

Pray Without Seeking

Toward a Truly Mystical Lord's Prayer

Part Two

Paul Alan Laughlin

In Part One of this series (Fourth R 22-5), I presented four alternative English versions of the traditional Lord's Prayer, each more radical in its revision of the original than the one before it. At the end of that survey, I both commended the efforts of those responsible for these variations for their sensitivity and creativity and criticized them for not being thoroughgoing enough in removing vestiges of the monotheistic framework of the original prayer and thus not sufficiently reflecting modern, post-Enlightenment, rational, and empirical values and sensibilities. I then promised to present a fifth and even more radical alternative Lord's Prayer that would be mystically based but broadly appealing to the contemporary mind, for it would remove the last trace of the petitions that represent an archaic and implausible monotheism.

This second and final installment of my series intends to deliver on that promise and then some; for not only will my version of the Lord's Prayer be conceptually acceptable and appealing in content, it will also be singable to the popular musical setting of the traditional English text, the one written in 1935 by Albert Hay Malotte, who was at the time a prolific Disney animated film composer.¹ Though difficult for most untrained voices to manage because of its octave-and-a-half range (exactly that of the treacherous "Star-Spangled Banner"), it is a beloved and moving piece of music, and for some Christian churches, a cherished congregationally-sung staple of Sunday morning worship. To some, accommodating a truly radical and admittedly heterodox version of the Lord's Prayer to a revered piece of traditional hymnody might seem at best gratuitous and at worst pointless; but I shall provide a sound rationale for having done so.

Mysticism and Affirmative Prayer

Contemporary discourse about the nature of mysticism, even among scholars, manifests a great lack of clarity and much confusion. Some, perhaps following in the footsteps of Evelyn Underhill,² claim mysticism to be a sense either of

oneness with God (unitive) or of being in the presence of God (numinous). To me, the sense of being in the presence of God, however intense, is still an example of an affective devotionism (usually in the form of love, faith, and worship) directed toward an Other, generally a profoundly transcendent deity. I prefer to follow the views of arguably the best modern scholar of mysticism, Walter T. Stace (1886-1967), a Princeton philosopher who defined the cardinal feature of mysticism as "the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate." He further maintained that this apprehension "entirely transcends our sensory-intellectual consciousness."³

Like Underhill, Stace distinguished two types of mystical experience—one outwardly directed and the other inwardly focused—but with a subtle yet profound difference: his "extrovertive" mystical experience found in the external world (mostly nature) not an Other or any intermediary or representative thereof (such as a saint), as that of Underhill and other Western interpreters did, but the same One that his "introvertive" variety found, in his words, "at the bottom of the self." For Stace, the introvertive type of mystical experience was "the major strand in the history of mysticism" and far more important than the extrovertive sort in the history of human thought as a whole.⁴ Stace's focus, therefore, is consistently on an immanent (that is, indwelling) One abiding within the cosmos, world, and nature, *and* (most importantly) in the individual's deepest self. This more thoroughgoing (and Eastern) type of mysticism is the sort with which I identify and on the basis of which I have constructed my alternative Lord's Prayer.

A mystical Lord's Prayer, then, must be non-devotional, which is to say, it cannot be an expression of affection toward another being or Being. It will also have to eliminate any petitionary taint from its content—hence the title of this article. That is because petitions imply a belief in the existence of a potential responder—that is, an other (or in this case, an Other). Such divine "Otherness" is, of

course, the very human-vs.-divine dualism and divine transcendence⁵ that provides the foundation of monotheism. Accordingly, I would like to suggest for consideration a non-theistic prayer form that I learned to appreciate when I was for a brief time active in the Unity branch of New Thought Christianity. It is *affirmative* in nature and, unlike the Quaker-style silence that Unity also wisely touts as another alternative prayer style⁶, it is verbal and often orally and audibly so, at least in public worship settings.

The key feature of affirmative prayer is that it does not call upon an Other to intervene, but rather affirms the immanent—that is, the innately, inherently, and indelibly indwelling—presence of the divine, and declares its power to be already at work in salutary ways. Affirmative prayer is not, therefore, an intercessory act involving two parties, one human and the Other divine, but rather an evocative exercise for realizing or reaffirming one's own true identity as both human (manifest and easily accessible) and divine (more deeply hidden and mysterious), and sometimes, in an obliquely intercessory fashion, to encourage another person to do so. Such a prayer may be seen as a poetic exercise of the faculty that the late best-selling author Norman Vincent Peale famously called "The Power of Positive Thinking" and his protégé, Crystal Cathedral founder Robert H. Schuller, dubbed "Possibility Thinking." Or it may be regarded simply as a pep talk on behalf of the afflicted, the importance of which should not be underestimated, for scientific study upon scientific study, coupled with much anecdotal evidence from physicians, nurses, and other caregivers, indicates that a positive attitude on the part of a patient and morale-boosting encouragement from loved ones noticeably speed the healing process.

A Truly Mystical Lord's Prayer

With a nod of sincere appreciation for the efforts and achievements of those who created the four alternative Lord's Prayers presented in Part One of this series, and another for those who have contributed to the idea and practice of affirmative prayer, I now present a fifth version, one of my own devising that reflects a radical mystical spirituality and presents a compatible non-theistic conceptual framework that is much more thoroughgoing than those previously examined.⁷ Because, as already suggested, it also has the salutary quality of conforming syllable for syllable to the familiar and beloved Malotte musical setting, I present it in parallel with the traditional King James-Malotte wording (see box to the right):

The first and perhaps most important thing that sets this version of the Lord's Prayer off from the others is its theology, which dispenses entirely with the personal, parental Father-Sky-God of the original, and replaces "Him" with a non-personal, immanent power-presence (or source-force), an infinite one (or One) that is none other (or non-Other) than the spiritual core of the person or persons reciting or singing the prayer. The implicit theology of this prayer, then, is not monotheism but monism¹¹, for it is based in the spirituality of mysticism laid out in my "Mystical Christian Credo."¹²

The second distinctive feature of this version of the Lord's Prayer follows from the first; for having eliminated a personal divine Other above, this Lord's Prayer—unlike the other four versions—has no petitions for any intercessory acts on behalf of a human individual or group. In their stead are strong affirmations of how we are already emboldened from within ourselves to become better persons and to accomplish ever-greater things. This "Lord's Prayer," then, can properly be regarded as a daily reminder of our full human potential—miraculous and praiseworthy in its own right—to be good and do good.

Thus my Lord's Prayer is not an invocative device, but an *evocative* exercise in self-realization—or perhaps Self-realization, if the ego-self is to be distinguished from one's deepest and truest identity, as it is in most mystical traditions. For humanists, this "within" may be seen differently: as our rational and empirical faculties, perhaps after the fashion of Plato, who equated the human "soul" (*psyche*) with the intellect. In either case, what we have here is an acknowledgement of a mysterious and *in some sense* divine Immanence (versus Eminence)—a reference to the indwelling mysterious Presence and Power that (at least for mystics) permeates or infuses the cosmos, and that (for humanists as well, though probably *sans* the capitals) abides in nature, human nature, and therefore ourselves.

O presence and pow'r within us,
 being⁸ and light⁹ of all.
 How we are filled,
 how we o'erflow
 with infinite love and gladness!
 We shall this day sow grace and peace,
 and show mercy to all,
 and gentle loving-kindness.
 And we shall be not so self-serving,
 but a constant source of giving.
 For ours is the essence,
 and the wholeness,
 and the fullness¹⁰
 forever.
 Amen.

Our Father, which art in heaven,
 hallowed be Thy name.
 Thy kingdom come,
 Thy will be done
 in earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts
 as we forgive our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom,
 and the power,
 and the glory,
 forever.
 Amen.

This Lord's Prayer, therefore, merely affirms poetically and metaphorically its (or Its) life-biased potency and potentiality, and evokes its (or Its) salutary effects. Objectively speaking, what we have in the praying of this version of the Lord's Prayer is a poetic (but nonetheless—or maybe all the more—effective) exercise of a very human faculty. Note also its radical working assumption: that whatever we need we already have, though we may require some modality—a formal prayer, for example, or some other spiritual exercise—by which to tap into it.

Despite its being grounded and steeped in mysticism, therefore, I would nevertheless argue that this fifth alternative Lord's Prayer could well become a staple of the spiritual life not only of mystically oriented Christians, but of Christian and non-Christian humanists as well. The last-mentioned (but hardly least important) of these groups, often dubbed "secularists," would find the alternative meaningful and useful, however, only if they regarded human beings, human life, and human experience, not as flat and one-dimensional, but as entailing and exhibiting an extraordinary, mysterious, and perhaps even a-rational (or at least ineffable) depth-dimension¹³ that needs some kind of verbal acknowledgement and articulation. But this alternative prayer should also be more plausible and palatable to modern, post-Enlightenment sensibilities in general than the original, which conjures the transcendent Deity of monotheism; for it suggests *neither* a realm beyond human experience and access *nor* a Being to inhabit it. More important, perhaps, it neither seeks nor even envisions the bestowal of blessings from such a Place or Person. Gone, therefore, are the petitions of the original Lord's Prayer. In their stead are strong affirmations of how we are already energized and emboldened from within ourselves to become better persons and to accomplish ever greater things. This Lord's Prayer, then, can properly be regarded as a daily reminder of our full human potential—a miraculous and praiseworthy (and empirically verifiable) faculty in its own right.

A final word is in order about my intentional tailoring of my Lord's Prayer to fit the Malotte musical setting, which, I believe, reinforces the new text in two ways. First, it couches the alternative text in a musical setting that for many Christians is itself familiar and inspiring, thereby reducing the shock effect of the new prayer's content and thus offering its auditors a degree of comforting familiarity. This striving for comfortability may, of course, be interpreted as a subversive tactic intended to distract the faithful from the text's truly radical nature, and that critique is not entirely invalid. I believe, however, that my second and stronger motive is a purer one: to wed a beautiful prayer with a beautiful piece of music that will enhance the total

prayer experience of the worshipper. Indeed, the musician and music-lover in me has long suspected that much of the current appeal of the traditional Lord's Prayer is due precisely to Malotte's having set it to a gorgeous and inspiring musical composition; and that the powerful music, rather than simply enhancing the lyric, may actually transcend it in power and importance. In fact, I tested my theory one recent Sunday morning when I asked a congregation that usually sings the traditional Lord's Prayer to the Malotte melody instead to merely listen contemplatively to the music played as a keyboard solo. Many insisted afterward that, though wordless, it had been the best Lord's Prayer they had ever experienced.

Possible Objections

Musical setting aside (and probably notwithstanding), one can anticipate some serious objections to my version of the Lord's Prayer beyond the simple fact that it isn't the original and isn't monotheistic. One charge would be that a latent dualism is entailed or at least implied in merely addressing and acknowledging the power and presence within as something (or Something) unto itself (or Itself). The proper response to such an objection is the observation, already made, that this prayer is intentionally metaphorical and poetic, and represents a concession to the need to put the ineffable into words. (Perhaps this *and all* Lord's Prayers should come with a warning label: "Nothing herein is to be taken literally!") But any sense that the within (or Within) to which the prayer

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points is really a cloaked Other that is transcendent in the sense of *really* or *essentially* another entity (or Other Entity) is simply wrong. My notion that one's own (or another person's) overall identity is a coincidence of the manifest and the mysterious—which we may for convenience call the *human* and the *divine*, respectively—is no more dualistic than recognizing a working computer as a combination of hardware and software; or than distinguishing the brain from the mind; or than acknowledging an extrinsic and intrinsic aspect in any context. In each case—and in the case of this Lord's Prayer—we are dealing with two sides of one and the same coin.

Another objection might arise: that there is nothing particularly Christian about this Lord's Prayer. I would respond that neither is there about the biblical original, which references its purported author not at all. The focus of both the ancient and my modern version is on God (or an equivalent), albeit viewed through different and sometimes diametrically opposed theological lenses (to wit, monistic or pantheistic versus monotheistic). Moreover, both express the desire for human life to become more godly, though through vastly different mechanisms (name-

ly, from within versus from without). For those who might object that there is nothing much left of the content of the original that might reasonably be attributed to the purported author of the prayer, I would point out that the Jesus Seminar has determined that little of the traditional Lord's Prayer is certain to have come from the lips of the historical Jesus anyway.¹⁴ Further, whether or not the alternative prayer expresses a sentiment at all attributable to an historical or scriptural Jesus depends very much on which alleged teachings of and about him a reader considers central and compelling, *and* on the interpretive lens through which she or he views them.

A third possible objection to my Lord's Prayer would also come from a traditionalist-biblicist perspective: that it is not biblical in *any* sense. If the reference is to the source-texts of Matthew and Luke, that is certainly true. Yet other New Testament passages more suggestive of a mystical spirituality might be offered in support. In any case, the fact of the matter is that a true mystic needs no biblical warrant for her or his spiritual life in general or for prayers that might be used to express or reinforce it. To a mystic, reliance on such external authorities as scripture is an exercise in *heteronomy* (that is, external control) rather than the *autonomy* (self-regulation) that self-exploration both requires and reinforces. The question to be asked of this or any prayer, therefore, is not whether it is based on some *authority* (Jesus, scripture, church, or other), but whether it is *authentic*, which is to say, resonant with one's direct experience of oneself and the world.

Other objections might follow, of course, including some with no ties to traditionalism. Those inclined to progressive interpretations of Christianity might be bothered by the sobriquet "Lord" retained in the prayer's title, since it dredges up images of a celestial political potentate or a descended savior figure to be worshipped and adored. To such folks I would point out the use of the title "Lord" in Eastern religious traditions (usually as a translation of the Sanskrit *Bhagavat* or *Bhagavad* or an Oriental linguistic equivalent) may be applied to any strictly human spiritual master or *guru*, including the historical Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama), who bears that title even among his most ardent Theravada¹⁵ followers—those for whom he was simply a most extraordinary man. If "Lord" still carries too much traditional and pietistic Christian baggage for the would-be user, I would advise re-titling the piece as "A Mystical Alternative to The Lord's Prayer." Finally, if anyone should quibble with the particular wording of my version, I would invite them to alter and adapt it to taste. For those who would want to keep the prayer Malotte-compatible for

singing, however, attention to syllabication will be necessary in any substitutions that might be made.

Conclusion and Concession

Whether or not an individual or community would want to adopt my mystically-based, non-theistic, and affirmative alternative Lord's Prayer—or, if you prefer—alternative *to* The Lord's Prayer—at the very least it makes a good starting point for individual reflection and group discussion

on matters of great import, including the nature and locus of God; the person, message, and authority of Jesus (the historical figure as well as the narrative character—or characters—of the same name); the varieties of religious experience and spiritualities; and even the relationship between the Bible, scriptural exegesis, and the Christian life. Such weighty conceptual matters aside, however, if this new prayer-text does no more than focus renewed attention on one powerful and, I dare say, inspired¹⁶ piece

of music, it will have served a noble and useful purpose.


In recognition of the fact that not all Christians are mystically-inclined, but still might like a contemporary and singable Lord's Prayer—and at the risk of stealing my own thunder—I offer in closing yet a sixth alternative. It is loosely based on the text of Tom Hall's contemporary version presented in Part One of this series and follows his lead in retaining some mild, veiled petitions (contained in two "May" clauses), but reduces their number from his eight (and the original seven) to three, perhaps thereby making it sound less needy. Like my other, more mystical and radical—and petition-free—version, it fits the Malotte tune syllable for syllable.

Great Spirit,
You are the Parent
and Loving Source of all.
In you are heav'n
and holiness
and hope for our world's renewal.

May we today have food to eat
and forgiveness for wrongs
we've done to one another.

May we have strength in times of trial
and injustice, loss and sadness.

In love we shall find you
and your power
and your glory
forever.
Amen.

Amen, indeed! 

Notes

1. The reader is kindly asked at this point not to make too much of the fictive nature of Malotte's day job.

2. Underhill's *magnum opus* was *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. It was first published in 1911 and underwent one major revision during her lifetime (1875–1941). Its Christian (and therefore theistic) bias is perhaps more obvious today, for Western scholarship has revealed so much more about Eastern religions and their philosophical underpinnings than was available in Underhill's day, especially in the English-speaking world.

3. Walter T. (Terence) Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York: New American Library, 1960), pp. 14–18. It should be noted that his use of the verb "transcends" here reflects the weaker sense of the word "transcendence," which refers not to a trait of the divine Other, but to the limitations of the finite human mind to perceive, comprehend, or articulate the alleged immanent Ultimate under normal circumstances and without an extraordinary effort—such as a spiritual discipline of some kind. See note 5 below.

4. Stace, pp 15–18. Stace's view of mysticism is clearly Eastern, deriving perhaps from his 22-year career as a British civil servant in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). His *magnum opus* was *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960).

5. My stock definition of the theological "transcendence" is "the quality of being above, prior to, and/or beyond with respect to the natural world and human life." A weaker sense also appears in theological contexts: "the quality of being beyond normal human abilities to perceive and conceive." The difference between the two meanings is that the first denotes a quality inherent in God (or the Ultimate by whatever name), while the latter acknowledges only the limitations of finite human beings.

6. Following the lead of its co-founder, Charles Fillmore, Unity likes to call this form of prayer "The Silence". Ideally, it is wordless, introspective, and meditative. Unfortunately, in practice it is often compromised by "directed meditation" verbiage offered by a worship leader, which often has the deleterious effect of taking time—and sometimes a lot of

time—away from the experience of silence it is intended to introduce and facilitate.

7. An earlier version of this prayer was presented and analyzed under the title "A New Thought Lord's Prayer," in *New Thought* 83:2 (Summer 1999), 12–13. *New Thought* is a publication of the International New Thought Alliance, which serves as an umbrella organization for such small, non-mainstream bodies as Religious Science and Unity. Like nearly all of my published pieces of the last decade, much of the inspiration and most of the clarity of the present article is due to the input of my valued friends and gifted editors, Tom Hall and Grey Austin (like Tom, a Westar Associate). Grey is also the author of the self-published *Wholly Spirit: My Search for a Plausible God* (2007), which presents a mystical and humanistic theology that is totally compatible with my Lord's prayer. The book is available through amazon.com.

8. The word "essence" may be substituted here.

9. The word "life" may be substituted here.

10. These three prominent closing nouns of the Prayer's doxology may be replaced with "wonder," "power," and "glory." These alternatives and their equivalents, along with "presence," "pow'r," "being," and "light/life" may be capitalized for emphasis; users are encouraged to substitute other nouns they find suitable for any or all of these. Mystics and others will likely prefer the capitalizations, while humanists and other secularists no doubt will wish to retain the lower case throughout.

11. By "monism" I mean the philosophical view that the cosmos is a closed system consisting of a single basic substance. The most common options here are usually *materialistic monism*, which maintains that the basic stuff of reality is Matter; or *idealistic monism*, which claims that it is Mind. I prefer the lesser attested, but nonetheless precedented, *neutral monism*, which claims that the cosmos consists of "One Something" more basic than and giving rise to both matter and mind, as well as to everything else. If this Something is called "God," the result is a variety of pantheism—the view that everything is, or is essentially, God, a theology most compatible with the experiential testimony of the greatest (and mostly Eastern) mystics.

12. This article appeared in *The Fourth R* 19.3 (Sep-Oct, 2007) and 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*, edited by Charles Hedrick (2008).

13. The reference here is to the "depth dimension of all human experience" that theologian Paul Tillich employed as one of his definitions of "religion" and used as the basis of his anything-but-traditional Christian theology.

14. In the Matthew 6 version, for example, the only words voted red are "Our Father" in verse 9a. Verses 9c, 10a, 11, and 12 are pink, leaving 13a gray and the rest black. In the Luke 11 version, "Father" was deemed red; the rest of 2c, pink; and 3 and 4, gray. My thanks to Westar Associate and editorial factotum Tom Hall for this summarization.

15. Theravada ("The Way of the Elders") is the school of Buddhism that prevails mostly in South and Southeast Asia and makes the most concerted effort to follow to the letter the example and teachings of the founder of the Buddhist faith, Siddhartha Gautama or Shakyamuni Buddha. The other major school, Mahayana ("The Large Vessel") is much more flexible in this regard and therefore diverse, having produced many sects (special interest groups).

16. I mean "inspired" here, of course, in a mystical sense: that the source (or, for emphasis, Source) of all creativity and genius is the innate, inherent, indelible, and immanent human spirit (or Spirit).

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