New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12299

Kierkegaard on Prayer

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The slightest acquaintance with Kierkegaard's life and work, *Samlede Vaerker* especially his journal, will have made it abundantly clear that he was a man of prayer. In 1954 Samuel Barber composed a cantata, *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, given its first performance on 3 December that year by the Boston Symphony Orchestra with Leontyne Price, soprano, as the soloist. T.H. Croxall, *Meditations from Kierkegaard*, Nisbet, 1955, contains prayers as well as homilies and meditations. P. Le Fèvre, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*, University of Chicago Press, 1956, was the first collection of the prayers.

Not only did he participate faithfully in public prayer but also he obeyed the dominical precept that we should pray all the time without losing heart. Punctilious in his attendance at public worship he was equally zealous in his practice of private prayer and the regular — "monastic precision" is his own description — reading of edifying literature. An important feature of his spiritual history is the religious experience of 19 May 1838. After this he began the practice of writing short prayers in his journal (*Journals and Papers* = JP volume 3 pp. 547–579). However it is clear that even before his religious experience the mystery of prayer had been very much on his mind, the disturbing echo perhaps of the influence of the religious upbringing given him by his father. Writing in his journal in 1836 he notes the way in which prayer's human solidarity is reflected in the fact that prayer is made in Jesus 'name. "Christianity", he says, "is essentially the consciousness of mediated relationship through which men must always approach the divine" (JP 413). The following year he muses that the way in which certain things never dull by repetition is "a kind of prayer" (JP 796). Equally characteristic of what I have described as the echo of his background is the way in which philosophical and classical references often appear in an otherwise scriptural quotation.

By October 1838 the tone of his reflections on prayer in the Journal is much more serious, reflecting the difficulty of his struggle with prayer. Referring to the tradition that the skin of the apostle James 'knees had become as rough and hard as a camel's through his kneeling at prayer for days, he remarks that this might seem ridiculous, but we should remember what fullness goes with such

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perseverance "especially as we have enough trouble in making one heart-felt prayer" (JP 3365). As Le Fèvre emphasized in his book, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*, becoming a Christian was Kierkegaard's central problem and in this struggle the life of prayer was paramount. Again and again in his journal he examined his life of prayer, scrutinizing his motives for giving thanks to God for what God had done for him. In July 1838 he says we do not know "how we should pray! It takes a long time before one really finds one's way" (JP 4405). As one who had lost his way he prays on 16 August 1839 (JP 3380) that God would let his face shine on him so that he would no more go astray. In passionate terms he addresses each of the Trinity seeking to be bound closer and closer to the Redeemer that his thoughts and deeds be sanctified so that it would be seen and known he was his "bondservant now and for all eternity".

Reflecting thus on his own experience of prayer Kierkegaard came to feel that prayer was extremely difficult. To someone who has never prayed or had never prayed in earnest it might seem a simple matter; but he felt that the more he prayed the more difficult it was to know how to pray. A Journal entry of 2 December 1838 compares prayer with a priori conception:

> "The development of a priori concepts is like a prayer in the Christian sense, for one would think that here a person is relayed to God in the freest most subjective way and yet we are told that it is the Holy Spirit that effects prayer so that the only prayer remaining would be able to pray." (JP 2257)

So difficult indeed did he feel the task of prayer to be that were it not divinely commanded one would give it up. Yet that should never happen, as the Journal entry of 1839, referring to Luther's sermon on the Epistle for the Sixth Sunday after Easter, comments:

> "Luther expresses very beautifully that the Christian must maintain the practice every day either of God's speaking with him (by reading God's word) or of speaking with God (by praying)." (JP 2501)

Becoming more and more conscious of the difficulty of prayer he wrote in the Journal on 14 June 1839 that contemporary prayer had declined to "a played-out witty conversation". Whereas it was for him increasingly difficult: "to pray", he says "means a continual striving to achieve the true inwardness of prayer" (JP 5792).

Already we have a clear view of Kierkegaard's spiritual pilgrimage as a voyage into the inwardness of prayer, in which silent land he was to become more and more the Christian of inwardness. It is no wonder that Jaspers should have fastened on this golden thread of Kierkegaard's life in trying to identify Kierkegaard's significance. In his article, The Importance of Kierkegaard (*Cross Currents*, Spring 1952, pp 5–16) he contends that Kierkegaard's piety was simple and

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straightforward as distinct from the tormented and complex nature of his thought. It would have seemed to him to echo his own philosophy of accepting "shipwreck" and courage. Yet even if he had no other material for forming our view of Kierkegaard's understanding of prayer than simply the prayers he recorded Jaspers 'interpretation can be seen to be very misguided. Perhaps he was misled by the similar interpretation of Kierkegaard which Torsten Bohlin had advocated. In any case, a glance at the language of the prayers and their nature will disabuse us of this interpretation. In his note on the section Prayer of Journals and Papers Vol 3, Howard Hong remarks that Kierkegaard's "experience of man's absolute dependence upon God shapes the religious background for all his upbuilding and edifying works" instancing among them the unchangeableness of God (op. cit. p895). Again, as is clear from Fèvre's arrangement of the prayers, they are often addressed to one or other of the Trinity's three persons. In short, "the tormented and complex nature" of Kierkegaard's insight is by no means as incidental or even irrelevant to his piety as Jaspers held. That complex nature of his thought was also partly at least due to his Lutheran heritage; and, as J. Pedersen points out in his article Kierkegaard on Prayer (*Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana* Vol 2 pp 68 ff) Kierkegaard was the heir of "the rich Augustinian tradition, but within that to the Lutheran tradition, which owes its character to Luther's break with cultic and monastic prayer and his joining of Protestant devotion and prayer directly to his doctrine of the works and of justification by faith" (p68).

We need not concern ourselves with the philosophical background in Schleiermacher, Hegel and Martensen, which Pedersen examines, beyond noting that all of this needs to be taken into account when talking about Kierkegaard's view of prayer. His conclusion is very just — that, despite "the radical renewal" in Kierkegaard's concept of prayer, it fits into what might be described as a conventional background. Similarly his point about the historical nature of Kierkegaard's prayers is very important.

> "In the same way that the prayers in the Papers reflect the connection between his life and thought, those in the Samlede Vaerker correspond to the construction and development of the authorship, when they emphasize the special character of his thought in its expression and its concerns." (op.cit.p 78)

As one attempts to give an account of Kierkegaard's view of prayer one meets the usual difficulty of expounding his thought — that without some kind of phenomenology no exposition is possible.

Setting out some series of assertions would be correct enough: prayer for Kierkegaard is the daughter of faith, the daughter too of solitude, the entrance gate to the kingdom of God. However, the more one seeks to find Kierkegaard's concept of prayer the more

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one is involved in his essentially subjective (but not subjectivist) understanding of what he is describing. He is describing what he has known of and by his spiritual pilgrimage. For instance, he speaks of the struggle of praying; but instantly the language moves from psychology to metaphysics — the struggle avails much and succeeds in that God conquers. This is what he says in *The Four Upbuilding Discourses*: "One who prays aright struggles in prayer and is victorious — in that God is victorious." (*Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. Hong and Hong p. 377).

The point just made about the nature of the language in Kierkegaard's account of prayer becomes very clear as the discourse moves on and he declares that the very thought of prayer as a struggle to be a contradiction (*ibid*. pp382 ff.). As early as 1837 he had noted in the Journal that the language of prayer was peculiar inasmuch as it was "one of those things that never grow dull by repetition" (JP 796). This mention of language is perhaps as good a point as any to remind ourselves that one of Kierkegaard's basic notions of prayer was that it was the very path of language to silence. That is in its way a marvellous exegesis of Zechariah's word: "Silence all mankind in the presence of the Lord" (Zechariah ii, 13). In a lengthy Journal entry of 1850 he speaks of prayer in situations such as spiritual trial and comments that one needs to forget. He concludes:

> "And now if the praying becomes prolix, verbose, it is just as anxious as before and is not capable of expressing the person's prayer — yes the very opposite is the result — then I am reminded more and more of that against that which I am supposed to defend myself by forgetting. Here the important thing is a sigh of trust and confidence . . . . . Here the prayer is the silent understanding with God. This, therefore is genuine education in praying because talkativeness is dangerous. Even though a longer outpouring before God is characterised by inwardness, the question still is and continues to be whether the act of prayer easily becomes a postponement of activity. (JP3447)

This was indeed his own education in prayer, as he records in a later Journal entry: "As I have noted earlier in this Journal I am brought to a stop by this difficulty; my praying is not as before, but is more a quiet surrendering to God, that it might become clear to me in what sense "grace" is to apply (JP4700}.

The awesome nature of prayer is something which is a recurring feature of Kierkegaard's thought — and certainly from 1837 onwards. However much his final experience and his most mature thought reflect the view of prayer as a childlike dependence on God, he never forgot that prayer is the practice of the presence of the Infinite Holy. The root of prayer for him was the sense of one's unworthiness and the 1849 entry in the Journal (JP2138} speaks of "an indescribable bliss in really and truly feeling oneself as nothing before God". The

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more lengthy entry a year earlier describes the task of prayer as the effort to maintain the thought of God present with me. "This", he says, is the significance of "judgement". He goes on to talk of the God-relationship to the single individual becoming diseased; but the most relevant part of the entry is the conclusion:

> "But it must be true for you that you reflect upon God because you need God, because otherwise everything would collapse for you. Therefore you should pray most sincerely for help . . . . . and then receiving everything from his hand." (JP2008)

In this connection he refers to the publication The Conflict between *Orsted and Mynster* by H-T (identified by Hong as R.P.K. Varberg, *Striden mellem Orsted og Mynster el/er Videnskaben og den officiel/e Theologi* and the particular point being on p28 ff) The controversy need not concern us beyond noting that Orsted was the famous physicist and Mynster the Primate — hence the subtitle of *Science and the official theology*. Referring to the publication he says 'They scoff at prayer. I would idealize it so that nobody is fit to pray" (JP 1798}

All this being understood, the remarkable thing about prayer for Kierkegaard is that it is an obligation which itself entails obligations. In 1848 he notes in his Journal that it is reassuring to think that, ideal as prayer may be, it is something commanded by God:

> "The more a person prays, the more certain his final consolation is that God has commanded that we *shall* pray; for God is so infinite that many times a person would hardly dare to pray, however much he wanted to." (JP3427)

This, as I said, marks but one way in which he sees prayer as a matter of ethics. In *Christian* Discourses he makes very clear that the simple action of praying is an acceptance of responsibility (p174 Lowrie edition). Praying presupposes the recognition of unworthiness; but the person who thus is in no position to ask for anything is told that this is what he must do.

> "*Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of the Lord*, for thou does assume an immense responsibility. Remember that there is One who is in Heaven — and thou art upon earth. But do not imagine that in His exaltation He is far away: herein lies the seriousness and responsibility of the situation, that He, the infinitely exalted, is quite close to thee" (ibid)

This point about the ethical nature of prayer is typical of Kierkegaard's thought; for it is clear that there are some three elements to this. First, it is a matter of ethics because it is an obligation. Recognizing a duty is clearly a matter of ethics.

However, we are now reminded that praying is to assume a right to relationships which we can hardly claim as a right. The succeeding

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parts of the discourse point out what is involved in this responsibility — the sincerity before God (ibid. Pp175 ff) so that there is a third element in the description of prayer as an ethical activity. This is what Kierkegaard has in mind when he talks of what it means to pray in Christ's name — quite simply that is an *imitatio Christi*, suffering and death to the world. These are the themes to which he returned again and again in his Journal. Two late entries on praying in Christ's name are especially significant. First in 1849 he interprets by an analogy with some official or social authorisation:

> "What it means to pray in Jesus 'name is perhaps illustrated most simply in this way. A public official orders this and that in the name *of the King* — what does it mean? In the first place it means: I myself am nothing. I have no power, nothing to say on my own — but it is in the name of the King. It is the same with praying in the name of Jesus. I do not dare to approach God except through an intermediary; if my prayer is to be heard, it must be in the name of Jesus; it is this name which gives it power. In the next place — when a public official commands in the name of the King, it follows as a matter of course that what he orders must be the King's will; he cannot command his own will in the name of the King. It is the same with praying in the name of Jesus, Praying in such a manner that it conforms to the will of Jesus. I cannot pray in the name of Jesus about my own will. The name of Jesus is not a casual endorsement but the decisive factor. The fact that the name of Jesus precedes is not praying in Jesus 'name but is praying in such a way that I dare put the name of Jesus to my prayer, that is, picture him, his holy will, together with what I am praying about. Finally, when a public official commands in the name of the King, it means that the King takes the responsibility upon himself. So it is also with praying in Jesus 'name: Jesus takes upon himself the responsibility and all the consequences: he steps forward for us, steps forward in place of the one who is praying." (JP 3441)

The theology of Atonement which is presupposed here need not concern us; for the relevant point as far as this argument is concerned is that Kierkegaard views prayer as part of a network of ethical relationships. In prayer not only am I ethically related to God but Christian prayer involves an ethical relationship with Jesus. What Kierkegaard is saying is that not only do I invoke his authority but that he assumes responsibility. The following year (neither entry being more precisely dated) he rejects a simple substitutionary view of Christ as atonement, pointing out how one-sided that is and indeed that it is an over-simplification of what is meant.

> "We forget that Christ is the prototype" (Forbilledet) "We alter the relationship as if God were a powerful prince and Christ the powerful, most intimate, courtier, whose influence when I pray in his name my prayer is heard. But this courtier does not pass himself as the prototype — I merely use his influence. If I pray to God in Christ's

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> name for one benefit or another or for exemption from one evil or another, there is implicit that aber, that in binding me to imitation (Efterfolgelse) Christ's name binds me to far greater suffering and privation by actually having to die to the world." (JP 3 455)

It was something that had impressed him about Luther's sermon on the Epistle for the Fourth Sunday in Advent at the end of which he had said that God is to be everything to us and we are to be everything *to our neighbour* (my italics JP2479). What has been teased out as the network of responsibility involved in prayer goes beyond such a perception as Coleridge's "he prayeth best who loveth best"; for what Kierkegaard was anxious to emphasise was the efficacy of prayer which he describes as an "Archimedean point" (JP 3426).

Two further things need to be said about the awesome character of prayer as Kierkegaard sees it. First, it is something that is essentially private. Clearly he took very seriously the dominical injunction (Mt.vi 6): "When you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is there in the secret place." As he had emphasised in *Christian Discourses* and elsewhere that prayer has silence as its father, so he notes in his Journal that solitude is involved in the birth, quoting from Rudelbach, *Savonarola* "The father of prayer is silence, its mother solitude" (JP 3460). The second point is less obvious; but if we recall the scriptural reference as well as what has been said about the activity of prayer we note that Kierkegaard's view of prayer was linked to a very clear and definite view of God's fatherhood. It was in fact one of his greatest insights; for what he does is to rescue the thought of God as Father from any and every kind of sentimentality. Talk of the Loving Father and of the Father as love has generally been so unspecified if not vague that the concept degenerates into sentiment. When one recalls Kierkegaard's own "crazy upbringing" it is all too easy to read into this all kinds of psychological problems. Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard must have been a very strange father; but one cannot forget nor should ignore the warmth of Søren's acknowledgment of his debt to his father. The simple bond he recognised as he undertook a new life after Michael's death speaks volumes. At times, when he reflects on this aspect of prayer Kierkegaard looks at the very basic level of the child-father relationship in as clear a way as Freud. Thus he remembers (JP 1148) that it is the child's inwardness and trust that are to be emulated and not the content of his faith. The task is to become transparent before God in all our weakness and all our hope.

> "To be able to say a total Amen to a prayer — 0, how seldom this happens even with an otherwise diligent and constant prayer . . . that is, before God one has become transparent to himself in all his weakness but also in all his hope." (JP 3425 Cf.3386)

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Transparent before God, Kierkegaard thought, the soul was embracing the challenge of a life which was the imitation of Christ. Reflecting on prayer in the name of Jesus he had, as we have seen, noted its anthropological or human significance — it belongs to the human race. However, in 1850 it is the directly spiritual and ethical significance that concerns him. To pray in the name of Jesus was to pray in a way that was in conformity with the will of Jesus. Perhaps it is worth recollecting an unusual way in which he talks of the honesty and not simply the faith required in prayer. Referring in 1847 to Luther's sermon he notes that Luther says that not to believe that God will give us what we ask for is to make God a liar (JP 2479). It is in such considerations as this that one finds the remarkable depth of Kierkegaard's spirituality. The metaphysical as well as the spiritual depth becomes very clear if one reads this in connection with the picture of the Incarnation in *Practice in Christianity.*

Having reached this point of regarding prayer as something particularly human in the sense that it is a general phenomenon of humanity, Kierkegaard's words in Christian Discourses are very significant: it is, he says, the human language. The text of that first discourse was "Be not therefore anxious, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' — after all these things do the heathen seek" (op. cit. P17). The human situation is contrasted with that of the bird. What, then, asks Kierkegaard is the temptation? It is "to lose oneself, to lose one's soul, to cease to be a man and to live like a man, instead of being freer than the bird, to slave . . . . . Yes, to *slave* . . . . . because one has become the slave of man and of his own anxiety, and has forgotten that it is to God one should pray for it" (op.cit. p25). In the next passage the contrast is developed between the heathen and the Christian:

> "In comparison with the lightness of the bird, which is alive the heathen is dead; in comparison with the Christian, however, one cannot properly say that the bird lives. In comparison with the bird which keeps silent, the heathen is garrulous; in comparison with the Christian, however, the heathen is dumb, he neither prays norgives thanks, and that in the deepest sense is human language." (op.cit. ibid)

Once again this brings us to Kierkegaard's characteristic thought about prayer — that it is learning to be silent before God. By 1848 this was the point at which he had arrived in his spiritual pilgrimage.

> "I almost feel an urge to say not a single word except 'Amen'; for I am overwhelmed with gratitude for what Governance has done for me. That everything actually can turn out for a man this way — I know of nothing that has happened to me of which I poetically might not say it is the only thing which is appropriate to my nature and disposition . . . . . .In all literalness I have lived with God as one lives with a father. Amen." (JP 6161)

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To end this account of what Kierkegaard has to say about prayer with this thought is in fact very appropriate; for it shows the extraordinary way in which his deepest spiritual insights combine with a keen appreciation of what is a profoundly human experience in the most general sense. In the end, the motivation to prayer has to do with my ***personal*** being — not whether I am a 'religious person' or not. In music there is nothing more significant than silence and in transparent human experience there can be nothing but silence. This has been an account of what Kierkegaard said throughout his spiritual pilgrimage. To have looked at what his prayers show would perhaps have been more significant — certainly more spiritually profitable. One feels that this has been merely to scratch the surface: the deeper story is for another day and probably another pen.

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