

Book review: A Philosophy of Prayer: Nothingness, language, and hope by George Pattison

John Cottingham reads a discussion of prayer and what its point is

IN THIS stimulating collection of essays, the Anglican priest and distinguished academic George Pattison takes up the challenge posed by Immanuel Kant, that “praying, conceived of as an inner ritual service of God and hence as a means of grace, is a superstitious delusion.”

Why should we declare our wishes to a being who has no need of such declarations? One could go further, and denounce the whole idea of petitionary prayer as a case of what the philosopher Mark Johnston calls “spiritual materialism” — the attempt to secure the benefits we desire via some supernatural short cut.

To counter such crudely instrumental views of prayer, Pattison draws on the work of an array of philosophers from the Continental tradition who have construed prayer in completely different terms, as expressing the existential anguish of the human spirit and its yearning for self-transcendence. In the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Søren Kierkegaard, for example, our relation with God is seen as consisting in an awareness of absolute dependence. So, prayer becomes a way of purging ourselves of the arrogant sense that we are autonomously in control of our lives, and replacing it with a sense of acceptance.

Such acceptance, however, is not based on the assurance of a philosophically defined deity. In prayer, we are forced to acknowledge the limits of our human knowledge as we reach towards the mystery of God. Pattison here proves a sensitive guide to the “apophatic” tradition in theology, exemplified in the anonymous 14th-century text *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Such mystical writings can sometimes give the impression that the spiritual quest is a reaching out towards emptiness, thus seeming to vindicate David Hume's scathing comment that religious mystics are simply "atheists without knowing it". But, in the life of prayer, which Pattison describes as involving a "convergence of activity and passivity", the God who cannot be grasped by the intellect may yet be disclosed through love. In the words of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, "the soul, when it is restored by grace, is made wholly sufficient to comprehend by love."

But the journey is not an easy one. The alienation that is a familiar theme in modern existentialist philosophy has ancient roots, going back to St Anselm, who, echoing the Genesis story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve, sees the human condition as one in which we are "expelled from our homeland into exile". Exploring this theme leads Pattison to discuss (among other thinkers) Martin Heidegger, for whom "our experience of being far from home enters into the very constitution of philosophy."

Should we, then, understand the life of prayer as offering the hope of homecoming — something like the joy reflected on by Heidegger in his exposition of Hölderlin's famous poem "*Heimkunft*" ("Returning Home")? As applied by Pattison to the life of prayer, such "homecoming" is no glib eschatological promise, but, rather, the fruits of an exercise in deep humility; for learning to pray cannot be finding our own self-determined way of addressing God: "language is not something each of us invents independently to express . . . our subjectivity."

On the contrary, language by its very nature is something that we receive, primarily from the words spoken by the mother to the child. So, being called by and calling upon God "reflects an essentially maternal relationship between God and the one who prays".

As may be apparent, the thread of argument that Pattison spins out in this finely wrought book is subtle and complex, but it will repay the attentive reader with much illumination. And, like Emmanuel Levinas (one of the many thinkers he expounds), Pattison's underlying message is more moral than metaphysical. As we draw closer to the mystery of God in prayer, we

learn that to live with the knowledge of that mystery "is not to weaken our sense of moral obligation toward others . . . but to infuse the life of freedom with the oxygen of gratitude and acceptance."

John Cottingham is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Reading and an honorary fellow of St John's College, Oxford. His latest book is The Humane Perspective: Philosophical reflections on human nature, the search for meaning, and the role of religion (OUP, 2024).

A Philosophy of Prayer: Nothingness, language, and hope

George Pattison

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