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Prayers, Words, and Temptation*

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To Elyakim Robinstein

In addressing people living far away, the prophet Isaiah (56.5–7) says: 'And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.'

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In gathering here today for a few moments of prayer led by a religious non-Christian, a word of explanation is due. Praying in public is a devotional signal. What it signals is that a community has gathered to share one-heartedly in all that is said and done. Like sacrifices, prayers require wholeness and purity. Furthermore, in offering its prayers to God, a community creates a venue that transforms words into verbal gifts. These gifts epitomise total and unreserved submission to the divine. A community emptying itself before God creates a body the inner space of which is the place inviting the benevolence of the holy presence to unfold.

At the same time, it is unfortunate to observe that the rays radiating from prayers often shape into walls. These walls may be excused as protecting privacy or self-identity; however, they do create denominational borderlines. While ideally consolidating similarities, in reality prayer books – viewed comparatively – intimate notions, and create dynamics, of difference and alienation. Prayer books shape devotional stances as issues that have cutting and hurting edges.

* [The article printed here represents an address given as part of the opening session of the meeting of the 55th Annual Meeting of the SNTS in Tel Aviv on 31 July 2000. The proceedings of each day of SNTS meetings are generally prefaced by a session devoted to prayer, during which an address is often given. These addresses are normally never published. However, on this occasion a number of those present expressed the view that the address has raised so many important issues that they hoped that the address could be put into the public domain; as a result, Professor Gruenwald kindly agreed to allow the address to be published here. The text of the address reproduces his original words. The prayer which appears at the end here is also Professor Gruenwald's own, composed specifically for the occasion. Ed.]

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Furthermore, prayer books are functional in propelling theological nuances to become big issues in denominational fractioning.

Indeed, religions do establish and consolidate differences. Establishing notions of otherness is as natural to religion as social existence to the individual. Three times a day we Jews pray that the 'they' who do not share in Judaic beliefs and forms of practice should be deprived of all hope, both in this world and in that to come. We use strong words to create and maintain barriers that cannot, and theologically speaking should not, be crossed. It does not make it easier for me, when I hear the comments of my fellow historians. They tell me that these prayers originally were an expression of self-defence against the consequences of schismatic tendencies as enacted by the new Christians and Gnostics.

However, in letting me lead this prayer today something makes itself evident that this whole Annual Meeting makes clear. The academic setting allows for things to happen that we cannot so naturally assume and achieve in our churches and synagogues. Praying in a setting that is basically academic gives prayers a new chance. An awareness crystallises in which common sense, toleration, and critical judgement prevail. Catholics and Protestants sit together, and thus give expression to an existential unity that transcends deep-cutting differences. Basically, there cannot but be unanimity before the one and the same God. The outgoing president, Hans Dieter Betz, and the incoming president, François Bovon, should, therefore, be blessed with our thanks for creating this unique opportunity of sharing prayers today. Let us pray to the health of all the members of the Society, those who are here and those whose thoughts are with us today. Let us pray to the well-being of our families that graciously grant us the spiritual space for free and creative work. Let us pray for the health, physical and mental alike, of our students. Finally, let us pray together that until we meet again, next year in Montreal, peace will come to this bleeding region and stay for ever.

Reflecting further on the subject of prayer, I was led into alleys in which I found lost words – dehumanised and godforsaken. For a long time now language is undergoing sectarian changes that easily link themselves to processes of devaluation. We academics often indulge in a scientific jargon that we consider to be the acme of scholarly ingenuity. However, to the outsider we sound as if conducting a discourse that celebrates esotericism. Furthermore, students often complain to me that in many of the classrooms question marks and scepticism are not given an epistemological chance. The hybris of unshakable certainties is not only a blemish on intellectual decency. It marks the use of language to manipulate the minds of young people who have not yet acquired the skills of discerning truth from temptation. It is very easy to blame the media for creating illusions with big words and over-dramatised forms of expression. Indeed, the media too often serve the goals of partisan interests and informative seduction. However, let us not clean the houses of others before doing the needed job in our own territory.

In short, we should all beware of words that create the kind of euphoria in

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which, ultimately, redundancy and the exclusion of the other receive undeserved prominence. When we sometimes say that a word is no longer a word, we should be aware of the fact that more is implied than simply a reference to the loss of confidence in the promises that build on words. In some essential ways, we can only blame ourselves for forcing words into a position in which their false glory is the only side that shines. In modern semiotic theory, words are signs. Thus, a disturbing question arises, did God create the world with a 'sign' rather than with a life-giving 'logos'? One cannot but watch, today, with agony and pain the dehumanisation of words. Words have had a fall – from what used to be their virginal dignity to a state in which their eligibility for devotional purposes is seriously impaired. One of our most urgent tasks as a praying community, then, is to restore the dignity of words and their suitability for prayers. Retrieving the original beauty and purity of words, their innocence and their accountability, is an essential task, in this respect. A first step in that direction is made in ameliorating our capability to hear what words say, whether used by us or by others. Another step is made in making promises deserve the words that were used in making them. Yet another step is accomplished, when exclamation is adjusted to the scale of modesty. And there is more to say on this than time permits.

Evidently, certain notions that originally prevailed when the original prayers were composed have substantially changed. Let me give one example. A monthly Jewish prayer for the new moon says: 'Just as I dance before you but I cannot touch you, so may none of my enemies be able to touch me with evil intent.' This part of the prayer comes from a Talmudic source. It reflects the basic notion already expressed in Ps 115.16, to the effect that 'The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of men'. This clear-cut separation between the heavenly and the earthly is one of the key notions in the religion of ancient Israel. As Prov 30.4 says: 'Who has ascended to heaven and come down?' The space age, with its famous moon walk, has brought about a basic change in our cosmological picture. I suggest seeing in this event a paradigmatic example that raises questions that can no longer be ignored. They concern the intellectual integrity that is required at moments of prayer. If we want to preserve our cognitive integrity at those cherished moments, then, clearly, some words have to give way and allow for new ones, entailing new concepts and meanings, to shine through.

The face of the moon is one of the more visible appearances of change in nature. For thousands of years it is a symbol, an evident sign, of the dynamics of nature that is dependent on divine omniscience that brings changes into effect. Complementarily, for thousand of years man considered himself to be bound to the non-changeability of the truths about himself, his environment, and his basic beliefs. However, mankind has reached a stage in which new forms of knowledge are easily adopted, even yearned for. Indeed, there is no solidity in any kind of knowledge that cannot undergo change. Mankind is, however, slow in allowing changes to come into effect. Religious beliefs and concepts are not the only

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examples, in this respect. However, changes in these particular areas are as desirable and urgent as in all other spheres of life. If the plants have to grow, the ice around them has first to melt away.

I have referred to the utterances in the Jewish prayer books that condemn the 'other'. Needless to say, such utterances cannot but breed hate and evil. Words can have no claim of innocence, when one intends them to create alienation and deprivation of rights. If sincerity is our pledge, then there is no way back from what the present line of argumentation wishes to establish. In our humanistic agenda, prayers must undergo a courageous process of scrutinisation. To tell the truth, there are notorious instances in which certain scriptural injunctions to hate one's foe cannot but create for us moments of irresistible temptation. However, being faced by temptation, we are well advised to turn the other cheek rather than fall into a self-destructive trap. We cannot speak two languages at one and the same time: preach toleration and then join in prayers that advocate religious intolerance. There is a limit even to the power of metaphors to show the way to the mental escape exits. Furthermore, the beauty of metaphorical modes of speech should not be the environment in which concessions to ambivalence and redundancy are made.

We have mentioned temptation. Life is full of seductions that look like great opportunities. Words play a great, though risky, role in determining when and where the continental divide between purity of language and its abuse is reached and even crossed. On a deeper, though not less alarming, level, it takes a hair's breadth to slip from the erotic beauty of the Song of Songs to pornographic sexuality that disguises itself as permissiveness backed up by ideological stances. We need common sense to discern good from evil; we need tact to make our decisions reasonable; we need responsibility to make our judgments morally acceptable; we need self-restraint so as not to encroach upon the rights of the other. In short, unconditional benevolence should prevail when paucity of grace is the big attraction associated with power.

Let us, then, retrieve the places in our human existence that help democratic pluralism show in its unblemished aesthetics. May God help us maintain our mental integrity and alertness to distinguish correctly between creative diversity and self-destructive confusion. Let us do our best so as to shape our prayers as a holy marriage between loving hearts and purified words. In the Jewish calendar, the nine days of mourning over the destruction of the Temple begin in two days' time. Reacting to the destruction of the temple, a contemporary sage, Rabbi Eli`ezer, said: 'Since the destruction of the Temple the gates of prayer have been locked . . . and in spite of the fact that the gates of prayer have been locked, the gates of tears have not been locked.' What is it, then, that in a condition of plight and loss we should shed our tears for? I believe that it is the dark emptiness that engulfs us when we realise that God seems not to care.

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We do need God's help to accomplish our prayers. This is what the psalmist says when he appeals to God (Ps 51.6–17): 'Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart … Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me … O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.'

A Prayer for the Blessing of Peace

Bless us, our Father,
All of us as one,
With grace and love,
With courage and righteousness,
With fraternal compassion and purity of heart;
So that we who pray –
Shall no longer pray one against the other;
And that all the sons of Abraham,
Shall see the virtues of the light
That makes peace shine –
Whole, truthful, and blossoming with life.

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