Prayer in the Abrahamic Faiths

Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, Helen Cahill, O.P., and Syafa’atun Elmirzana

The authors, through the lens of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, offer reflections on how they understand the practice of prayer, particularly as personal relationship with God, source of discernment, and embracing all of life.

Interfaith prayer services have made international news within the recent past. Having witnessed events precipitated by religious persecution and war, we have also been moved upon seeing the Pope pray with both Jewish and Muslim leaders. Dialogue groups consisting of members from each of the three religious bodies whose agendas are as diverse as theological issues, civic matters, and neighborhood concerns have sprung up throughout the country. This has been

Rabbi Bronstein is senior scholar (Rabbi Emeritus) of North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois, and also teaches in the religion department of Lake Forest College. He has successfully combined life in the active pulpit with academic lecturing, teaching and writing.

Helen Cahill, O.P., is a staff member at Claret Center Resources for Counseling and Spiritual Direction in Chicago. Engaged in spiritual direction, retreat ministry and supervision of formation personnel, she is also adjunct faculty at Catholic Theological Union.

Syafa’atun Elmirzana is lecturer at IAIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyokarta, Indonesia, and research coordinator for the Institute for Inter-faith Dialogue. She is working for a D.Min., at Catholic Theological Union and has been accepted in the Ph.D. program at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago.
especially true since the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Clearly the “children of Abraham” are becoming interested in each other’s unique religious and cultural heritage and are desirous of discovering where and how these traditions intersect.

If, as history reveals, all three monotheistic faiths trace themselves back to the same Abraham, and if, as most contend, they worship the same God, then perhaps they hold other characteristics in common. Since one cannot presume commonality on the basis of external similarity alone, New Theology Review asked one member of each of the faiths (all professional religion teachers) to describe how the practice of prayer is understood within her or his tradition. No focus was suggested; no further directions given. A brief analysis of their statements is offered at the end.

Prayer in the Jewish Tradition

Ever since my childhood, at the moment I awaken each morning, as if unbidden, the same words emerge into my consciousness: “I give thanks to You, O Sovereign God living and enduring, that in mercy you have restored my soul to me; how great is your faithfulness!” So I begin the day with thanks.

By the word “soul” I am daily reminded that there is more to my being than the physical. Much later in my life I learned that the rabbi of Kotsk taught his students not to pray for anything material for themselves. When asked, then, what he prayed for, he answered, “I pray to remind myself that I have a soul.” In line with this thought, I once heard my daughter, who is also a rabbi, tell her congregation: “Whatever you pray for, the very act of praying itself brings you closer to God.” I myself have come to appreciate a short form of regular prayer advised by the ancient rabbis: “O God, you know our needs before we utter them, and you ordain all things for the best. What is good in your sight, do! Praised are you, O God, who hear prayer.”

That prayer that I recite in the morning is the first of many such prayers. The Jewish tradition provides for morning prayers, for praise of God who gives sight, steadies the steps, and gives strength to the weary; who wondrously forms the astoundingly complex functions of the body, which are continuously working without our conscious effort so that, each day, we are able to stand in praise before God. I pray all of these prayers, not in English, but in our holy tongue of Hebrew. I do this so that in this way each day I am touched with a sense of the sacred. Ever since childhood, I do not merely speak these first words of prayer. I sing them! I do this so that heartfelt melody transforms words of prayer into a prayer of the heart. I hasten to add that my own sense of an “indwelling Presence” or sense of awe in worship came not from so-called “Children’s Services” but from sitting as a child with my family at adult worship or around the sabbath.
table. There I shared in the prayers in which my parents themselves were immersed.

It is through prayers learned and practiced in childhood that one can begin to glimpse the life of prayer in any faith. From my experience as a rabbi working with literally thousands of Jewish children, I have learned that when one asks a Jewish child to name the first prayer that comes to mind, the child will answer either the *Sh’ma* or the *Motzih*. The *Sh’ma*, which is to be said daily in the morning and at evening, can be translated: “Hear (hearken, listen to, or understand) O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your being” (Deut 6:4-5). This prayer is both a “watch-word of the Faith” and an act of covenant commitment.

The *Motzih*, the shortest of graces prayed before eating, can be translated: “Praised are you, O God, who bring forth bread from the earth.” Reciting this prayer as a child, I also associated the assuaging of my own hunger and enjoying the good taste of food with care for others. Along with saying the prayer, I was taught to put coins into a charity box that was placed on the table. These offerings were meant for those who had little or no food on their tables. The *Motzih* is a form of prayer we call *Bracha* (blessing), and it is the most characteristic form of Jewish prayer. The *Bracha* emerged in the earliest days of Judaism, from the time of the ancient rabbis—about the same time as Jesus lived. A *Bracha* always begins, “Praised are you, O God.” Such a prayer is easily recognized. Once I picked up a hitchhiking young man. When I advised him of the dangers of hitchhiking, he said: “But I know who you are! I’ve been to your Services at Bar Mitzvahs (son of the law) of my friends. I even know some of your prayer in Hebrew! *Baruch Atah Adonai.*” He had heard that phrase so many times that he had actually learned it himself.

Such a prayer of praise is an affirmation, a “Yes” to existence. It is a way of saying: “How wonderful are your works O God!” By means of this prayer, one might praise God for seeing a rainbow, for enjoying flowers, or for meeting a person noted for wisdom. Before reading Scripture, enjoying the first fruit of the season, or celebrating a sacred and joyous occasion, we pray: “We praise you, O God, who have kept us in life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this sacred and joyous time.” Such prayers continuously remind us of God’s “wonders which are daily with us, Your miracles, morning, noon, and night.”
In order to illustrate the importance of prayer in the very ordinary experiences of life, I remind adults and children alike: “You know that we say a bracha only on religious occasions.” Then I ask: “What is religious about eating a piece of bread?” If there is no answer, I explain:

You see a small piece of hard matter, a seed. At some point human beings learned to put seeds into the ground. Through some strange marvelous process, the seed in the ground breaks open, puts out roots, takes in nourishment from the soil, and, as if it contained some fantastic laboratory within itself, changes its form and contributes to its own growth. It develops into a beautiful plant with its own many seeds. The more scientists learn about this mysterious process, the stranger, more wonderful, and mysterious it seems to become. Some time in the past, human beings learned to grind the seeds into a flour, mix the flour with a liquid, and bake bread to eat. For the mystery hidden within the seed and for the wonders of human ingenuity, we praise God.

This simple example shows that in the Jewish tradition, prayer is a very important part of conscious living. Nothing is too small or insignificant to bring us to prayer. This tradition teaches that everything comes from the hands of God, and so there is always reason to praise God and give thanks.

RABBI HERBERT BRONSTEIN

Prayer in the Christian Tradition

The subject of this reflection, the significance of prayer in the Christian tradition, is a bit daunting. The fact that prayer is a priority in my life does not exempt me from wrestling with questions about prayer. I write as a Catholic Christian, a woman religious, and a spiritual director. Listening as a spiritual companion to the prayer of many people enriches my experience and understanding of prayer. The rich diversity in their prayer and in their approaches to prayer is a source of wonder to me, and it makes me realize that prayer is infinitely simple and infinitely complex, personal and interior as well as communal and public. The ways of prayer and the presence and movement of God within an individual and a society are as varied as are the fingerprints of humanity.

In the Scriptures we often encounter Jesus urging us to stay awake, to be alert. Is this not an invitation to pray always by cultivating an awareness of the divine presence of love? There dwells within us a dynamic force or deep longing for “something more.” This is really the human yearning to connect with the mystery we call God, a mystery that is always present and active in our lives. As in any relationship, if we want this love to deepen, we must invest our energies in nurturing its life.

RABBI HERBERT BRONSTEIN

PRAYER IN THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS
Christian prayer is inspired by and modeled after the prayer of Jesus. I would like to focus on three aspects of this prayer as gleaned from the Gospels: prayer as an integral part of the life of Jesus, prayer as intimacy with God, and prayer as revelation for the people of God.

First, biblical instances of Jesus praying are too numerous to list here. In Luke's Gospel we read that he prayed at significant moments: before his baptism (3:22), in the synagogue (4:16), as he blessed the loaves and fish (9:16), in his tears and sweat in Jerusalem and Gethsemane (19:41; 22: 41-44), and in his sense of abandonment on the cross (22:46). In truth, prayer was a defining characteristic of Jesus' life.

Second, the nature of Jesus' relationship with God, whom he called Abba (a familiar term for Father), is testimony to his personal and intimate experience of the living God. He lived in communion with God, always engaging his affections and sharing his hopes, desires, convictions, pain and sadness. In this relationship of mutual self-disclosure, the prayer of Jesus integrated contemplation and vulnerability. Today we might describe Jesus as a discerning person. He lived in communion with God, in touch with life and in the truth of who he was. Christians too must be discerning persons. They must live by the grace of God, in touch with the movements of God in their personal and communal lives. Living in touch with this mystery assumes discernment as a way of life, a way of searching for and uniting oneself to God's will in life.

Finally, prayer occurs when God communes with us and we with God. In authentic prayer we are face-to-face with God who is personal, relational, and actively present in all of creation. In prayer we take a long, loving look at reality as we lift up our minds and hearts and pay attention to the action of God in the world. As such, prayer is a contemplative encounter with God, a way of relating to a loving God who desires us.

A short story might illustrate the exercise of Christian prayer. Two women religious, Anne and Margaret, were experiencing conflict with their community leadership. Both women take prayer seriously but each has a different understanding of it. Anne prayed: “God, You are in charge. Where are you? Fix it.” Her concept of God was that of an all-powerful “Mr. Fix It,” and she prayed for a quick solution to the conflict. She did not share intimately with God what was happening in her in this conflict. She assumed little, if any, responsibility for bringing the conflict to resolution. Her prayer lacked deep interpersonal involvement.
Margaret approached prayer much differently. She shared with God her deeper self, her joys and hopes, her pain and confusion. She daily paid attention to the movements of God in her life. When the conflict with leadership arose, she expressed to friends and to God her own need for comfort and support. When in prayer, she did not mask her feelings and responses, but was open to the “desires of God’s heart.” Led by the Spirit, she spoke her truth in love to the community leaders. Thus, she assumed some responsibility and moved toward others with integrity. This brought her a degree of inner peace.

Like Anne, Margaret experienced God as all-powerful, but her experience of divine power was an invitation to a deep sense of mutuality and partnership. She did not expect God to fix the situation, but trusted God’s direction and guidance in her prayer. It is important to note the connection between the prayer of each woman and the respective images of God. Of the two, Margaret’s prayer reveals a desire to pray like Jesus prayed. She sought to live a discerning life, to enjoy intimacy with God, and to take necessary risks for others. As she experienced a deeper intimacy with God, she grew in freedom in God’s service.

This short story illustrates how Christian prayer, patterned after the prayer of Jesus, possesses an openness and responsiveness to the providential care of God that envelops us all. It is an awareness of and an engagement with the infinite mystery within which we live, move, and have our being.

HELEN CAHILL, O.P.

Prayer in the Islamic Tradition

Prayer is an expression of religious experience in action. It is the soul of every religion. In Islam prayer marks and directs all the activities of Muslims who begin and end their day with prayer. In Islamic spirituality, prayer has at least four different meanings. First, it means salat or ritual prayer and daily worship, which is the second pillar of Islamic religion. Prayer also means dua’, personal or congregational entreaties and petitions to Allah. Dhikr is remembrance of God, invoking certain key Qur’anic phrases or divine epithets. Finally, munajah is devotional conversations between the lover (believer) and the beloved (God).

When Muslims speak of prayer, they usually mean salat, the ritual prayer or daily worship. That is the meaning that will be explained here.

Salat is the Muslims’ daily teacher, guiding them to God and to a life of integrity. The word salat comes from an Arabic root meaning “link.” Thus, salat is the Muslims’ link or bridge to Allah. Salat is like a capsule that contains the extract of all teaching and the goal of religion. In salat Muslims become conscious of the goal of life, which is worship of God, the One. Since salat establishes contact with God, a Muslim must be in the state of ritual purity to perform it. This purity is crucial, so much so that when one becomes impure, one must undergo
some form of ablution in order to regain ritual purity. While major ablution involves a full bath from head to toe, a minor ablution can be as simple as rinsing or wiping one’s hands. In the absence of water, one might use clean sand as a form of cleansing. Salat need not be performed in the mosque. However, the place of performance must be clean and as tranquil and free from distraction as possible.

Muslims follow the example of the prophet Muhammad (praised be him) in performing salat. He is the perfect example of one who prays. It was told that, when a man once asked him: “Teach me to pray,” the Prophet replied: “Come and stay with us a day or two and thus learn your prayers.” He also said: “Pray as you see me pray.” Thus, his personal guidance and living example are the source of Muslims’ prayer.

Salat opens with a formula of consecration followed by the proclamation: “Allah is the Greatest!” This affirmation opens one’s heart, makes contact with God, and cuts one off from inappropriate relationships. To stand in salat is to stand with one foot in this world and the other in the grave. It is to stand in the balance before Allah. A mystic once said that salat or daily worship is dying in living. Salat is enjoined on the believers at fixed hours: dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, evening, and night. In this way the believer will be in a constant, conscious, prayerful attitude throughout the day.

The experience of the presence of God in salat is ineffable. However, no less important is the realization and expression of the experience in daily life. Salat wards off great sins of every kind. The Qur’an states that one who repudiates the faith is the one who maltreats the orphan and does not exhort (others) to feed the poor (107). It is obvious that salat can produce a sense of humanity and solidarity exemplified by a kindness to the needy. It is this goal of salat as the way of education of character or morals that is symbolized by saying salaam (peace) as its closing. Salat is really a prayer for peace for humanity, and it is uttered as an expression of solidarity with all humankind. Thus, one might say that salat begins with an affirmation of a relationship with God and closes with an affirmation of the relationship with humankind.

If salat is performed with devotion and attention and is accompanied with tranquility of every member of one’s body, it is a perfect declaration of faith. It creates a highly elevated feeling of religiosity. A person who performs salat will have a soul that is balanced and full of hope without losing awareness of oneself or becoming haughty. The one who prays “does not despair of misfortune
strikes, and does not become puffed up while experiencing good fortune” (70:19).
The ideal that salat seeks is the creation of a peaceful and just community.

One might say that this kind of prayer fosters spirituality, but it does not require organized religion. It means that belief in God and doing good are enough, with no need to participate in specific ritual prayer. Faith and good works are important in Islam. However, in order for faith to move one in the direction of good work, it must possess a warmth and intimacy in the soul which can be achieved through the practice of salat. Thus, salat expresses the logic of Islamic faith. Without salat as a ritual prayer, faith would become an abstract formulation lacking the ability to motivate the individual inwardly to act with integrity. As a ritual prayer and an institution of faith, salat functions to strengthen faith, making one conscious of its implications in daily life. The well known hadith (teaching) says, “Faith is not something static that appears once and for always. Faith, rather, is of a dynamic character that knows both the rhythm of negative development (decreasing, failing, becoming weak) and a positive growth (increasing, deepening, becoming stronger).”

Finally, as a ritual prayer, salat is thought to establish the social condition of union of servant and Lord believed to be essential if individuals and the community are to be truly safe. Prayer, in its higher form, is contemplative and unitive. It leads to salvation or liberation of the soul from all bondage and imperfection. This in turn leads to appropriate action. Without prayer or contemplation one cannot be in a state of grace or goodness, and without being good one cannot do well.

SYAFAA’ATUN ELMEZANA

Prayer in the Abrahamic Faiths

The importance of prayer in each of the Abrahamic faiths is readily apparent in these three short statements. Certain characteristics are also quite obvious. First is the very personal character of prayer. While communal prayer and the public celebration of religious events and festivals are often mandatory in each tradition, at the heart of genuine prayer is a personal relationship with God. Furthermore, though the holiness and total “otherness” of God is never denied, within this relationship God is perceived as an intimate friend, even a lover. This sense of intimacy with God seems to be the foundation of many of the other features of prayer.

A second common characteristic, and perhaps an implication of the first, is the very human yet all embracing scope of prayer. Each writer indicated that prayer is the context within which all of life is to be lived. Because it attunes us to the presence of God in our lives, it marks the periods of the day, and it
influences the way we make decisions. Thus in each tradition, prayer practiced in this way makes all of life an act of prayer.

Finally, all three faiths maintain that it is within prayer that we seek and discover God's will for us. Though that divine will might be expressed in various religious customs and traditional regulations, it is in prayer that we discern what may be specific to our own lives.

These short statements show that, despite their unique nature and the unfamiliar face they may reveal to the public, each of these three Abrahamic faiths cherishes the practice of profound, even contemplative, prayer. Furthermore, it is by means of such prayer that their members seek an intimate relationship with God that will manifest itself in lives of integrity and harmony with others.