Some Remarks on Prayer

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"I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Mt. 12:36f)[1] One may be surprised to read such a sentence as an introduction to the topic of prayer. But since these words are spoken by Jesus Christ himself, we cannot easily ignore them. Better to face them at the very beginning. Not only what we do but also what we say, all our spoken words, matter to God, and since prayer – at least in its original meaning – is based on words addressed to God himself, we have to pay particular attention to them. *"Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth."* (Ps. 54:2) If God is supposed to incline his ear to our prayers, how can we bother him with useless words? This brings us to Jesus' admonition regarding prayers when he says in the Sermon on the Mount: *"When you are praying, do not heap up*

1 Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Mt. 6:7f)

"Your father knows what you need before you ask him." Does not Jesus' saying question the need for prayer at all? Why bother someone with petitions when he is already aware of them? It was Thomas Aquinas who tried to mediate human prayers with an unchangeable divine providence in his *Summa Theologiae*:

> We pray not that we may change the Divine disposition, but that we may impetrate that which God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers; in other words, 'that by asking, men may deserve to receive what Almighty God from eternity has disposed to give,' as Gregory says (Dial. i, 8)[2]

According to Thomas, divine providence determines not only what effects there will be in the world but also what causes will give rise to those effects and in what order they will do so. Therefore human prayers as partial causes of certain effects can be conceived of as included in God's providence. However, Eleonore Stump rightly asks: "Why should prayers be included in God's plan as the causes of certain effects? And what sense is there in the notion that God, who disposes and plans everything with omnipotence and perfect goodness, brings about some things because of human prayers?"[3] And one can add the question of whether such a notion of prayer resembles the situation in a Skinner box, where a lab rat has to press a lever in order to obtain a food reward. Under these circumstances God can be compared to an experimentalist, who chooses "praying" as a suitable verbal output, pairing it with an unconditioned stimulus, "daily bread".

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2 Summa Theologiae II-II q. 83 a. 2 co.

3 Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip L. Quinn and Charles C. Taliaferro, Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999, pp.577-583, p.582.

A divine providence which anticipates human prayers either in a cause-effect-relation or in a stimulus-response correlation does not allow any communicative relationship or interaction between God and human beings. Thomas' "God", metaphysically paralyzed to immutability, is unable to listen to the words and cries of his people. Even the lament of his Son on the cross *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mk. 15:34) cannot affect him.

We have to bear in mind that the common understanding of divine providence is a philosophical one, devoid of biblical resonance[4]. The Greek synonym *pronoia* does not appear in the canonical books of Scripture[5]. It derives from Stoic and Neo-Platonic philosophy where it designated the rule of divine reason or *logos* over all events. This notion emphasizes "the power and wisdom of God rather than the motivation or purpose that inspired God to act."[6] One can easily figure out the differences between a philosophical concept of divine providence and the biblical notion of God's provision when we consider Jesus' words in his commissioning speech to his disciples:

> Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Mt. 10:26-31)

The images of the hairs counted and the sparrows kept in the air express not God's determination of every event but his

4 Cp. John H. Wright, "Providence," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane, Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987, pp.815-818.

5 It occurs only in the deutero-canonical Book of the Wisdom of Solomon (14:2; 17:2).

6 Wright, *Providence*, p.816.

provision for his creation out of his fatherly love and concern. A communicative relationship between God and his chosen people is **basic to** any kind of divine causation. It is because of God's provision (and not his causation) that the disciples can faithfully acknowledge Christ before others in a fearless way (cp. Mt. 10: 26-27, 32). Therefore, when early Christian writers took over the term "providence", they were not reasoning about an impersonal divine force but confessing God's fatherly love and care, which enables his children to be faithful to Christ. Consequently Bishop Theophilus of Antioch wrote in his Apology: "If I call God Providence, I refer only to his goodness"[7]. However, it was the prevailing impact of Greek philosophical thinking which subsequently dimmed the biblical understanding of a caring provision and instead emphasized an unchangeable plan executed by the power of an immutable God.

"For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished." (Mal. 3:6) These words are not a metaphysical description of a divine attribute " immutability" but instead God's own words, spoken within an announcement of his judgment. Only because of his steadfastness, the children of Jacob are able to return to him. Without such steadfastness and faithfulness, human beings cannot find trust in God. Thus it is more appropriate to speak of God's steadfastness as his character than of immutability as a divine attribute. If God is conceived in a characterless way to be immutable, omniscient and omnipotent, so that everything that is going to happen is foreseen (or even foreordained) by him, then, of course, all our prayers are simply superfluous, spoken into the air.

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7 *To Autolycus* I,3 (written around 181 A.D.), quoted after Wright, *Providence*, p. 816.

In order to talk about prayer we have to abandon the notion of a paralyzed God, a God created by philosophers based on their own reasoning. The God of Philosophers, different to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Blaise Pascal), has no communicative relationship with human beings and therefore cannot receive our prayers. *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."* (Eph. 1:3) It is the praise which precedes our prayers. When we praise God because of his blessing in Christ, we acknowledge the communicative relationship with him, which allows us to address him with our petitions.

Why pray? The simple answer is that Jesus demands it from his disciples who followed him to the Mount of Olives on the night of his capture: *"Pray that you may not come into temptation."* (Lk. 22:40) He even introduces the requirement of petitionary prayer with a parable "compromising" God's image: a widow approaches an independent, self-reliant judge and persistently presses him to grant her justice against her opponent. Finally he relents, in order to get rid of her interference into his private life. (cp. Lk. 18:1-8).

It seems to be that prayers addressed to God and based on faith can change human life, as Christ himself promises: *"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. (...) If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"* (Mt. 7:7, 11) Or, with even stronger words:

> Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mk. 11:22-24)

"Faith can move mountains." This proverb, if extracted from the gospel and therefore cut off from the intertwining of God's economy of salvation in Jesus Christ, can easily become a slogan for "Christian" paganism. Pagans are looking for "higher" support for their life and therefore choose a promising and capable deity as their supplier. What they sense to be lacking, either restoration (involving physical and spiritual healing) or acquisition (prosperity, success, status, relationship, offspring) is addressed as a petitionary prayer to their god. With their proper worship, their obedience, their reverence, and all their loyalty they aim to achieve and maintain a dense and intensive relationship with their deity in order to foster divine gratitude and favor towards them. One can describe the relationship between pagans and their gods as commercial, *do ut des* (Lat. "I give that you may give"). Although pagan petitionary prayers can express concern for others, the "intercession in-group" is mainly those made relevant by a connection of life, like blood ties or tribal/clan membership. Although affection for other persons certainly plays a role in praying, the main emphasis for such intercessory prayers is the sustenance of a social system like family or clan as the living foundation.

Even salvation, implying a savior or redeemer, can be conceived in a pagan way. There is a neutral salvific place envisioned as "heaven" and there is a good to be achieved called "eternal life". Believing in such a savior called "Jesus Christ" is regarded as the proper means to achieve this eternal status in heaven, beyond the threat of death. After achieving the status of being "saved" – through a personal act of conversion, faith or baptism – the relationship with Christ doesn't matter anymore. In this model of salvation, Christ resembles a ladder. Once one has climbed up and reached the salvific destination, the ladder becomes useless. The scandal of such "soteriology" is the

consequent devaluation of Christ's death on the cross: Christ no longer died for them, since they are already saved.

The crucial flaw of religious paganism begins with the belief in choices: human beings believe that they can choose the right God for their own sake. But at the very end they can rely only on the choice they have made, not on the chosen one. As Christians, however, *we* are the chosen ones, not because of our own origin, our capabilities or our dignity, but because of Christ, in whom we are elected, *"before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love."* (Eph. 1:4) God himself *"destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."* (Eph. 1:5f) When God chooses his people and calls them, as he did first with Israel, there is no human choice possible. Unbelief is no choice but sin. We have to obey and to follow the call, in order to become what we are, children of God adopted in the name of his Son Jesus Christ.

It is this prevenient divine election which frames every kind of Christian prayers. As Christ himself says: *"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name."* (Joh. 15:16). Within the union with Christ – and thereby in his name – we dare to pray. This again signifies a crucial difference between Christian and pagan prayers: the prayers of pagans aim to get divine attention for their own life, they want to draw God's power, mercifulness or goodness into their own affairs, so that something good can be added to their life. The final motive behind such prayers is to uphold one's life by divine grace. The focus is self-centred; being in relationship with the deity and knowing him or her is mainly for the sake of transaction of grace. Christian prayers on the other hand are

grounded in the salvific relationship with Christ. They aim not to involve God in our private matters but to draw us into the life of God, whereby we can rest in his goodness.

Our petitionary prayers to God emerge out of our dependence on him. As Christians, we depend on God not primarily because of our human needs or deficits in terms of capabilities but because of his claim on our entire life. By our petitionary prayers, we address things which we cannot reframe in our relationship with God in Christ. Certainly in our daily lives, we either personally encounter, or become aware of, occurrences and situations that cannot be called good in the eyes of God. As St Paul says; *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now"* (Rom. 8:22). Every kind of suffering requires our prayer, since it seems to be outside of Christ's restorative recapitulation (cp. Eph. 1:10). Through our prayers we bring it to the awareness of God, asking him to integrate and transform it by his mercifulness. The goods that we ask for in our prayers are only goods for us, and for our lives, if they can be related to God's economy of salvation in Jesus Christ – thus, goods prayed for can never become our private property. This brings us to the crucial understanding: prayers are not part of a transaction between God and human beings.

To come up with an example: a young friend is suffering from life-threatening cancer and the medical treatment seems to fail. What should we pray for? The pagan prayer simply asks for recovery so that life will be prolonged. Assuming the young man dies in spite of such prayer, the inevitable conclusion is that the prayer has not been answered, which leads to three questions concerning the parties involved: did one perform the prayer properly (with regard to the wordings and personal commitment)? Was it the right deity addressed with the petition (with regard to his or her mightiness)? And finally, was the patient himself in a

curable condition (with regard to his innocence that could free him from illness seen as punishment)?

We, too, as Christians are struck by the suffering of our brother; his condition and his short life expectancy cannot be related to the will of God as we understand him. However, in a way, the Christian prayer is answered even before it is addressed to God. We pray as we are told – in the name of Christ, *"the Lord of both the dead and the living"* (Rom. 14:9), who conquered death by his own death on the cross and reconciled us, sinners, with the Father. Christian prayer that refers to the name of Christ aims at restoration of life, but never at such a life which remains separated from God. Our prayer request is not simply life-preserving, since we have heard from the mouth of Christ himself about the dialectic of self-centred life and its loss: *"Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*(Mt. 10:39) As Christ introduced himself to Martha:*"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."* (Joh. 11:25f) Our prayer in his name is already answered. The promise of prayers answered is confined to Christ's name: *"The Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name."* (Joh. 15:16)

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mk. 10:47) This is the cry of the blind Bartimaeus, a beggar sitting at the side of the road near Jericho. Yes, it is a prayer (later called the "Jesus prayer"), although it is not addressed to God, our heavenly father, but to his son Jesus, and although Bartimaeus does not know who Jesus really is (cp. Mk. 12:35). And different to our prayers, Bartimaeus' penetrating call; *"Son of David, have mercy on me!"* found a direct response in Jesus: *"What do you want me to do for you?"* No question, but rather,*"My teacher, let me see again."* The blind man's prayer request was answered, as he regained his

his eyesight immediately.

One should not try to spiritualize legitimate prayer requests too soon. " Let me see again" refers to the physical loss of eyesight and the resulting darkness in life. This beggar doesn't ask for spiritual insight, as we often do in our church prayers: "God, let us know ..., show us..." When physical or mental disabilities or chronic diseases are occupying people's lives, they cannot recognize their life in the perspective of God's chosen children. The darkness in their life dims the light of redemption. Therefore Christ their savior first has to be their healer. Thus he said to Bartimaeus: *"Go; your faith has made you well."* Yes, Bartimaeus goes after regaining his eyesight, but no longer his own way, for he follows Christ. The prayer; "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me*!", aimed at physical restoration, became the initiation into life as a follower of Christ, whose promise goes beyond biological life on earth:*"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."* (Joh. 8:12)

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."(2 Cor. 12:9) That is Christ's answer to the prayer of St. Paul, who appealed to the Lord three times to remove a thorn given him in the flesh. A prayer is answered without healing, but St. Paul can bear this answer: *"I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."* (2 Cor. 12:10) Different to the blind Bartimaeus, he has seen our Lord Jesus before (cp. 1 Cor. 9:1). Within the life-giving union with Christ he can acknowledge his own distress, tribulation and persecution as a requirement for being an *"apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God"* (1 Cor. 1:1). *"While we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh."* (2 Cor. 4:11) When we as Christians confess with St. Paul that, *"If we live, we live to the Lord, and if*

we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8), our own prayer requests are no longer a question of life and death.

"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words." (Mt. 6:7) According to Christ, prayers have to be precise in their petitions, as introduced by the Lord's Prayer itself. This brings us to the question of the right form of prayers. Luther in his introduction to the Lord's prayer in the Larger Catechism values prayer as a great and precious thing, as long as we "clearly distinguish between vain babbling and praying for something definite."[8]

> Where there is true prayer there must be earnestness. We must feel our need, the distress that impels and drives us to cry out. Then prayer will come spontaneously, as it should, and we shall not need to be taught how to prepare for it or how to generate devotion. The need which ought to be the concern of both ourselves and others is quite amply indicated in the Lord's Prayer. Therefore it may serve to remind us and impress upon us not to become negligent about praying. We all have needs enough, but the trouble is that we do not feel or see them. God therefore wishes you to lament and express your needs and wants, not because he is unaware of them, but in order that you may kindle your heart to stronger and greater desires and spread your cloak wide to receive many things.[9]

It seems to be that prayers with free wordings can better serve the requirement of earnest needs behind petitions. Liturgical or formulated prayers, on the other hand, are often regarded as ritualistic speech acts lacking commitment to the words uttered.

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8 Martin Luther, Large Catechism 3, 33, in: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert, Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1959.

9 Luther, Large Catechism 3, pp.26-27.

Indeed, every kind of ritualism is the death of prayer. However, empty phrases result not from pre-given words, but from the detachment between words and the human heart in general. The Jewish Rabbis coined an extra term for the required connection between words and heart, *kavannah*, which may be circumscribed as intention, attention, purpose, devotion, or concentration of thought. "Prayer without *Kavvanah* is like a body without a soul."[10] A prayer loses its quality when it becomes merely the enaction of words without inward attention to the meaning of the words being spoken. While praying a fixed order of prayer – mainly recited from the Siddur (the Jewish Book of Common Prayer) – the praying person has to envisage himself in direct communication with God. This is seen as a binding halakhic requirement:

> The worshipper must inwardly intend the meaning of the words uttered by his lips, and imagine himself to be in the presence of the Shekhinah, and should remove any disturbing thoughts, until his mind and heart are pure for prayer. He should think that, were he standing before a king of flesh and blood, he would prepare his words carefully and address them well in order not to fail in his attempt. All the more so when he is standing before the King of Kings, blessed be He, who searches our innermost thoughts.[11]

It can easily happen during a common worship that persons in charge utter empty phrases aimed to be prayers because of the worship agenda, i.e., "We have to pray now because we are supposed to do so at this moment." It matters not whether such emptiness is made up by the praying person herself or just read from a piece of paper. Authentic prayers are those where persons can confirm the single petitions with an "Amen". Particularly

10 This saying was first mentioned by Rabbi Isaac Abravanel in the book *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*. Cp. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*, New York: Schocken Books 2000, p.34.

11 *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 98:1, quoted after Steinsaltz, *Guide to Jewish Prayer*, p.35.

when one is praying on behalf of the congregation, petitions based on words carefully chosen in advance can ease their acceptance by the praying community. Free prayers in contrast suffer from the danger of becoming redundant, lacking any focused petition. Quite often the coherence of petitions is lost; in addition, the addressee can change unconsciously from God the Father to the Son or vice versa[12]. It may also happen that such a prayer is no longer addressing God but the audience, as indirect preaching or sharing. It is no wonder that such failures occur particularly in free prayers, since they are more complex than formulated prayers. Whereas formulated prayers require that our heart is in concordance with words found, spontaneous prayers involve the additional procedure of finding words while speaking.

In order to pray in the proper way, we have to know (a) to whom we are praying, (b) how we can address him, and (c) how we can persuade him to change something in our life or the lives of others. This leads us to the Book of Psalms, since it has been regarded as a school of prayer, in particular by religious orders and monastic communities. Their divine office – a series of services of prayer to be chanted at determined hours of the day – is largely based on the psalms. Within that school we encounter aspects of prayers which are often left out of our daily prayers.

> Restore us, O God of hosts;
> let your face shine, that we may be saved.
> You brought a vine out of Egypt;
> you drove out the nations and planted it.
> You cleared the ground for it;
> it took deep root and filled the land.

12 A mistake quite common is the concluding phrase "we pray in your name" which is mainly used, when Christ instead of the Father is addressed in prayer. The reference to the name of Christ, however, makes sense only when the Father is addressed; otherwise it entails a self-referential address: "Jesus Christ, we address you in Jesus Christ."

> Turn again, O God of hosts;
> look down from heaven, and see;
> have regard for this vine,
> the stock that your right hand planted.
> (Ps. 80:7-9; 14-15)

In psalm prayers there is always a balance between God's deeds of the past and human beings' needs at present. As we can learn from psalms, praying to God is more than expressing our own requests. Instead we have to win him over to act according to our needs. Patrick D. Miller therefore considers prayer an act of persuasion: "Prayers have as a primary function the effort to persuade and motivate God to act in behalf of the petitioner who is in trouble and needs God's help."[13]

> God may not be coerced, but God can be persuaded. The prayers do not assume that things are cut and dried, that God either answers prayer or does not. They seek to evoke a response, not just through the petitions themselves but through all dimensions of the prayer and especially those sentences and clauses that suggest reasons for God's actions and results that can be accomplished or prevented by God's intervention. The impassibility of God is not a part of Israel's understanding of prayer. In form and content, the prayer for help assumes that God can be moved and that God can be persuaded to act in the situation so that it is changed for good.[14]

Why should God act? Referring to Psalm 80 above, there is a relationship indicated between Israel, the "vine", and God, who had previously acted like a vinegrower. Based on that relationship the psalmist Asaph is able to challenge God: *"have regard for*

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13 Patrick D. Miller, Prayer as Persuasion: The Rhetoric and Intention of Prayer, *Word & World* 13/4 (1993), pp.356-362, p.356.

14 Miller, Prayer as Persuasion, p.361.

this vine, the stock that your right hand planted." (v. 14f) The psalm itself provides a reason for God to act: he has to protect Israel in order to preserve his own work. What the Book of Psalms teaches us is that the situation of the petitioner has to be related to God himself, either by referring to his previous deeds or by appealing to his own character, particularly to his righteousness, faithfulness and steadfast love. Psalm prayers dare to remind God of who he is in relationship to us. The lack of expressions of such a relationship between God and the petitioner is a shortcoming in many contemporary prayers. We only present our needs, unable to link them with God's character and his deeds of the past. Instead all we do is merely fill God up with our prayer requests, describing situations of needs, without reminding God of all he did to and for Israel, and what he did in Jesus Christ for us. This is the decisive difference: God doesn't have to act according to our wishes; we should not urge God to respond to the needs we perceive but we should urge God to act faithfully regarding all he had done to Israel and us in Jesus Christ.

In order to avoid such shortcomings it is advisable to refer to a proper order as is introduced by the form of the Collect prayer. This prayer was originally the concluding prayer of the priest for the intercessory prayers of the people within the Eucharistic liturgy. The pattern is as follows: it starts with the **invocation** of God using doxological ("praising") attributes (in order to give glory and honor to him), for example *"LORD God, merciful and gracious"*. It then is followed by a **predication** referring to God's character or even better to his beneficent deeds of the past, e.g., *"you listened to the cry of your people Israel in the wilderness and brought them into Promised Land."* The purpose of the predication is to remind God of who he is and what he has done. Then and only then it comes to the **petition**, which includes the presentation of a situation to be changed in combination with the

request of a particular divine action, e.g., *"Look on the misery and desolation in the world. Break the power of evil and lead us into your kingdom"*. The petition can be extended by a **consecution** denoting an anticipated situation which is in accordance with God's salvific will, e.g. *"so that we with your whole creation can live in peace and harmony with each other."* Finally comes the **conclusion** which refers to the name of Christ in a doxological way (indicating that the prayer request is related to Christ and supported by him), e.g., *"We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives in our midst, now and for ever."* This prayer is assumed and confirmed by the congregation with the **acclamation** *"Amen."*

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