

TWO TRADITIONS OF PRAYER

By Gerry Pierse

What is spirituality?

1. Spirituality is “the way in which a person, with his or her unique faith history, perceives and responds to what is beyond their senses, to mystery, to what many call God”.
2. All *perceptions* are limited and inadequate. So one has to be humble about one’s own spirituality and respectful of that of others.
3. An important part of this unique faith history will be the models of spirituality and prayer to which a person has been exposed. In general, there have been two models.

What are the two main models of spirituality and prayer?

1. The *kataphatic* tradition is where words and images are used in prayer and is generally associated with the West.
2. The *apophatic* tradition is a way of prayer, of being present with God, *without* images or words. It is generally associated with the East.

What are some examples of kataphatic prayer and what are its merits?

1. St Ignatius and the *Spiritual Exercises* would be an example of kataphatic prayer. As one meditates through the Gospel scenes, and makes colloquies with our Lord, one comes into deeper union with God.
2. One of St Teresa’s ways of explaining prayer, again in the kataphatic tradition, is in terms of the four ways of drawing water.
 - a. At the beginning, prayer is like drawing water with a bucket – there is a lot of effort and little result.
 - b. The next stage is using the windlass (today, we might say a hand pump) – less effort gives more results.
 - c. Then there is the irrigation system which, once it has been set up, delivers the water – without too much effort on our part.
 - d. Finally, there is the rain where God does everything – and we do nothing.So in Teresa there is a progression from reasoning and thinking to a state where the senses are suspended and there is pure presence to God – it is a movement from the kataphatic to the apophatic.
3. St John of the Cross would basically insist on the same progression. For him, and those who follow him, one would have to have acquired certain habits of virtue before moving on to a higher stage of prayer.
4. This has generally been the model for *progress in prayer* in the Western Church for centuries. As one moves from one stage to the other there is a growing detachment from sin and growth in virtue. Any effort to accelerate this process is to be seen as pride. This model of prayer has produced great gains through the centuries and is to be much respected. Spiritual directors in this tradition are justifiably suspicious of techniques of meditation, or anything that would give instant experiences. They would be even more apprehensive about commercialised meditation, or “solve your problems by meditation” groups.
5. On the other hand, the idea that holiness is the domain of specialists, monks, and nuns, is partly due to the kataphatic tradition. Its insistence that it would be pride to seek to advance from one stage to another without having first attained a certain level of virtue sets a barrier to growth for the more timid who abandon the effort to “professionals”. The division of growth into mansions, or stages on a ladder, may tend to play to our obsession with success even in spiritual things. It may indeed lead to pride at being “worthy” to advance, and hinder that very advance.

What about the apophatic tradition?

1. The apophatic tradition is an entirely different tradition in the Church. It includes the tradition of Christian meditation as re-discovered by Fr John Main in his own experience and in the writings of John Cassian in the fourth Century. This is the tradition of praying the prayer-word, the *mantra*. By praying the mantra, one takes the focus of attention off oneself. One is following the call of Christ to leave self behind and to follow him. It is a totally simple method, but not an easy one.
2. To those trained in the kataphatic tradition, the claims made for the mantra seem far-fetched and ridiculous. That is why John Main insists that these claims can only be *verified by experience*. Start saying the mantra and you will know in a short time if it is right for you. *Personal verification* is essential. Nobody who has not made a serious effort to pray the mantra for at least a few months has the right to question the value and authenticity of this way of prayer.
3. In praying the mantra we are not concerned about success. We are concerned only about being faithful to a discipline – a discipline that detaches us from our self-centredness. This is a constant process that has no stages by which it can be measured. It is only what we notice in our daily lives that assure us that something has been happening.
4. So, there is also a tradition and a proven practice of beginning with apophatic prayer in Christianity. Anybody who makes the decision to start saying the mantra will, of course, have made this decision out of some knowledge of the scriptures and the teachings of the Church, and a desire to live a more Christian life. Then as they continue to say the mantra and experience the freedom and grace that it brings, they will be drawn to greater study of the scriptures and to a more simple virtuous life.

In sum . . .

Sometimes those of one tradition seem not to be able to see the point of view of the other, somewhat like many Western trained doctors cannot accept the merits of acupuncture.

Notes in outline produced by Alex Peck (aepeck77@yahoo.com.au); April 29, 2009.
Source: Fr. Gerry Pierse, “The Prayer That Jesus Taught”, *Meditatio Talks 2006, Series A*
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