

On Prayer

by Archimandrite Sophrony

The way of our Fathers requires strong faith and long-suffering, whereas our contemporaries attempt to acquire spiritual gifts, including even direct contemplation of the Absolute God, through pressure and in a brief space of time.

Often one can remark a disposition in them to draw a parallel between prayer in the Name of Jesus and yoga or 'transcendental meditation' and the like.

I think it necessary to point out the dangers of this delusion the danger of looking on prayer as a very simple, easy 'technical' means leading to direct union with God.

I consider it essential to emphasize the radical difference between the Jesus Prayer and all other ascetic theories.

All those are deluded who endeavor mentally to divest themselves of everything that is transitory, relative, in order in this way to cross some invisible threshold, to realize their being 'without beginning', their 'identity' with the Source of all that is; in order to return to Him, to be merged in Him, the nameless transpersonal Absolute; in order in the vast expanse of what is beyond thought to unify one's personal individuality with the individualized form of natural existence. Ascetic efforts of this kind enabled some strugglers to a certain extent to rise to metaphysical contemplation of being; to experience a certain awe; to know the state when the mind is stilled, when it goes beyond the bounds of time and space. In like states man may feel the peace of divestment of the constantly changing manifestations of the visible world: may uncover in himself freedom of spirit and contemplate mental beauty.

The ultimate development of such impersonal asceticism has led many ascetics to perceive the divine origin in the very nature of man; to a tendency to the self-divinization that lay at the root of the great Fall; to see in man a certain 'absoluteness' which in essence is nothing else but the reflection of the Divine Absoluteness in the creature created in His likeness; to feel drawn to return to the state of peace which man knew before his appearance in this world.

In any case after this experience of some such form of mental aberration may arise in the mind. I am not setting myself the task of listing all the various types of mental intuition but I will say from my own experience that the True, Living God, the I AM, is not here in all this. This is the natural genius of the human spirit in his sublimated impulses towards the Absolute.

All contemplation arrived at by this means is self-contemplation, not contemplation of God. In these circumstances we open up for ourselves created beauty, not First Being. And in all of it there is no salvation for man.

The source of real deliverance lies in unquestionable, wholehearted acceptance of the Revelation, 'I am that I am ... I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last.' God is Personal Absolute, Trinity One and Indivisible.

Our whole Christian life is based on this Revelation. This God called us from nonbeing into life. Knowledge of this Living God and discernment of the manner of His creation releases us from the obscurity of our own ideas, coming 'from beneath, about the Absolute; rescues us from our attraction unconscious but for all that ruinous to withdrawal from existence of any sort.

We are created in order to be communicants in the Divine Being of Him Who really is. Christ indicated this wondrous way: "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life."

Apprehending the depths of the Creator's wisdom, we embark on the suffering through which Divine eternity is to be attained. And when His Light shines for us we unite in ourselves contemplation of the two extremes of the abyss on the one side, the darkness of hell, on the other, the triumph of victory. We are existentially introduced into the province of Uncreated Divine Life.

And hell loses power over us. We are given grace to live the state of the Incarnate Logos Christ Who descended into hell as Conqueror. Then by the power of His love we shall embrace all creation in the prayer: 'O Jesus, Gracious Almighty, have mercy upon us and Thy world.'

Revelation of this Personal God imparts a wondrous character to all things. Being is not some determined cosmic process but the Light of the indescribable love between Divine and created persons. It is the free movement of spirits filled with wise knowledge of all that exists, and consciousness of self.

Without this there is no sense in anything but only death. But our prayer becomes a living contact of our created persona and the Divine Person that is, something absolute. And this is expressed when we address the Word of the Father: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Unoriginate Word of Thine Unoriginate Father, have mercy upon us. Save us and Thy world."

From "On Prayer" by Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) p.168-170
Source: <http://www.orthodox.net/articles/on-prayer-sophrony.html>