

Pamphlets for the People

No. 3

**WHAT IS
THE USE OF
PRAYER?**

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What is the Use of Prayer?

I.

"Without Prayer there would be no Religion."

Dr. R. W. Inge, late Dean of St. Paul's.

"Men would not pray unless they expected to get something by it, and that their prayers would have the effect of securing it."—*Archdeacon Paley.*

Why do men pray? The obvious reason is that given by Archdeacon Paley: they hope to get something which they would not get without it. Whether we pray for a change in the weather, for safety while at sea, or for recovery from sickness, the same thing holds. Mankind has produced quite a number of varieties of the genus "fool," but there has never existed that kind of a fool who would pray while convinced that it would make no difference to the course of events.

But when man prays he must pray to some *one*, to one that is able to listen and respond. No one prays to a volcano to stop erupting, or to the rain to stop falling. There is, of course, the childish rhyme.

Rain, rain, go away, come again another day

but no adult now believes the petition has any effect on the weather. Yet, put the child's rhyme in the form of a solemn prayer, say it in proper form, recite it in a church, and it is believed that some *one* listens and stops the rain, although he might not have done so had the prayer remained unsaid. We should like someone to try to establish a real difference between the child's incantation and the adult's prayer.

Prayer is a matter of a transaction between two persons. Man asks and God grants. If either of the two terms is wiped out prayer is impossible. Or if things would happen as they do whether one prays or not, then prayer becomes a manifest absurdity.

Paley is right. Dr. Inge is also right when he says that without prayer there would be no religion. The practice of prayer is based on the belief that gods exist and that they manipulate events in the interests of those who pray.

Primitive peoples pray for rain and for success in life exactly as Christians do to-day, but with more logic and sincerity. Roman Catholic papers out of England—they are carefully trimmed for the British public—give numerous accounts of recoveries from sickness, of jobs gained, of good business deals done, as a result of prayers to God or the Saints. In continental churches stacks of crutches are exhibited which are said to belong to those who have been cured by prayer. So medicine-men of a savage tribe pray for their chief, exactly as the Archbishop in this country prays for the King, and with equal results. All Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and other places of worship have their set prayers, and in the long run they all boil down to the identical petition, "Oh Lord give us something." It may be that God made man so that man might worship him, it is equally certain that the worship would not continue for long unless it was believed that God did something in return. Gods are not worshipped for merely existing. They are believed in and worshipped as in investment, and the dividends received are duly published. The reason for prayer is that God does something for those who pray. Without this belief prayer would die, and "without prayer there would be no religion."

There is no real doubt why men pray; neither is there any doubt as to why mankind developed the practice of and the belief in prayer. Prayer origin-

ates at that stage of human development when man thinks of the forces around him as akin to himself. So far as he thinks about what is going on in the world outside himself, he reasons as a child would, if it faced the world without the stored-up knowledge and experience which is the heritage of all in a civilized society. Man feels that somehow or other he must get on terms with these powers that are angry with him in the storm, and pleased with him in the smile of the sunshine. If the rain does not fall or if the crops wither, or if a disease breaks out, it is because the gods are angry with man. In these circumstances he reacts to the different aspects of nature as he does to those men who are stronger than himself, or who exert authority. He praises, he flatters, he worships. In other words he gives the gods service, and he expects something solid in return.

But unlike the modern religionist, primitive man, or even semi-civilized man, is not above "talking back" to his gods. If the gods fail him he may turn to others. In a more advanced stage even the temple of a defaulting god may be closed. He very easily, as missionaries among primitive peoples, find, swaps one god for another, if greater benefits are promised.

Many amusing instances of this are given in that great encyclopaedia of primitive customs, *The Golden Bough*, by Sir James Frazer. Here is one of them concerning an incident that occurred in Sicily as recently as 1893.

There had been a very long drought. The earth was parched, processions of priests and people had marched through the streets of Palermo, and consecrated candles had been burned in the churches in honour of certain selected saints. At last the peasants lost patience. Many of the saints were banished altogether. At Palermo they threw St. Joseph into a garden, so that he might see for himself how bad things

were, and threatened to leave him there till the rain fell. The golden wings of St. Michael were taken from his shoulders and replaced with pasteboard. His purple mantle was taken from him, and he was given a mere clout for a covering. At Liacto, the patron saint was reviled, put in irons and threatened with drowning or hanging if he did not soon send rain. "Rain or the rope," was the cry of the people.

But it is not often that the modern believers thus stand up to their gods. The worse they are treated the lower they grovel. The more the gods punish them, the louder they declare their unworthiness, and the more vehemently they proclaim the greatness and the justice of the god who is afflicting them.

In all this we have the persistence of the original mentality which is enshrined in all our creeds and catechisms, which is expressed in our spring festivals when the god is asked to give us a good crop. In the harvest thanksgiving when he is thanked for what he has given, in the blessing of fishing boats and nets, in the official prayers for rain, for the health of the King, and, in a more vulgar form, in the lavish use of mascots, in the belief in lucky days, and in the common conviction that when disaster occurs to a people, it is because they have offended or "forgotten" God, there is the persistence of primitive beliefs.

But if we are certain of anything it is that when there is a bad harvest it is due to bad soil, or bad weather, or bad husbandry, or other assignable causes. If an Atheist and a Christian start farming, the Christian is no better off than the Atheist. Whether a man reads his Bible daily or his *Freethinker* weekly, makes not the least difference, other things equal. A doctor who sent his consumptive patients for residence to a Church in preference to a sanatorium would soon find himself out of practice. And those people in this country who trust to the "Prayer of faith to save the sick," may, if their child dies, find themselves brought

before a Christian judge and sent to a Christian prison for the offence of trusting to the power of prayer. British law and British common sense say that you may *believe* in prayer, but it is criminal to rely upon it.

When prayers are offered up in churches for rain, or for good crops, or for the health of the King, or for our Members of Parliament to be dowered with wisdom, who is it that is deceived? It cannot be the Christian God, because we have it authoritatively stated that he cannot be deceived. It is not the clergy, they are the operators. Who is it that is fooled? It must be the people.

II.

DR. R. W. INGE is one of the ablest of modern theologians. Until recently he was Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London. At the modern Churchman's Conference held at Oxford, in August, 1936, Dr. Inge gave an address on "What to Believe About Prayer." He began by assuring his audience that there was no subject "on which Christ spoke with more downright explicitness than of the efficacy of prayer." By example and precept Jesus taught that prayer could accomplish miracles. The dead were raised, the blind could be made to see and the lame to walk. The Christian Church, officially, teaches that all things may be accomplished by prayer. There is not a critical occasion in the life of the country when the Churches do not announce a united service of prayer, as though by a kind of mass volleying, high heaven will do what the people want.

But Dr. Inge deliberately scoffs at the idea that our prayers can have any influence on the weather. He says:—

The more we know about the causes of climatic phenomena the less likely we are even to dream of changing them in order to save our hay crop, or to secure a fine day for our garden party.

Which is exactly what Freethinkers have been trying to drive into the heads of believing Christians.

Prayers for the sick come off quite as badly. Thus:—

But can we consistently give up praying for rain with the expectation of altering the weather for our benefit and continue to pray for the recovery of a relation or a friend in sickness. Knowledge has been enlarged in this field also during our lifetime. We know something about microbes; how can they be affected by our prayers?

For generations Freethinkers have been insisting that faith in prayer was only another name for ignorance. Here is one of the most prominent clerics of the English Church saying the same thing without disguise. We have said thousands of times what Dr. Inge is now permitted to say to a congregation of his fellow Christians. Of course, it is said without acknowledgment of the work of Freethinkers, and when a Freethinking truth is admitted it is duly acknowledged—as a product of Christianity. We do make headway, even among the leaders of the Christian Church.

But if prayers for rain and for the sick are of no value to-day, then they were of no value at any time. Microbes did not begin to exist the other day. Meteorological processes did not commence yesterday. Prayers were as useless in the time of Christ as they are in the time of Edward the Eighth. The teachings of the New Testament that the prayer of faith shall save the sick, were as false when the advice was given as they are now. The teachings of the Churches were completely wrong, the money taken by the churches was money obtained by fraud, and the buildings, the churches erected for the purpose of

prayer, were so many monuments to fraud or folly, or both.

This is not all. The Church of England has set prayers for rain, for better harvests, for the sick, and so forth. The Church of England prayer-book says definitely that whatsoever one's disease may be, it "is certainly God's visitation." There is a kind of lunatic logic in asking God to take away a disease he has definitely inflicted, but lunatic logic is not unusual in religious reasoning. When the late King George was ill, prayers for his recovery were ordered by the Churches, and when he recovered, God was thanked for what he had done. The Church said it was God's visitation. Ex-dean Inge says it was a matter of microbes, and the prayers were all so much rubbish. Why thank God for the King's recovery if the doctors cured him? Why thank the doctors for the recovery if God cured him? Was it to humour God that prayers were offered, or was it to fool the doctors that they were thanked for effecting a cure?

If prayer is of any value, why wait till a man is dying, or the crops are perishing, or the land is parched before prayers are said? Prevention is better than cure, so why not set aside, say, a week at the commencement of each year, and offer an omnibus prayer for all the things we want for the rest of the twelve months? Is it only with God that we are to wait for a preventable accident to happen before a move is made to protect the public from danger? A local council that behaved in this stupid manner would find itself held up to public condemnation.

Still further. Dr. Inge was for many years Dean of St. Paul's. On official occasions he had to take part in prayers for the health of the Royal Family, for the victory of the nation in war, and for rain when it was needed. How long has Dr. Inge held these ideas about prayer? Was he always praying with his tongue in his cheek, or had he to wait until he retired from office before he reached a conclusion that

was a commonplace with millions of people outside the Church? And how many other preachers inside the Church hold the same belief as Dr. Inge without saying anything about it?

Dr. Inge asks whether the consequences of prayer can be tested by statistical methods. He implies they cannot. But if prayer has any observable effect it must be a calculable one. Dr. Inge asks whether the husband of a "prayerful wife" has a better life value to an insurance office than has a husband whose wife does not pray? The answer is that insurances companies decline to recognize any such influence. They require, other things equal, the same premiums, whether people are Christians or Atheists. Insurance companies enquire into a man's family history, what were the ages of father and mother when they died, are there certain diseases in the family, and some ask whether a man is a teetotaller or not. But none of them asks whether the applicant prays regularly. Even those companies that cater specially for the clergy make no allowance for very prayerful characters. If there is any building in the world that is guarded by prayer it is a church; but insurance companies will ask a bigger premium for a church without a lightning conductor than they would for an Atheist lecture-hall with one.

The Royal Family are prayed for more than any other family. Have they a longer life or a better life than other people have? Everyone knows they have not, and in several of the royal families of the world, mental and other diseases are marked. Being the defender of the faith did not give George the Fifth robust health; it did not endow George the Second with wisdom; nor did it save George the Third from insanity.

There is a special prayer in the Litany, "That it may please Thee to endue the Lords of the Council and the Nobility with grace, wisdom and understanding." Has anyone been able to trace any marked result of that prayer said regularly and with professional competency?

Every Church Congress since the Christian Church was established has been opened with prayer. Never have these assemblies been cited, even by Christians, as examples of wisdom, good feeling and a sense of justice. There is no direction in which one can look for answer to prayer.

There is also a special petition in the prayer book for safety at sea—altered a few years back to one for “seamen of the British Navy.” This may have been done because it was thought that asking God to look after *all* was too big a job, or because it was considered that if God would look after the British Navy, other navies could take their chance. But will anyone say that the number of those lost at sea differs in proportion to the prayers said? The Board of Trade has a number of regulations for sea-going ships; it makes no provision whatever in the matter of prayer. It does say that ships carrying more than a certain number of passengers must carry a qualified doctor, it says nothing about parsons. It considers the famous Plimsoll line of greater consequence than the prayers of the united British churches.

There is no test to which the believer will submit to prove that prayers are answered. Belief in prayer is nowadays a huge “bluff.” The Freethinker calls the bluff—and the Christian runs away.

Dr. Inge says:—

The very definite promises made by Jesus Christ seem to be contradicted by experience. Most of us would say they have been contradicted by common experience. Hence the problem troubles us all the time.

“Seem,” to be contradicted by experience! The belief in prayer is contradicted by all experience. Dr. Inge knows this as well as we do, but it is hard for any cleric—active or retired—to be intellectually straightforward where religion is concerned. Even a horse gets attached to blinkers in time, and a dog learns to love its collar.

III.

BUT Dr. Inge still professes allegiance to something which he may call religion, even though the very core of religion is absent from it. He says:—

If prayer has no efficacy we must give up not only our trust in the plain words of Christ, but all practice of religion, for if prayer has no result, no one could care to pray, and without prayer there can be no religion. Prayer is the very breath of religion; its most essential and characteristic activity.

So Dr. Inge must find some use for prayer, and save something that can be called religion; and as

the notion that the world is governed by natural laws which may be modified or suspended at any time by divine intervention is felt to be the least satisfactory of philosophies,

some place for prayer must be found, where its consequences cannot be tested, or even observed.

There are two pleas put in, both worthy of the greenest of green young curates. The first is:—

If we ask *why* men pray, the simple answer is; because they cannot help it.

This is very crude. There are many millions who never pray, and the number of those who do pray is steadily diminishing. Of course there is a sense in which whatever one does, cannot be helped. It is as true of a man crawling round a room on his knees as it is of a man kneeling to pray. That kind of thing ought not to pass muster in a Sunday school.

The second reason *looks* better: but involves mental crookedness.

In so far as prayer is loving intercourse or reverent homage, or thanksgiving, or meditation on the revered

attributes of God, or contrition for sin, it is meaningless to ask whether it is efficacious. No one doubts that as an exercise it deepens character, strengthens the will, purifies the affections, and brings peace, rest and blessedness.

This passage is priceless as an example of the sheer verbiage a man of ability may put forth when he is trying to rationalize an absurdity. Loving intercourse with whom? For what? If God does nothing, if he does not interfere with things, if things will happen as they do happen, whether we pray or not, what have we to thank God for? The only thing left is to thank God for doing nothing. Does all this spiritual "kow-towing" really mean no more than an Alice in Wonderland performance?

Of course prayer brings comfort to most of those who believe in it. No one has ever disputed this. The war-dance of the savage encourages him to fight. The wearing of a mascot strengthens the confidence of those who are idiotic enough to wear them. An hysteric may be cured by faith in Jesus Christ, or in a doctor, or in a bread pill, a gambler may feel strengthened by carrying a rabbit's foot, or warned not to gamble by a black cat crossing his path. The question is not whether people believe certain things benefit them—all the quacks and humbugs in the world, political, religious, social and literary—live on this belief. The real question is whether this kind of belief rests on more than pure self-suggestion?

Dr. Inge must know that the science upon which he relies says very definitely that "divine interference" is not merely untrue of what takes place in the physical world, but of the mental world also. And among the things that science is rapidly bringing to an understanding is the mechanism of this phenomenon of self-suggestion which plays so large a part in all cases of hysteria, and its attendant ailments.

It is this grain of truth in the practice of prayer which is used—often criminally used—by quacks of all kinds,

and, which forms the stock-in-trade of the travelling evangelist, while it also forms the basis of the megalomaniacal ravings of Mrs. Eddy and her benighted followers. If Dr. Inge cares to call this kind of thing "spiritual influence," he may do so; but no one has ever disputed the ability of a man to deceive himself, whether it be for goodness or badness. And if a man *will* deceive himself, he can have no better machinery, than that provided by religion.

But is this process of self-deception what the world really understands by prayer? Is it what Dr. Inge had in mind when for many years he read the official prayers, and when he stood in the pulpit and said to his congregation, "Let us pray"? Did he really mean to say:—

There is no answer to the prayer which I am asking you to offer in the shape of any visible alteration in the course of events. You must not expect rain to fall in answer to your prayer, nor that disease will be cured. Microbes are not influenced by prayer, nor are meteorological conditions changed. Prayers will save neither the sailor at sea nor the soldier on land. But if you can persuade yourself that there is someone somewhere who will listen to your prayer and will answer it as you desire, then you will find that prayer will bring you peace and blessedness.

I think that if Dr. Inge had addressed his congregation in these plain words he would soon have been without a congregation to address. But he was only following the example of large numbers of the more intelligent of the clergy in thus using the old phraseology, while inwardly giving his words a new interpretation. Preachers thus believe one thing and say another. I admit that this kind of double-dealing is not confined to the Church, but it is in the Church that it finds its strongest and most popular expression. Ministers of religion often indulge in this practice

because they think their congregations will complain if told what the clergy really think. Congregations go on pretending to believe what is told them, because they do not wish to shock their parson. Open and honest speech on both sides might lead to some startling results.

Belief in the efficacy of prayer belongs, as I have said, to the childhood of the race. It belongs to a time when mankind believed that nature was a complex of living forces that could be swayed in their action by prayers and worship. Thence arose the elaborate ceremonies that belong to the religions of the world. Prayer meant the establishment of diplomatic relations between man and the gods. But these diplomatic relations were disturbed by the growing knowledge that the forces of nature were not conscious of man's desires and needs, that they were not deviated from their path by his prayers; and with that knowledge there set in the decline of the belief in prayer.

To-day science will have nothing to do with prayer. It cannot admit the slightest probability or possibility that the course of natural happenings is to be influenced in this way. And, willy-nilly, other people follow the line indicated by science. Their attitude is that of Falstaff (adapted) "Will prayer mend a broken arm? No. Will prayer mend a broken leg? No. Prayer hath no skill in surgery. A fig then for prayer; I'll none of it." History endorses the dictum of wise old Montaigne, "We pray only by custom and habit."

But the power of even custom and habit has its limitations. And Dr. Inge's theory, that prayer is good so long as one can persuade oneself that it is good, will not work. People have not prayed for health, or for rain, or for protection, or for victory,

because they believed they were indulging in a kind of mild mental exercise, or because they wished to fool themselves with phrases. They prayed because they believed there were gods that took sides with those who praised them and punished those who did not. Let this belief die and religion exists as a mere shadow of a shade, while the gods join that lengthy procession of dead deities that wind like a ghostly caravan across the face of history.

The position of the educated clergy to-day is not one to be envied. In terms of historic Christian belief and doctrine they are committed to the belief in, and teaching of, the power of prayer. In the light of scientific knowledge, in view of their own self-respect, they are bound to recognize the absurdity of belief in prayer. Some of those who have begun their ministerial career have broken away, although family and social connexions often keep them silent concerning their opinions. Others decline the priesthood although their parents had destined them to enter this ancient, but hardly, to-day, wholly honourable profession. Those who, despite their knowledge and understanding, enter the ministry, find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, if they openly discard prayer, without which religion has no sense of reality, they will lose the support of multitudes of simple-minded believers. On the other hand, if they proclaim the power of prayer, they know they will lose the respect, even though they may retain a measure of deference, of more intelligent and better-educated folk. And beyond all is the deeper question as to the use of a God who does nothing to help those who believe in him, and nothing against those who do not. It is good to find a man of Dr. Inge's eminence repudiating the historic function of prayer. It would also be interesting to know for how long he has

held this belief about prayer. It would be still more interesting to know how many thousands of the clergy, in practice, share Dr. Inge's opinions, and how many of them await till their retiring age, before taking the general public into their confidence.

The belief in prayer was once the greatest asset of the religious world. To-day it is ceasing to be an asset and is fast becoming a liability. And when the churches are called upon to liquidate this liability, the prospect is—Bankruptcy.

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