

Pray Without Seeking

Toward a Truly Mystical Lord's Prayer

Part One

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As the Westar Institute continues its defining program of promoting religious literacy, its message appears to resonate most with those dissatisfied with traditional Christianity. While the Fellows and Associates of the organization are by no means of one mind theologically, it is safe to say that many, perhaps most, have rejected the theism (or more precisely, the monotheism¹) that has dominated the faith from its inception because it is incompatible with our Western, post-Enlightenment, modern scientific worldview. In so doing, they have found themselves far more attracted either to the Tillichian² "Ground of Being" God of Bishop John Shelby Spong, the panentheistic deity³ of Marcus Borg, or to some synthesis or semblance of these two. Some few, perhaps, have found themselves at least intrigued by my own monistic-pantheistic model for God drawn from Eastern mystical religious philosophies.⁴ Whatever forms such theological deviations have taken, however, it was perhaps inevitable that such explorations would lead Westar members still active in local mainstream denominations to a reconsideration of the language of worship, and that this topic would be included in the deliberations of their favorite scholarly organization.⁵

In that light and to that end, I would like to present for consideration four recent alternative versions of the most beloved prayer in the history of Christianity, The Lord's Prayer. These variations reflect different modern sensibilities, and together they represent at least three theological models, which constitute a kind of spectrum of revisionism ranging from mild to major, each moving further and further from the original. Yet all four, I shall argue, still bear the vestiges of the pre-Enlightenment monotheism that is so difficult for the scientifically informed, rational, and empirical modern mind to accept. In the second part of this two-part series, I shall present a fifth alternative of my own devising, which, in view of my well-documented inclination toward mysticism,⁶ will likely prove even more deviant, radical, controversial—and, I hope, provocative of much thought and discussion.

The King James Criterion

In order to establish a baseline of comparison, let me set forth the most traditional and popular English version of The Lord's Prayer, which is perhaps better known to Catholics as The Our Father. This icon of Christian faith and worship is routinely used in one form or another by nearly every church, denomination, and sect of the religion. It comes to us from scripture in the different versions of Matthew (6:9–13) and Luke (11:2–4), and thus probably resided originally in the "Q" material used by the two evangelists. It is the longer Matthean version that has become the standard, the most familiar wording in the English-speaking world coming to us from the King James biblical translation via the 1662 and 1928 editions of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP). This version even caught on in Catholic circles after the Second Vatican Council insisted that the language of the Catholic Mass, including the *Pater noster*, be thenceforth rendered in the vernacular rather than Latin.

For easier comparison between the alternative versions of the prayer that I shall present shortly, I have laid out the text of this and the first revisionist version in shorter, and somewhat arbitrary phrases; and these have been heavily influenced by the musical phrasings of the popular musical setting by Albert Hay Malotte,⁷ about which (and whom) I shall say much more in Part Two of this series. Malotte generally followed the wording of the 1662 BCP, except that he changed "trespasses" and "trespass" to "debts" and "debtors," and the "forever and ever" at the end to the simple "forever" of the King James Version:

Our Father, which⁸ art in heaven,
hallowed⁹ be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done
in¹⁰ earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.¹¹

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power,
and the glory,
forever.
Amen.

A prayer could hardly be truer to traditionalist monotheistic Christianity or more beautifully worded. Addressed as "Father" is a heavenly Being who is clearly Other than the praying person; petitions call *down* blessings upon the earth from above; these (as far as human concerns go) boil down to "favor, feed, forgive, and forefend"; and the concluding (optional) doxology unmistakably identifies the Source of all beneficence and beatitude as the aforementioned "Him" on High.

For a person steeped in and satisfied with the monotheism of mainstream Christianity, then, there is no need to look further. For less orthodox adherents of that faith, however, there are adjustments simply begging to be made.

The ELLC Cosmetic Version

The first alternative to the traditional Lord's Prayer is the product of the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), which was formally established in 1985 for the purpose of developing and promoting English liturgical texts and, insofar as possible, a common lectionary that might be used ecumenically across the English-speaking world. Its members have run the gamut of Christian churches and denominations, but have consisted primarily of Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant bodies. It adopted the version of its predecessor organization, the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET, est. 1969), one of whose first projects had been the production of a modernized Lord's Prayer, which was published in 1975 in a booklet titled *Prayers We Have in Common*. It reads:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom,
the power,
and the glory are yours now and for ever.
Amen.

This is obviously a mild reworking of the original KJV/BCP version, mostly in the interest of using contemporary language. The notable changes in this regard are that the

"which art" and "who art" dilemma in the original opening address is eliminated, the word "trespasses" (or "debts") becomes "sins," while "your" and "yours" replace the archaic "thy" and "thine." The most controversial and apparently much-debated change was from "Lead us not into temptation" to "Save us from the time of trial," which the majority of the ICET and ELLC believed more accurately reflected the meaning of Matthew's Greek. For all of these reasons, but primarily because of that new and controversial line, this mildly revisionist prayer was ardently opposed by some conservatives, especially in the Anglican communion. Nevertheless, the General Synod of that body finally approved it as an alternative version in 1998, nearly twenty years after the Episcopal Church in America had given its congregations permission to use it.

Compared to other versions of The Lord's Prayer to be treated later in this article, the ELLC version is mild almost to the point of being cosmetic. Surely nothing there, including its most controversial new line, challenges the fundamental theological model of a profoundly transcendent, heavenly, and fatherly God who can be petitioned to get things accomplished on behalf of his petitioners, and who remains the sole possessor of majesty, power, and glory—now and always.

A Westar-Inspired Contemporary Variation

A much more robust revision of The Lord's Prayer comes to us from our own Westar Associate and crack Polebridge Press copy editor, Tom Hall, by way of Oceania. His intention was to produce a modernization of the iconic prayer that would be acceptable for usage by a fairly traditional congregation and that would be based on *The Five Gospels* and its rendering of the Matthean and Lucan versions, as well as the reconstructed "Q" original that the two evangelists appear to have shared. The result is a beautiful adaptation of an already eloquent version of The Lord's Prayer that crossed his path in 2004 above the caption "from the Prayer Book of the Anglican Church of New Zealand." Tom's quite thorough reworking is all the more remarkable in light of his own role as an active Universalist lay preacher with a distinctly rationalist-humanist bent. The format of the text is his:

Eternal Spirit,
Source of all that is and ever shall be,
Loving Parent in whom we discern heaven,
May knowledge of your holiness inspire all peoples,
And may your commonwealth of peace and freedom
flourish on earth
Until all of humankind heed your call to justice and
compassion.
May we find the bread that we need for today,
And for the hurts we cause one another

May we be forgiven in the same measure that we
forgive.

In times of trial and temptation, help us to be strong;
When life seems overwhelming, help us to endure;
And thus from the yoke of sin deliver us.

May you reign in the power of human love,
Now and forever.
Amen.

Though a significantly bolder departure from the KJV or ELLC versions, this one is still quite conservative theologically, for though it begins, with a broader and more ecumenical pair of titles for the addressee ("Eternal Spirit" and "Source," both of which are ambiguous as to whether a personality or something more like a power is involved), it soon becomes obvious that the prayer is still addressing a largely transcendent Other, and—it is now clear—a personal one at that, though "Parent" is commendably gender-neutral. Also, although a series of four "may" clauses (and a fifth at the prayer's end) might seem to soften the petitionary nature of this prayer somewhat, the "help us" requests that follow (not to mention the "deliver us") reinforce it, and leave one wondering whether the five "may" clauses are not requests for divine action after all. Conspicuously missing in this prayer, however, is any sense of heaven as a place: it is instead (in the first instance) something "discerned" in the "Loving Parent," but that is not quite to say in parental love in general. At the end of the prayer, however, it is clear that the "Eternal Spirit" reigns (and, presumably, dwells) not in some celestial realm, but precisely in human love (but, one wonders, *only* there?). One may conclude, therefore, that though this rendering of The Lord's Prayer is an eloquent step away from orthodox monotheism and in the direction of inclusivism, it is a tentative one.

Two Cosmic Alternatives

The next two variations on the traditional Lord's Prayer come from the same source, and thus are siblings, so to speak. The older (our third) version is that of Neil Douglas-Klotz and is based on a reading of the Syriac-Aramaic *Peshitta* text of the New Testament.¹² The newer (our fourth) version, by Bruce Sanguin, is clearly and admittedly dependent on the earlier Aramaic textual work of Douglas-Klotz, yet nevertheless is original, commendable, and compelling in its own right. The similarity of spirit of the two resulting variations obviously stems from their common Aramaic source; but both authors are also firmly in the camp of the theologian Matthew Fox and clearly fans of his Creation Spirituality,¹³ and—as the titles of their books and the content of their prayers suggest—both share its basic mystical orientation, its immanence-heavy theology, its ecological and feminist values, and its appreciation of the modern scientific worldview.

Let us start with Douglas-Klotz's version¹⁴ of The Lord's Prayer, and juxtapose it immediately with Sanguin's slight departure from it. The layout of each of these versions is that of the respective author.

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos,
Focus your light within us—make it useful:
Create your reign of unity now—
Your one desire then acts with ours,
as in all light, so in all forms.
Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.
Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,
as we release the strands
we hold of others' guilt.
Don't let surface things delude us.
But free us from what holds us back.
From you is born all ruling will,
the power and the life to do,
the song that beautifies all,
from age to age it renews.
Truly—power to these statements—
May they be the ground from which all
my actions grow: Amen.¹⁵

Loving Presence, luminous in all creation,
hallowed be your name.
Thy kin-dom [*sic*] come.
May we reflect on earth
the yielding perfection of the heavens.
Help us to receive an illumed measure from the earth
this day.
Forgive us when we trespass against others,
human and other than human,
as we forgive others who trespass against us.
Keep us on the path of wisdom
when we are tempted to take the selfish path.
May it be your rule we follow,
your power we exercise,
and your radiance that allures.
May this be the truth that guides our lives,
the ground from which our future will grow,
until we meet again.¹⁶

As sympathetic as I am to Fox's spirituality (precisely because of its mystical orientation) and its attending values, and as much as I like many of the phrasings of both prayers (and especially the "kin-dom" of Sanguin's version¹⁷), they remain off-putting to me. Why? Because they still in varying degrees suffer the vestigial effects of the monotheistic (and therefore dualistic) theological model of both traditional Christianity and the original (Matthean and Malotlean) Lord's Prayer.

Douglas-Klotz, for example, addresses God (presumably, though never named as such) as "Birther" and "Father-Mother," which images overwhelm the "light" reference,

making it seem like something God *has* rather than (*as the Light*) *is*. The author then asks for God to *do* a list of tasks: focusing, making, creating, granting, loosing, preventing, and freeing. The basic message here seems to be, "Yo! God! Get busy!" Sanguin does soften such invitations to divine busy-ness a great deal by using the very device that Hall did earlier: a series of "May" clauses. Yet, as with Hall's version, these are offset—or perhaps overwhelmed—by requests for action (help us, forgive us, keep us), which make every "May" clause that precedes and follows sound like a veiled, polite "Make it so" request of its own. In other words, the petitioning persists; and when the prayer is done, the ball seems to be in the Other's court to *do* something.

Conclusion

Of course, any of the above prayers, including the benchmark English original, can be used by anyone as a mere historical symbol, or perhaps as a purely poetic or merely metaphorical device—in other words by any progressive person who is not a literalist when it comes to prayers or liturgical language in general. From an aesthetic standpoint, all of these versions are creative and lovely. But at the substantive point at which the content of the words begins to matter, all of these alternatives to the traditional Lord's Prayer fail to escape the image of a Parental Provider who can intervene to affect (and, one would assume, *effect*) human life "from above," as it were. Though such an image of God might serve as a stop-gap, it could never be finally satisfying to anyone who is self-consciously a post-Enlightenment individual, whether that person be a secular humanist or a mystic.

What I intend to offer in the sequel to this article is a fifth and original alternative Lord's Prayer that I hope will better satisfy both of these odd bedfellows *and* provide a point of wide-ranging discussion for everyone else. Until that installment arrives, I suggest that the reader ponder the first four alternatives, and especially the more adventuresome final three, testing each for its acceptability relative to both her or his own personal spirituality and theology and, if appropriate, significant religious community. Make

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This is truly a bonanza for Oregonians. The presence of Westar and Polebridge here greatly increases access to the cutting edge of creative thought and outstanding research in theology and history. Kudos to Willamette for having the superior vision and insight to bring us this invaluable resource."

—Richard Vandiver, Associate, Lincoln City, Oregon

no final judgment or selection, however, for the best may be yet to come! **4R**

Notes

1. I generally use "theism" and "monotheism" interchangeably to identify a theological model that posits a God who is profoundly transcendent (that is, an Other totally distinguishable from and in some sense above and beyond the cosmos and its natural components, which "He" created and remains actively (or, better, *interactively*) involved in its affairs in an ongoing way.

2. The reference is to the great twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich (d. 1965), who redefined God not as another being (or even Being) among others, but as the very Ground of Being in which every existing being is, so to speak, grounded. He also referred to this God as "Being Itself."

3. Pantheism (literally, "everything in God-ism") is a theological model that says that God somehow contains the universe, but in such a way that the universe also contains God, who (or which) in any case has an aspect or dimension that does not coincide with or correspond to the universe in any way.

4. This model was introduced in Chapter 5 of my *Getting Oriented: What Every Christian Should Know about Eastern Religions, but Probably Doesn't* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2005), and later expounded upon in my "A Mystical Christian Credo: From Experience to Expression," *The Fourth R* 19:3 (Sep–Oct 2007). That article appears in a slightly revised version in the Polebridge Press *Festschrift* for Robert W. Funk, *When Faith Meets Reason: Religion Scholars Reflect on Their Spiritual Journeys* (2008), edited by Charles Hedrick.

5. At the Spring 2006 Westar meeting in Miami, for example, Jerry Stinson, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church (U.C.C.) in Long Beach, California, presented a thought-provoking paper entitled "The Encounter of Progressive Christian Theology with the Language of Prayer and Ritual on Sunday Morning." In it, he argued persuasively for the need for modern Christians to be authentic in their use of language in public worship, making it not only inclusive in every possible way, but theologically honest as well.

6. See footnote 3 above. A fuller definition of "mysticism" will be provided in Part 2 of this article.

7. For those who are unfamiliar with the Malotte setting or do not associate it with the composer's name, there is a classic recording of it by a contemporary of the composer, the great tenor Mario Lanza, on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NN0NMpVGa20&NR=1>.

8. The 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* changed "which" to "who," as do many reciters and singers

9. This word is generally said and sung as having three syllables.

10. The 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* changed "in" to "on," as do many reciters and singers.

11. When recited rather than sung, this couplet often becomes "and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," and the *BCP*'s redundant "and ever" is occasionally tacked on at the very end.

12. However important such issues may be to New Testament scholars, I shall not deal with issues like the date, authenticity, or relative worth of this ancient version, which is best known due to the work of Aramaic speaker and scholar, George M. Lamsa (1892–1975), who argued that the *Peshitta* predated and was the source of the Greek New Testament. For me, as well as for Douglas-Klotz and Sanguin it seems, the text is merely a window to an Aramaic worldview *that may have been* more akin to that of Jesus and, *more important*, more resonant with our own modern worldview and especially with a mystical spirituality.

13. Fox's classic text on Creation Spirituality is still *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Bear & Co., 1983). Also helpful, a bit more recent, and therefore more readily available, is his *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991).

Continued on page 28

Flattery in its Sincerest Manifestation *Continued from page 14*

17:28) comes not from Jewish scripture but from a Greek poet, Aratus. When he relates the story of his conversion to a cultured audience, Paul has Jesus quote a Greek proverb ("It hurts you to kick against the goads," 26:14), found in Euripides' *Bacchants*. In Acts the missionary is "Saul" and the Septuagint to the Jews, but "Paul" and the Classics to Greeks: all things to all people. This subtlety is a very clever tactic. Luke shows rather than tells the processes by which he paints a picture of how a Jewish sect became a gentile religion. Readers perceive continuity and change without the necessity of detailing them.

Conclusion

Imitation was a constituent feature of much literature composed during the Roman Imperial era (about 27 BCE to about 565 CE) and beyond. Students learned to write by imitating what were already "the Classics." Selection of an appropriate model to imitate was essential. Imitation of the historian Herodotus, for example, indicated what an author was seeking to accomplish. This would be futile for an audience that did not know Herodotus. Imitation also intimated that no one could improve upon the ancient masters.

The author of Luke and Acts also engaged in mimesis, most notably of the LXX. He wrote for an audience that

viewed the Greek Bible as the foundational text. Unlike most contemporary Greek and Latin authors, his mimesis served a central and pervasive purpose: demonstration of continuity in salvation history, the firm relation of the Jesus-movement to Israelite history. Religious, rather than cultural, continuity was the factor driving his practice of writing like the Bible. **BR**

Notes

1. Xenophon's *Anabasis* ("Expedition") is his history of Greek mercenaries' military adventures in the Persian Empire.

2. Such pauses are a conventional method for the liturgical reading or singing of the Psalter. Liturgical Psalters, such as that found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, often mark the point for pausing with an asterisk.

3. The old and familiar "Glory to God in the highest and peace, good will toward men" is based upon an inferior Greek text that read "good will" rather than "of good will." One can readily see how this disrupts the parallelism.

4. See, e.g., D. R. MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer: Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.



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Pray Without Seeking *Continued from page 20*

14. Douglas-Klotz actually lays out no fewer than eight alternative renderings of each line of the Aramaic Lord's Prayer, so that in the end, he parenthetically labels his English version of the prayer, cobbled from a selection of the many optional readings, "One Possible New Translation from the Aramaic."

15. Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990, p. 41.

16. Bruce Sanguin, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Ecological Christianity*. Keylowna, B. C., Canada: CopperHouse, 2007, p.196. CopperHouse is an imprint of Wood Lake Publishing, Inc.

17. "Kin-dom" is actually the brainchild of another Creation Spirituality advocate and author, Briane Swimme.



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"That One" Takes a Village *Continued from page 22*

4. Because of the strong parallels among Luke 11:21-22, Matt 12:29, and Mark 3:27, it is difficult to say whether this group of sayings begins with the small story about the strong man's house or not. If it was in Q, which I think is likely, it is equally difficult to make a reasonable proposal about the wording. *The Critical Edition of Q* leaves that part of the passage in brackets to indicate the difficulty.

5. Räisänen, "Exorcisms and the Kingdom," 127.

6. Käsemann, "Lukas 11:14-28," 244.

7. Beare, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 270.

8. Bultmann, *History*, 162.

9. Shirock, "Whose Exorcists are They?" 51.

10. Allison, *Jesus Tradition*, 126.

11. Humphries, *Christian Origins*, 33.

12. For an exposition of Marcion and his teaching, see Joseph Tyson, "Marcion," *The Fourth R* 22.3 (May-June 2009).

13. See 2 Sam 22:17; Ps 17:15 and 143:6; Wis 17:3; Zech 13:7-9; Sir

48:15; Tob 13:5; and the Didache 9.

14. Klaus Berger, as quoted in Humphries, *Christian Origins*, 36.

15. Killagen, "The Return of the Unclean Spirit," 56.

16. Humphries, *Christian Origins*, 38.



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