Chapter One

Introduction

Prayer in Many Places

Religion and Reality

Religions and religious people often disagree with each other, sometimes even violently. In recent years we might be led to believe that there is nothing but dispute and divergence among religions and their members. Stephen Prothero wrote an entire book emphasizing this.¹ There is a tendency to accept, respect, tolerate other traditions in our time, and perhaps this leads some to claims that all religions are the same, that we all have the same God. Anyone teaching or studying world religious traditions in a comparative way cannot help but recognize really striking convergences, as well as equally powerful differences. Some are not surprising at all, for example, that religious traditions concern themselves not just with doctrine or teachings, statements about God, gods, or the origin and end of the world and personal lives. They also have a great deal to say about just how we live those lives, that is, about ethics—what we should and should not do.

Religions generally consider what is taught and believed to be real, for example, how the world came to be or how our own lives will end. Perhaps the metaphors and symbols used are not always to be taken literally, in every detail. Yet behind them, through them, something real and important is being communicated. Alexander Schmemann,
the well-known Orthodox priest and theologian, once told a friend that God was as real and as near as the blades of grass upon which they were sitting in a field. And if God were not that real and that close, he said further, then God was of no use. The mystic from the middle ages, Julian of Norwich, saw something similar. Jesus showed her to be holding in the palm of her hand something small, small as a hazelnut. When she asked what it was, the answer the Lord gave was, “It is all that is made.” In this tiny round object Julian understood three things: God made it, God loves it, God keeps it—everything, all of creation. This little hazelnut-like sphere signified for Julian the immense love God had for each of us and everything in the world. Julian would also say, “There is no wrath in God,” only forgiveness and love. This vision so permeated her outlook that she could famously say, “All will be well, and all manner of things shall be and all will be well.” In our own time, writer and monk Thomas Merton had God say: “Mercy within mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end because I have never known sin.” With his consistent stress on compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance, Pope Francis has become known as the “pope of mercy.”

Beyond such examples, hearkening back to an often heard line, “We all have the same God,” at least in the three great monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, such a statement, at root, is true, given what these traditions say and believe about God. And in all three, God, for all the commandments, punishments, and wrath, nevertheless is at heart a loving God, one who creates and forgives endlessly. The first and greatest of God’s names is that of mercy—*al Rahman al Rahim*, the gracious, the merciful. Not a few religious writers and visionaries have likewise only been able to experience a loving, forgiving God. This they are not speculating about. It is for real.

Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann’s well-received study directed attention to how belief intersects with people’s lives in very powerful ways. She examined evangelicals’ and Pentecostals’ intense experiences of the presence and action of God in the world around them and in their own lives. As an anthropologist, she takes seriously the psychological, political, social, and cultural consequences of faith in peoples’ lives. As with the thinking and acting of any people or tribe, she affirms the powerful reality of what these evangelical and
Pentecostal Christians believe and experience in many different ways, from explicit prayer to other events and encounters in their day-to-day lives.

This book takes for granted Luhrmann’s ethnography of faith and prayer, and also uses the work of sociologist Nancy Ammerman and her associates, as well as Diana Butler Bass in charting religion in everyday life. You will read about how people experience communion, encounter with God, and more that is usually considered prayer in less than traditional or typically “religious” ways. Following Ammerman’s lead, there will be “stories” from people who pray, this being one of her major means of getting at the everyday experience of faith.

*Prayer Everywhere*

In earlier books, I looked at the search for God, identity, and meaning, a life of holiness and wholeness. I examined the spiritual journeys of a number of writers, theologians, pastors, activists, and others, focusing on a range of examples of the search for holiness. In some cases, the figures and their experiences were very much within classical lines, while in others, they were less than typical, sometimes rather unusual. Over the course of these studies, I wanted to make the point that the call to holiness is for all, that holiness does not require perfection and does not exclude one’s humanity, and that failure, doubt, questions, and the like are not impediments. I also felt it important to examine the destructive, toxic aspects of religion, as a number of individuals experience these. Not only can religion sometimes be destructive and toxic, religion is often captivating, consoling, creative, and transformative. Unlike the way in which we regard religion in our time, as a private matter, a personal choice and pursuit, clearly in much of history it was by definition communal. The Hebrew Bible, particularly in its historical books, narrates the struggle of Israel over against its polytheistic and very local religious neighbors. The God of Israel, but for that matter, all the other gods of surrounding nations, was anything but private and personal. All of life and every person in society, from ruler on down, was subject to divine power, required to follow divine commands,
worship, and obey in all aspects of life. There was no separation of church and state, no compartment into which religion fit over against the rest of “secular” society. Religion permeated everything.

We clearly do not think or behave like this today. The oldest texts we have, the scriptures, the most ancient of liturgical services, are not only thoroughly communal, assuming all are involved, they are also cosmic, stretching beyond the local community, city, town, country, nation, or empire. On the one hand encompassing and universal, the tradition nevertheless permeates all of life, not just the temple and its celebrations, but every corner of the everyday. The striking contrast, almost paradoxical, we should keep in mind as we proceed here, on prayer. We tend to restrict religion in general and prayer in particular to the house of worship, the temple, synagogue, or church, and to the scriptures, the prescribed services, the feasts, that is, the prayer of the whole community.

One of the best-known prayer books in English is the Book of Common Prayer, largely the editorial and creative work of the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. It was authorized for use by the Church of England by the Crown in the sixteenth century. Its elegance and cadence have become almost the standard of prayer language throughout the English-speaking world. Yet in all of religious history, prayer has never been restricted to the scriptures or liturgical texts, even though these are fundamental in shaping faith and piety. There are numerous, excellent studies of prayer, such as Friedrich Heiler’s classic study. A more recent one that has been of particular value is an almost encyclopedic one by Philip and Carol Zaleski.

Prayer in Life

Here, though, we shall focus on the experiences and activities that individuals searching for God understand as prayer. I want to take these as seriously as Luhrmann does in listening to what believers hear God saying to them. I do not mean here primarily prayers compiled in books or those employed in liturgical services, so I speak of “uncommon” prayer. This does not in any way diminish the value or place of formal, liturgical prayer—far from it. It is prayer in ordinary, everyday life that I will consider here, not prayer in theory or just
conceptually, but in the actual experience of people. In a documentary, a Benedictine monk said that there is no such thing as faith or prayer or love, only people who believe, who pray, who love.

This approach is neither primarily an historical investigation nor a technical, how-to-pray approach. Neither is it an academic theological reflection on prayer in the ordinary sense, though clearly many questions arise, and, in what is contained in these chapters, there are many answers. This book is distinctive in searching out the lived experience of prayer.

On the grassroots level, prayer remains a major ingredient in everyday life. A recent survey on prayer conducted by LifeWay Research, a Nashville, Tennessee, based Christian organization, gives something of a snapshot of what people in America pray for or about. Such a high percentage pray for family and friends, 82 percent, which, when added to other targets like people in disasters (38 percent), government leaders (12 percent), those of other or no faith (20 percent), and others in the public eye (5 percent), make it clear that prayer is highly relational or interactional, social. Chapters here about a prayer list and parish events as prayer will give this real support. Yet, the same survey also underscores the personal dimension of prayer: 74 percent pray for their own problems and difficulties, another 54 percent for good things that have happened in one’s life, and 42 percent and 36 percent for, respectively, one’s sin and future prosperity.

This study found that 48 percent of those queried said they prayed daily. The more detailed list of things they prayed about is at times hilarious, ranging from asking that their favorite team win to finding a parking place, as well as success in things that one had not really worked hard for and for vengeance against one’s enemies. Over a third also prayed for their enemies, too!

Various surveys on religious behavior in the United States consistently show slippage in such activity, particularly among younger people, the millennials in particular—more than 20 percent are “religious nones,” indicating no membership in churches or participation in communal activities. Yet even among these, religious belief and activity on a personal level like prayer has not disappeared.

Prayer is many things. For some, likely even some readers of this book, prayer is, or rather, must be talking to God, our talking to God. I can also imagine that for some, prayer has to follow those
classic modalities mentioned: praise, thanksgiving, and the rest. For still others, prayer surely requires that God be somehow addressed, thought about, aimed at.\textsuperscript{15}

Ruth Burrows, known in religious life as the Carmelite Sister Rachel, makes what is a classic, very traditional point in her study.

Prayer. We take the word for granted but ought we to do so? . . . Almost always when we talk about prayer we are thinking of something we do and, from that standpoint, questions, problems, confusion, discouragement, illusions multiply. For me, it is of fundamental importance to correct this view. Our Christian knowledge assures us that prayer is essentially what God does, how God addresses us, looks at us. It is not primarily something we are doing to God, something we are giving to God, but what God is doing for us. And what God is doing for us is giving us the divine Self in love. . . . True prayer means wanting GOD not ego. . . . The great thing is to lay down this ego-drive. This is the “life” we must lose, this is the “self” we must abandon if we are to have true life and become that self God wants us to be, which only God can know and ultimately only God can bring into being.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Prayer and Ourselves}

A number of the poets and other writers we will listen to in this book affirm that there is a true self as well as a “false” or “shadow” self. Thomas Merton is the best known of them, Richard Rohr another. They also argue that the spiritual life, at least in part, involves discerning between these. One should seek to move away from the false in favor of the true self, the self that God has in mind, that God created.

The larger question is about the self and, by extension, others around us and prayer. Is ego involved in prayer? How could it not be? Is prayer only top-down, one-sided, directed to God, in whom we are to lose ourselves but who will be silent? It is possible to say yes to all of these, but I would also say it is much more complicated. Burrows is struggling to remind us that prayer is not just about the words or the liturgical forms, not just about methods. She knows, as does any
wise spiritual director, that it is easy—really the natural inclination—to make prayer into a symphony of ourselves. All the best approaches to prayer likewise tell us that prayer cannot be just the sound of our own consciousness, the stream of our insecurities, hurts, joys, and plans. Prayer is of necessity about ourselves and about the important other people in our lives. But prayer is more. Whether one comes at prayer from God’s perspective or that of the individual, there is the tendency to objectivize it, to make it into something. Prayer is far more expansive, diverse, and elusive. Again, consider the monk in the documentary who said that there are no such things as faith, love, or prayer, only women and men who believe, love, and pray.

While it is crucial to keep sight of the presence of God in prayer, what about the experience of those who pray? Is it not the case, as we shall hear from Barbara Brown Taylor, that an inescapable reality is the experience of God’s absence, God’s silence? She invokes Ruth Burrows’s fellow Carmelite, John of the Cross, with his famous description of la noche oscura, each person’s “dark night.” Jesus quotes the Psalms on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Not only is the absence of God part of prayer—as are doubts and inabilities to use traditional theological language—but so too many other of our feelings, thoughts, experiences, and lives.

**Prayer Where You Least Expect It**

This book will be radical but also traditional at the same time. Sometimes prayer is not respectfully asking things of God or, for that matter, desperately demanding that God fix things for us. Neither is it always praising God or begging forgiveness. Or expressing gratitude or even exulting in the beauty and presence in the world around us. We will see that for some great souls, it is simply being there in silence, before God, not even trying to imagine God or communicate with God. The point is that in so doing we are much more likely to eventually listen and hear what God has to say to us.

I will suggest that prayer may be the joy of being together with friends and neighbors to eat, to celebrate, and also to work, to make things. Being with others, caring for them, teaching and learning with them, is prayer. So is confronting the dark, what we do not know,
what we fear, whether failure, sickness, aging, the bad things we and others do, or death. This too is prayer, as is ragging about the pain and the difficulty in facing the darkness.

Some of those to whom we will listen here, particularly poets, will tell us prayer, more than anything else, is paying very close attention—to the woods, the beach, to the animals both wild and tame—and, by extension, paying attention to the natural world will lead to paying attention to others, and at last to ourselves. Going inside, following what many call the prayer of the heart, is how to find our true selves.

In classes that I teach at Baruch College of the City University of New York, I always encounter a rich, diverse student community. Over a hundred languages are spoken by faculty and students at the college. It is the business school of the CUNY system but also is home to a large arts and sciences school, which services both the schools of business and public administration. We do not have a department of religious studies or theology but a program, that is, a regular offering of courses in religion by trained and interested faculty from several different disciplines—anthropology, history, modern languages and literature, philosophy, sociology, and political science, among others. There are overview courses in the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, as well as a very popular comparative religions course and other more specialized ones that focus on the scriptures of various traditions, specific historical periods, as well as important figures in the traditions. There are seminar-shaped courses in which we read both the lives and the writings of singular persons of faith in the Christian traditions, from Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton to Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Maria Skobtsova. Gradually additional, still-living writers, poets, and activists were added, such as Sara Miles, Barbara Brown Taylor, Darcey Steinke, Mary Karr, Mary Oliver, as well as a number of others. In another course we read primary sources—memoirs, poetry, and fiction in which authors share their experiences and describe their spiritual journeys.

The three books on holiness, mentioned earlier, were written during and increasingly drew from these courses. This book on prayer in everyday experience continues the mining of others’ encounters
with God in all kinds of life situations and events. The chapters here listen to and reflect upon what some remarkable individuals offer by way of spiritual experience, by way of their living out of prayer. Those who have read the earlier books will recognize some authors—Thomas Merton, Rowan Williams, Sara Miles, Barbara Brown Taylor, Dorothy Day, Maria Skobtsova, Paul Evdokimov, and Seraphim of Sarov. Others have been read and discussed in class but were not included in prior books—Sarah Coakley, Heather Havrilesky, Mary Oliver, Christian Wiman, Mary Karr, Richard Rohr. In some cases, I have grouped together writers whose thinking collide and merge in a most fascinating manner—this is the case with the theologians and others in chapter 2 and the poets in chapter 4. In other cases, I brought together individuals who did not know each other or even live at the same time but nevertheless complement each other in fascinating ways—Dorothy Day and Maria Skobtsova in chapter 7, Paul Evdokimov and Seraphim of Sarov in chapter 10. And in still other chapters—3, 6, and 11, I focus on one writer only: Merton, Taylor, and Rohr, respectively. These are neither randomly selected individuals nor an attempt to represent an exhaustive range of Christian traditions, though there are Anglicans/Episcopalian, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic figures, as well as several of no-claimed church affiliation. I hope the gathering and conversation among them will be as fascinating to you as it has been to my students. I also have three chapters that arose out of my own life and experience. A bit more on them shortly.

Listening to Experience

First, we will go to the prayer of theologians. The theologians speaking here are not offering the dense, often challenging material for which they are best known. Rather they offer very personal and accessible witness about prayer. A number of times in this book we will hear that prayer, even that of simple silence and presence before God and the world, is profoundly disturbing, disruptive, and transforming of who and what we are. We will hear of this from theologian and priest Sarah Coakley. Along with her, fellow theologian and former