible to get. He can, for instance, fairly be associated with writers like George Eliot. In 1853 she wrote: 'I begin to feel for other people's wants and sorrows a little more than I used to do. *Heaven help us! said the old*

religion; the new one, from its very lack of that faith, will teach us all the more to help one another'.⁴ Not surprisingly, Richards is eventually left with only two positive things to say about genuine prayer. 'Praying', he explains, 'can relieve the tension of the person who prays' (p 62). It can also, he adds, be a practice in which one changes one's attitudes and behaviour. 'The prayer that one's enemies be forgiven', says Richards, 'is answered in the very act of saying such a prayer ... The very act of praying is its own answer' (pp 64-65). In other words, according to Richards, praying is essentially talking to oneself.

Now I do not wish to deny that prayer can be therapeutic. I have rarely found it so, but, like hot baths and a good sleep, it may well be so for some people. Nor should I deny that a prayer can itself be viewed as its own answer. In some cases, perhaps it can. But, unless you deny the existence of God, it makes perfectly good sense to add that prayer is also a matter of asking God for things, even for things that people themselves can bring about. It need not be thought of as simply a matter of getting on with something on our own, of, in an absolute sense, doing our own thing. Yet Richards seems oblivious to this point. Instead, he seems to think that to ask God for something is just a form of manipulation. Talking of intercessory prayer he writes:

Taken literally, it presupposes a God who is able to provide magically what we are unable to provide for ourselves, who is ignorant of our needs before we inform him, who is really basically loth to grant our wishes and needs to be talked into doing so, and who responds best, therefore, to pressure and repetition. (p 72)

But that is simply nonsense. I can (*literally*) ask God for X and thereby (a) express my desire for X, (b) express my desire that God should bring X about, and (c) express my knowledge that everything comes from God. And, far from thinking of my prayer as an attempt to manipulate God, I can actually regard it as brought about by him. Indeed, if God is the Creator and not just a celestial spectator, that is just what it must be.

In this connection it is again worth referring to Aquinas. At one point he asks whether it is appropriate (*conveniens*) to pray. First, he cites three reasons offered for holding that it is not: that we cannot inform an omniscient God, that God's mind is unchanging, and that God is generous enough to give without being asked. Then he writes as follows:

One must remember that divine providence not only disposes what effects will take place, but also the manner in which they take place, and which actions will cause them. Human acts are true causes, and therefore men must perform certain actions, not in order to change divine providence, but in order to obtain certain effects in the manner determined by God. What is

true of natural causes is true also of prayer, for we do not pray in order to change the decree of divine providence, rather we pray in order to impetrate those things which God has determined would be obtained only through our prayers. In other words, men pray that *by asking they might deserve to receive what Almighty God decreed to give them from all eternity*, as Gregory says.⁵

Like Richards, Aquinas refuses to think of prayer as a form of magic. But, unlike Richards, he sees that we can ask for things in prayer since God is the source of all that is real, which means that prayer can never be just an activity of ours. God, you might say, prays in us. And since we can pray as well, we can also pray by asking for things. If no one asks for anything, then nobody gets answered. And, though my prayer cannot *make* God bring something about, God can bring something about in accordance with my prayer, which is Aquinas' basic point in the passage quoted above. Richards seems to think that if prayer is not just our activity, it can only be coercive. But the conclusion does not follow, for prayer can never be *just* our activity. At one point Richards comes close to accepting this. God, he observes, 'is the Supreme Insider, the ground of our being and the inspiration of our deepest desires ... The more active we are, the more active he is. For our activity does not exclude his' (p 74). That is exactly right, but Richards, infuriatingly when you come to think of it, does not seem to appreciate its significance for talk about prayer. He cannot see that asking for things in prayer, *literally* asking for things, need not be taken as an instance of trying to put the screws on God. And that is why he is, as I said at the outset, misguided.

Before concluding, however, it is also worth touching on one final point. We can ask for things in prayer, but do we get what we ask for? What shall we say about the answer to prayer?

My own view, for what it is worth, is that there is really not a lot to be said. If I pray for something particular, and if what I pray for comes about, it can truly be said that my prayer has been answered. For whatever comes about comes from God, and if something comes about in accordance with my prayer, then God has brought something about in accordance with my prayer. If, on the other hand, what I ask for does not happen, then it is hard to see that any certainly accurate explanation of the fact can be given. At one level, of course, that may not be so. My friend sets out to fly to America, and I pray for his safe arrival. The plane crashes and he is killed. Given sufficient empirical data, I could probably tell you why this happened. But, at a deeper level, it is not so easy to account for unanswered prayer. It is perfectly clear that prayer is often unanswered, at least in the sense that the precise thing asked for often does not come about. But to ask why this is so is

really the same as asking why anything happens at all. And that is like asking why God creates at all, which is not a question that we can answer in any readily intelligible terms. We can say that 'God creates out of love' or that 'God creates to show forth his glory'. But such remarks are certainly puzzling. They look like explanations of someone's behaviour, but they cannot be. For God is not just another person alongside the rest of us.

Yet this is not to say that we should give up asking for things in prayer, and, here again, one must take issue with Richards. He notes that some prayers seem to be unanswered; and that is fair enough. But his gloss on the fact is not. According to Richards, the Bible holds that anything one prays for will be given. Since the Bible is wrong, he adds, we cannot take seriously the business of asking for things in prayer – or, rather, in prayer we can only 'ask' in a non-literal sense (Cf Chapter 4). But why should we say this?

One reason for holding that we should not (a reason noted by Richards, but not given the weight it deserves) is perfectly obvious. Many prayers will conflict with each other. Then again, it is surely possible for people to ask for what it would not, in the long run, be good for them to have. This point is also alluded to by Richards, but his manner of dealing with it is not satisfactory. He writes:

It is not 'what God wills' that is promised, but 'what *you* will'. And indeed the promise of anything less would be pointless. It would be like saying, 'You may ask for any colour you like, as long as it's black.' If the choice is already fixed by God's will, why pray? ... The main difficulty against the solution here being offered is that it does not stand up to the test of experience. What people experience is not that they are refused things which may be contrary to the will of God; even what is unambiguously in accordance with his will fails to materialize, however persistently it is prayed for. (p 60)

One reply to this is that what is promised is what God wills *as well as* what we will. Biblical promises that requests will be granted live beside the stress that God's will comes first, and only a very odd kind of selective biblical literalism would fail to recognize the fact. But, in any case, and more importantly, how does Richards know 'what is quite unambiguously' in accordance with God's will? He seems very confident that he does know, but, even waiving the obvious point that only God can properly understand the will of God, it needs to be observed that if a prayer is unanswered then that *is* God's will. As I said above, the problem of unanswered prayer is really the same as the problem of creation. And, unless we say that something can be thus and so in spite of God's will (unless we deny the doctrine of creation), we will have to maintain that whatever follows unanswered prayer is just as much in accordance with God's will as anything else. Some people have made this point by saying that the answer to prayer can be 'No', a move

which Richards calls 'silly'. 'It is silly', he says, 'to pretend that prayers to which the answer is no are "answered"' (p 58). If I can only answer you by giving you whatever you ask, that is, of course, correct. But it does not take away from the fact that 'No' is every bit as much of an answer as 'Yes', as any reader of dictionaries will tell you.

There is more to say about Richards' new book, but to say it here would divert attention from the points I want to emphasize. Suffice it, then, to conclude at this stage that *What Happens When You Pray?* just does not go far enough. If the book is treated to a second edition, maybe the defect can be remedied. In the meantime, we must make our own corrections.

- 1 SCM Press Ltd 1980. pp 96. £2.50.
- 2 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a,3,3.
- 3 'God: I – Creation', *New Blackfriars*, October 1980, pp 411-412.
- 4 See J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (Edinburgh and London, 1885), Vol. I, p 302.
- 5 *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 83,2. Cf Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, pp 95-96.

Reviews

UNDERSTANDING MYSTICISM edited by Richard Woods O P Image Book *Double-day*, New York. pp xi + 586 \$7.95.

The editor in his valuable Introduction points out that 'to date there has been no attempt to provide a selection of critical studies [of mysticism], both "classical" and contemporary, particularly those written from a comparative viewpoint and exhibiting a wide range of enquiry'. Certainly this book performs that service. He also tells us that 'most of the essays were gathered as reference material for students in university courses on the psychology and theology of mysticism'. All that is possible in a review is to draw attention to a certain number of these essays. In Part I, on the various ways in which the word 'mysticism' is understood, Margaret Smith and Evelyn Underhill are represented, followed by Louis Bouyer's essay of 1952, some characteristic passages of Zaehner's, a criticism of him by Ninian Smart and a somewhat enigmatic discussion of the distinction between mystical experience and 'superstructures' by Fritz Staal.

In Part II, on mysticism in world religions, a (for me) unilluminating paper by Suzuki ('The Basis of Buddhist Philosophy') is more than compensated for by W E Hocking's essay 'The Mystical Spirit and Protestantism' (1944) – this philosopher has been too quickly forgotten, at least over here. Happily he reappears in Part III ('Scientific Investigations'), following an attractive paper by William James; the other essays under this heading may prove at times too much for some readers, but it should be easy to pick out their conclusions. Among the 'Philosophical and Aesthetic Evaluations' of Part IV there is a condensation of Bergson's Part III in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, a most readable, if at times amateurish, essay of Auden's, a useful confrontation of John Hick with Terence Penelhum and an impressive paper on the Self by Louis Dupré. Part V ('Theological Appraisals') is a little disappointing. Maréchal has a few magisterial pages, but after that there is