

Reflections On Prayer

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When I first undertook the mystical life my mentor introduced me to the discipline of Prayer. At first I was quite unmoved by it. However, encouraged by him I persevered and was able to engage in what I have since realised is the essence of spiritual alchemy. My mentor's inspiring and thought-provoking ideas concerning prayer led me into rich avenues of meditation, wherein I spent a long time reflecting upon both its ancient lineage and its place and significance in the world today. I reflected upon how in times past it was generally acknowledged that prayer enshrined the noblest thoughts, aspirations, concepts and ideals of mankind, and that many prayers were written in poetic form because poetry was deemed to be the highest expression of literary art; thus it was only natural for prayer and poetry to combine. Indeed, sometimes it is difficult to ascertain whether a verse is a poem or a prayer. However, every rose has its thorn and during the course of my meditations a thorn emerged out of the invisible and unfathomable depths in the form of a question; a question that initially appeared to be simple enough, but on further investigation proved difficult to answer in a way that is both objective and meaningful. The question is simply 'what is prayer'?

Until recent times the spiritual ethos that sustained prayer had never really been disturbed by the political changes in religion, thus prayer had never been called upon to justify or define itself, for it was always a part of the fabric of the human life. However, the same cannot be said of society today. The end of the Second World War proved to be in many ways the end of an era, and out of its ashes a new world order emerged whose immediate appetite was fundamentally material. This appetite, once unfettered, gave rise to an unprecedented growth in world consumerism, which, along with related developments in science and technology has effected a profound change in the intellectual life of our civilization. Society has since become permeated with a materialistic philosophy that often assumes the name of Humanism, but in fact is frequently a mask for an extreme form of Materialism¹ that is hostile to the spiritual life and all spiritual thinking; a philosophical stance that is radically different from that of Renaissance luminaries such as Erasmus, Thomas More and Ficino, who with other spiritually minded thinkers founded the great intellectual movement known as Humanism.

Humanism emerged in Renaissance Italy during the early part of the 15th century. Its originators sought to revive the study of classical Greco-Roman thought, embodied in ancient texts that had been lost to the major part of the western world for centuries. The movement was called Humanism because it provided a basis for an education in *Humanitas* (better known today as the Humanities). Its philosophical focus was the intrinsic worth of Man, emphasising human welfare and the fulfilment of human interests in this life without undue reference to the transcendental or spiritual world. The main exponents of Renaissance Humanism were concerned with promoting religious and social tolerance. One of the chief advocates, Desiderius Erasmus², campaigned for many years for peaceful reform within the undivided Church, rather than the internecine conflicts that came with the Reformation.

¹ The basic premise of Materialism is that physical matter is all that there is - it is the only reality. Consequently, all aspects of the universe, including Life in its many forms, are explicable in material terms.

² **Desiderius Erasmus** (1466-1536) One of the most important literary figures of the Renaissance period. His best known work is the *Praise of folly*, a pamphlet directed against the vanities of the ruling classes and church. He devoted himself to the revision of Christian traditions, fighting for a clearer and more humane approach of religion.

Another, Sir Thomas More³, revealed to the world in his *Utopia* a model society based on the natural reasoning power of humanity without spiritual revelation, whilst Ficino,⁴ protégé of Cosimo Medici and head of the New Academy of Florence, translated for the first time the complete works of Plato into Latin as well as various other works on Neoplatonism. Humanism was a movement conceived within Christianity by Christians and nurtured by Christians. Today, those who call themselves humanists are almost all either agnostics, materialists, or avowed atheists.

Materialism is no new phenomenon; indeed, it has long been a part of the human intellectual landscape. One of the most notable of the early exponents of Materialism was the Greek philosopher Leucippus⁵, who, along with his student Democritus⁶ is credited with being the originator of the theory of Atomism, an essentially materialistic description of the universe. However, the more modern cult of materialism, which emerged during the late 17th century, much influenced by the writings of Thomas Hobbes⁷, is far more extreme than the philosophy of Leucippus and Democritus in its denial of the existence of God, of the soul and of the continuity of life after death, promoting instead the pessimistic viewpoint that human life along with all of its beliefs, aspirations and loves is nothing more than the result of the random combining of atoms, that ceases at the moment of death, thus reducing our cultural perception of consciousness to a temporary biological function.

By claiming the credit for being the philosophy underlying the amazing scientific and technological developments of the 19th and 20th centuries, the proponents of Materialism have in the name of Humanism dominated the intellectual landscape of our culture, resulting in the dismantling of religion and the secularisation of society. As a result the word 'prayer', now reveals less and less of its meaning in our everyday language and is becoming increasingly difficult to explain objectively. Thus the question 'what is prayer' is a question that is probably more pertinent now than at any other time in our history. But how is it to be answered? Are we to view prayer as the last hope of the desperate as argued by the proponents of materialism, whose philosophy provides the cold comfort of a meaningless existence, or, are we to view prayer as a means by which we can elevate our hearts and minds to fellowship with God, and in communion therewith receive inspiration and develop a greater understanding of our world?

If we accept prayer in the latter positive sense, it necessarily follows that we accept God as a conscious living being, because the essence of prayer is 'communing with God'; and although a full discussion on the nature of God is outside the scope of this paper, we may accept with some degree of certainty, that humanity's definition of God as the source, ground and destiny of being embodies the totality of purpose and meaning of human existence in a

³ **Sir Thomas More** (1478-1535), later canonized St. Thomas More, is famous for his book *Utopia* (1515) and for his martyrdom. As Chancellor to Henry VIII he refused to sanction Henry's divorce of Queen Catherine, and was imprisoned, tried and executed. More was a friend of such Renaissance humanists as Erasmus, John Colet and Thomas Linacre.

⁴ **Marsilio Ficino** (1433-99), the Florentine, was a man who wrought a deep and lasting change in European society. From him and his Academy the Renaissance drew its most potent intellectual and spiritual inspiration. To Ficino the writings of Plato and his followers contained the key to the most important knowledge for Man: that is, knowledge of the divine and immortal principle within him.

⁵ **Leucippus**, Originator of the Atomic Theory; he lived in the second half of the fifth century BC.

⁶ **Democritus**, of Abdera, b. 460-57 BC. Student of Leucippus and proponent of the Atomic Theory.

⁷ **Thomas Hobbes** (1588-1679) The philosophy of Thomas Hobbes is perhaps the most complete materialist philosophy of the 17th century. He rejected Cartesian dualism and believed in the mortality of the soul. He rejected freewill in favour of a determinism which treats freedom as being able to do what one desires. He rejected Aristotelian and scholastic philosophy in favour of the philosophy of Galileo and Gassendi, which largely treats the world as matter in motion.

framework of absolute consciousness, and it is only in this context that prayer can be defined in an objective and meaningful way.

However, this is conceptually far removed from our general understanding. Indeed, for most of us, our understanding of prayer rarely transcends the notion of pleading or asking for a special favour from a divine source. Indeed, the etymological root of the word 'prayer' is derived from the Latin *prex*, which means an entreaty or request, particularly from a god; however, no matter how correct this definition might be, it is insufficient to describe the vital role that prayer plays in the soul's intimate relationship with God, which is far more than begging or plea-bargaining with divinity. It is an act of friendship, of love, of sharing with the source and destiny of our being what we can never share with another person. It is communion of the most intimate and essential kind, a communion initiated by the soul and reciprocated by God. It is then not surprising that from the earliest times prayer has been central to the spiritual life of humanity, indeed, many of the most ancient writings that have survived the course of time are prayers and hymns to the Divine.

To the people of Ancient Egypt life on this earth meant far more than mere survival, they recognised that the end of a human life was but a beginning of another superior life. That much is obvious, even from a casual examination of the records they left on the walls of the earliest Pyramids. The 'Pyramid texts', as they are called, date from the 3rd millennium BC and constitute the oldest corpus of religious literature available to us. They contain a vast amount of information concerning the Egyptian understanding of the spiritual life. Without doubt many of the prayers of ancient Egypt, as of any other culture, were prayers of need, or at least perceived need. As, for example, this excerpt from a prayer accredited to a certain Nebensi, a scribe and artist of the Temple of Ptah⁸:

[*O thou god Hetep*]

"...Let me gain dominion within the Field, for I know it, and I have sailed among its lakes so that I might come into its cities. My mouth is strong; and I am equipped against the khus; let them not have dominion over me. Let me be rewarded with thy fields, O thou god Hetep; that which is thy wish shalt thou do, O lord of the winds. May I become a Khu therein, may I eat therein, may I drink therein, may I plough therein, may I reap therein, may I fight therein, may I make love therein, may my words be mighty therein, may I never be in a state of servitude therein, but may I be in authority therein..."

The following is attributed to the scribe Mes-em-neter, a servant of the God Amen:

"Hymn of praise to thee O god who makest the moment to advance, thou dweller among mysteries of every kind, thou guardian of the word which I speak. Behold, the god hath shame of me, but let my faults be washed away and let them fall upon both hands of the god of Right and Truth. Do away utterly with the transgression which is in me together with my wickedness and sinfulness, O god of Right and Truth. May this god be at peace with me! Do away utterly with the obstacles which are between thee and me..."⁹

The prayers of ancient Egypt span several millennia, uniquely enshrining an intimate relationship between the soul of the people and God. For the Egyptian the spiritual world and the mundane world permeated each other in the perpetual rhythm of life, thus establishing

⁸ Sir E.A. Wallis Budge (Trans.), *The Book of The Dead*, London, 1899, p327

⁹ *The Book of The Dead*, p63

meaning at the very root of human existence, and it seems difficult to imagine today that for thousands of years a whole civilisation was grounded in a spiritual ethos that gave certainty to the meaning of existence. Yet Egypt was not alone in its convictions. In the fertile lands of Mesopotamia that lie between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, civilisations were established one upon another. The ancient culture of Sumer gave way to the founders of Babylon who in due course gave way to the Assyrians. Each one rooted, as Egypt, in a world that had both a mundane and spiritual dimension. In a Sumerian epic the following hymn occurs:

“O lord, in thy city which thou lovest, may thy heart be at rest. In the temple of Nippur, thy city, which thou lovest, may thy heart be at rest. When thou joyfully enterest the temple Shumera, the dwelling place of thy heart’s contentment, say to thy wife, the maiden queen of Nippur, What is in thy heart, say to her what is in thy mind, say to her the kindly words of one who is forever king.”¹⁰

Close in spirit to this Sumerian hymn is a prayer addressed to the god Bel by an *Urigalla* or high priest on the second day of the Babylonian New Year Festival. It is a plea for the protection and well being of the people of Babel.

“Bel, without equal in his anger; Bel, merciful king, lord of the lands, causing the great gods to be favourably disposed; Bel, whose glance overthrows the mighty; Lord of kings, light of mankind, fixer of destinies. Bel, Babel is thy seat, Borsippa is thy crown. The wide heavens compose thy liver; Bel, with thine eyes thou dost behold the universe; With thine oracles thou dost control the oracles; with thy glance thou dost give the law; With thine arms thou dost crush the mighty; thy people thou dost grasp with thine hand; When thou dost see them thou dost take pity on them; thou causest them to see the light; they declare thy might. Lord of the lands, light of the Igigi, who dost bestow blessing; who will not speak of thee? Who will not declare thy might? Who will not tell of thy glory? Who will not praise thy kingdom? Lord of the lands, whose dwelling is in E-ud-ul; who dost take the hand of him who has fallen; have mercy on thy city, Babel! Establish the liberty of the children of Babel, objects of thy protection...”¹¹

In the foregoing prayers it is easy to see that the concerns of the high priest are for the well being of the people and for the administration of society. In principle they are no different from the prayers of our own generation. The concerns are the same – for peace, prosperity, good government, and the general health and humour of the people and their rulers.

In the prayers of ancient Israel the same principal concerns are addressed. The most important scriptural reference point is the Bible, particularly the first five books, known as the Pentateuch and or the Torah (Law). They contain divine instruction given by God to the people of Israel about how they should live in the world and how they should order their lives around God. Later books of the Bible contain many prayers and hymns that demonstrate the intimate and dynamic nature of Israel’s relationship with God, particularly concerning the Torah. For example, in the first Book of Kings it is written that Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of the assembled people of Israel and prayed thus:

¹⁰ Stephen Langdon, *The Mythology of All Races - Semitic Mythology*, Boston, 1931 p.125

¹¹ S. H. Hooke, *Babylonian & Assyrian Religion*. Oxford 1962 p101-2

“Lord God of Israel, there is no god in heaven above or on earth below like you, who keep your covenant and mercy with your servants who walk before you with all their hearts. You have kept what you promised your servant David my father; You have both spoken with your mouth and fulfilled it with your hand, as it is this day. Therefore Lord God of Israel, now keep what you promised your servant David my father, saying ‘You shall not fail to have a man sit before me on the throne of Israel, only if your sons take heed to their way, that they walk before me as you have walked before me.’ And now I pray, O God of Israel, let your words come true, which you have spoke to your servant David my father. But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you. How much less this temple which I built! Yet regard the prayer of your servant and his supplication, O my Lord my God, and listen to the cry and the prayer which your servant is praying before you today: “that your eyes may be open toward this temple night and day, toward the place which you said ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may hear the prayer that your servant makes towards this place...”¹²

The prayers of ancient Israel are probably nowhere better enshrined than in the Psalms, many of which are traditionally attributed to King David, the father of Solomon. The Book of Psalms consists of 150 hymns and prayers of which two examples are given below; the first describes an ethical basis that must be a fundamental pre-requisite for any wholesome and sustainable society, the second, Psalm 23 ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’, is probably the most familiar of all of the psalms. For many people it has been a guiding light throughout their lives, and a constant source of comfort in difficult times:

Psalm 15

Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle?
 Who may dwell in your holy hill?
 He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness,
 And speaks the truth in his heart;
 He who does not backbite with his tongue,
 Nor does evil to his neighbour,
 Nor does he take up a reproach with his friend;
 In whose eyes a vile person is despised,
 But he honours those who fear the Lord;
 He who swears to his own hurt and does not change;
 He who does not put his money at usury,
 Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
 He who does these things shall never be moved.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
 He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul;
 He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil; for you are with me;
 Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

¹² 1 Kings 8:23 – 29.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
 And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

It is clear that the golden thread of spiritual understanding, which from ancient times connected us to the spiritual world, wove its way down through ancient Egypt to Moses and the people of Israel, and then into Christianity. As Christianity emerged out of Judaism it was inevitable that early Christian religious life would continue to some degree the same practices and disciplines of Israel, consequently, many of the prayers used by early Christians were prayers used in common by both Jew and Christian. Thus, apart from the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles, the scriptures were then, as now, a major source of inspiration for many Christian prayers; indeed, the Liturgy, which is in itself a complex prayer, is made up almost entirely from the scriptures. However, the most important prayer in Christian terms has ever been, and always will be, the prayer taught by Jesus Christ himself.

Known as 'The Lord's Prayer', it embodies the same essential relationship between humanity and the divine as established in Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Jewish religions, of which it could be argued that Christianity is but a continuation. Yet, the Lord's Prayer contains an element that is unique in that it is a prayer that is accepted by all Christians as being given to humanity by God, rather than an entreaty from humanity to God. It is consequently far more intimate in its relationship than anything that man alone had previously devised, indeed, for countless people, both religious and secular, this prayer has been the focal point of prolonged contemplation; its simplicity should not be taken at face value. There also follows another early Christian prayer that is typical in that it demonstrates the perpetual need to involve the divine in our daily life.

*The Lord's Prayer*¹³

Our Father which art in heaven,
 Hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
 In earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread,
 And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,
 And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever.
 Amen

*A Morning Prayer*¹⁴

Helper of Men who turn to you, Light of men in the dark,
 Creator of all that grows that grows from seed,
 Promoter of all spiritual growth, have mercy, Lord on me
 And make me a temple fit for yourself.
 Do not scan my transgressions too closely,
 For if you are quick to notice my offences,
 I shall not dare appear before you.
 In your great mercy, in your boundless compassion,
 Wash away my sins, through Jesus Christ,
 Your only Child, the truly holy,

¹³ Matt. 6:9 - 13

¹⁴ Adalbert Hamman (Ed.), *Early Christian Prayers*, Chicago 1961 p62-3

The chief of our souls' healers.
 Through Him may all glory be given you,
 All power and honour and praise,
 Throughout the unending succession of ages.
 Amen

The same golden thread, which passed through ancient Egypt and Israel and then into Christianity, also flowed via Orpheus, Solon and Pythagoras into the world of classical Greece, and thus to Rome. It is an obvious thread, yet it has often been passed over unnoticed by those seeking evidence of deeper things, evidence that indeed exists, although not in the gloomy recesses of secret chambers full of cryptic symbolism, as some might suppose. Rather it is found in the relationship that exists between humanity and the divine; and is more commonly beheld in the highs and lows of daily life, for as creatures subject to the whims of fate, confronted with threats to our existence that appear in the forms of disease, poverty, war, and famine, we are more inclined to commune with the divine in celebration of our triumphs or when under pressure or threatened; as so much of our history testifies. It is, then, in the heart of our daily life that we find the material of great spiritual mysteries. The following hymns from ancient Greece are typical of that relationship, in that they are concerned with establishing and continuing a harmonious rapport between the gods and the community, that peace, prosperity and health may be maintained.

*Hymn of the Kouretes*¹⁵

Io, Kouros most great, I give thee hail, Kronian,
 Lord of all that is wet and gleaming,
 Thou art come at the head of thy Daimones.
 That we make to thee with harps and pipes mingled together,
 And sing as we come to a stand at thy well-fenced altar.
 For here the shielded Nurturers took thee, a child immortal,
 From Rhea, and with noise of beating feet hid thee away.
 And the Horai began to be fruitful year by year
 And Dike to possess mankind, and all wild living things
 Were held about by wealth-loving Peace.
 To us also leap for full jars, and leap for fleecy flocks,
 And leap for fields of fruit, and for hives to bring increase.
 Leap for our cities, and leap for our sea-borne ships,
 And leap for our young citizens and for goodly Themis.

*Hymn to Demeter*¹⁶

Demeter with her lovely hair, sacred goddess,
 I begin to sing of her and her daughter,
 The surpassingly beautiful Persephone,
 Farewell goddess. Save our city
 And guide my song.

And yet, as efficacious as such prayers might be, it remains a fact that just as every life has its turn on the world stage, so every civilisation has its day and then declines as another rises to take its place at the forefront of the honours list; so it was with classical Greece,

¹⁵ Jane Harrison *Themis*, Merlin Press, London 1963. p.8-9

¹⁶ J. Cashford (Trans.), *The Homeric Hymns* Penguin Classics, 2003, Hymn XIII, p112

which in its own fashion gave way to the emerging power of Rome. Initially the religion of Rome was a family religion, in which each family constituted a little church whose centre and focal point was Hestia (or Vesta) the goddess of the Hearth. Upon this model the state religion of Rome was founded. Hestia was the guardian of family life both for the state and its citizens; her temple stood in the centre of Rome wherein burnt a sacred fire that was never allowed to go out.

However, if the Roman military conquered Greece then Greek religion conquered Rome. Greece became the elderly tutor to the younger Rome, particularly where religion and philosophy were concerned. Greek anthropomorphism displaced Roman animism and their love of ritual, pomp, sacrament and aestheticism overwhelmed the simpler Roman cult. In time the prayers of Rome and Greece merged both in form and spirit, as the needs and pantheons of both were essentially the same. The following example is taken from one of four prayers found in Cato's¹⁷ 'Farm Almanack' and addressed to the god Mars, it is typical of the Greco-Roman world. It illustrates the intrinsic sense of relationship that humanity had always shared with the divine and is wonderfully direct and purposeful.

*Prayer at the Lustration of a farm*¹⁸

"O Father Mars, I pray and beseech of thee, that thou wouldst be well willing and propitious to me, to my house, to my dependents; and for this reason I have ordered that the suovetaurillia should be led around my fields, my land and my farm, that thou shouldst hold back, and drive away sickness, visible and invisible, desolation, ruin, damages and storm; and that thou shouldst cause to grow and prosper the fruits of the soil, the grain, the vineyards and the thickets; that thou shouldst keep in safety the shepherds and the sheep; that thou shouldst give prosperity and health to me, to my house and my dependents. For these reasons, and because, as I have said, I am lustrating and causing to be lustrated my farm, my lands and my fields, mayst thou be increased by this suovetaurillia which is being offered to thee. O Father Mars mayst thou be increased by this suovetaurillia which is being offered to thee."

In the above prayer, as with all of the foregoing, the relationship between humanity and the divine is clearly an important part of daily life. It may be argued that this is simply because in the ancient world life was precarious, and people sought every advantage, alternatively, perhaps it is because there is something within each of us that intuits another realm of existence, and desires knowledge and experience of it, no matter how clumsy or naïve the means. How we describe that something has probably been a subject of ongoing discussion since the beginning of time, and doubtless it will continue, but to all intents and purposes there is an innate need within us all to live our life in a spiritually meaningful context, which the rewards and distractions of this world do not, indeed cannot fulfil, for the desire to commune with the divine is not so much a conceit or a delusion as a primary instinct lying at the very roots of our being.

Thus, from a personal perspective prayer is far more meaningful than any dictionary or encyclopedia might suggest. It may be understood on one level as the natural expression of our need to commune with God, sharing our most intimate thoughts, hopes, aspirations, intentions, fears and doubts with our creator in the same way as children commune with parents, or lovers with one another. And as we have seen, at a mundane level the prayers of humanity are generally concerned with very human needs. After all, we are gregarious creatures seeking fulfilment in communion with each other, so why not with God? It is a

¹⁷ Marcus Porcius Cato, 234-149 BC, Roman Tribune.

¹⁸ Quoted in James Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion & Ethics*. Vol. X. Edinburgh, 1918 p200

matter of fact that deprived of human company we sicken because communication is fundamental to a healthy and meaningful life, the lack of which can result in loneliness, depression and other psychological disorders. The same may be said regarding a meaningful spiritual life. Deprived of the opportunity to commune with the divine essence that we call God, who is the very source, ground and destiny of our existence, we have no benchmark or polestar to set our life's course by, and ill health may well occur in the form of self-obsession and the inevitable addiction to the basic human failings of avarice, gluttony, anger and lust.

On the other hand, to know that we may commune unhindered with the essence of the created universe; to know that essence as God, who is ever attentive and sympathetic to our concerns; to know that we will always be heard in absolute confidentiality; to know that there is nothing that stands between us and God other than our own inhibitions, is to know that we are anchored securely and meaningfully in the cosmos. In this knowledge we can unfold our lives in a context that has purpose and meaning both within and beyond the constraints of the mundane world, and furthermore, that we may live in harmony with every other creature that inhabits creation. But, such communication requires of us that we not only speak well but that we also listen well, and that we listen attentively with an inward ear, otherwise there is little possibility of the soul hearing the voice of the divine because the spiritual world does not announce its presence noisily, 'as the babbling of baboons', but silently, like the falling of snow.

If, then, we would hear the voice of the spirit then we must disconnect, if only for a moment, from the internal chatter of the mind and listen attentively in the silence that ensues. In heeding this we may notice, as did St. Paul, that Man consists of two parts: the first part a terrestrial, mortal being and the second part a celestial, immortal being, the first a creature of earth and the second a creature of spirit, St. Paul alludes here to a great mystery concerning the means whereby the "Man of dust" is transformed into the "Heavenly man". It is a mystery that applies not only to our earthly life but also to our spiritual life, and prayer is essential to both, thus:

"All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one kind of flesh of men, another of animals, another of fish and another of birds. There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being" The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterwards the spiritual. The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly man."

[1 Corinthians 15:39-49]

Thus far we have only looked at prayer as it applies to our earthly life. However, when viewed in another light, those with eyes to see will know that prayer embodies both an art and a science. As an art it is the secret language of the soul – a language synthesizing thought, image and emotion in a manner best described as an alchemical process, enabling the soul to transcend the limitations of mundane existence, an existence defined by the experiences we have via the senses, which shape both what we feel and what we think. It is the life of "the

man of dust” alluded to by St. Paul. As a science it defines the formulae and techniques required to transcend that world of the senses and all that such implies. And to those who have the eyes to see, the *Fama*, is a veiled expression of that science.

This same insight is implied in the writings that were compiled by the followers of Orpheus, who understood that human nature consists of two distinct parts – a mortal physical nature, derived from the Titans, and an immortal spiritual nature derived from Dionysus. Legend has it that the Titans, encouraged by the goddess Hera, slew the infant god Dionysus and consumed him, for which terrible deed Zeus slew them with his thunderbolt. From their remains man was created: part immortal and part mortal. From this premise they taught that the body was the tomb or prison of the soul, and that salvation was only to be attained by overcoming the mundane world, of which the body is a part. Consequently, the soul could only free itself by sublimating the passionate titanic nature and regenerating the divine Dionysian nature that lies within, and prayer was an essential part of that process. This is expressed clearly in following Orphic prayer and hymn, both of which are obviously concerned with the life of the soul beyond the mundane world and the influence of the physical body – St. Paul’s ‘man of dust’.

*A Confession*¹⁹

Lord of Europa’s Tyrian line, Zeus-born, who holdest at thy feet
 The hundred citadels of Crete, I seek to thee from that dim shrine,
 Roofed by the Quick and Carven Beam, by Chalyb steel and wild bull’s blood
 In flawless joints of cypress wood made steadfast. There in one pure stream
 My days have run, the servant I, Initiate of Idaen Jove;
 Where midnight Zagreus roves, I rove; I have endured his thunder-cry;
 Fulfilled his red and bleeding feasts; held the Great Mother’s mountain flame;
 I am set free and named by name a bacchus of the mailed priests.
 Robed in pure white I have borne me clean from man’s vile birth and coffined clay,
 And exiled from my lips away touch of all meat where life hath been.

*The Petelia Tablet*²⁰

Thou shalt find on the left of the House of Hades a Well-spring,
 And by the side thereof standing a white cypress.
 To this well-spring approach not near,
 but thou shalt find another by the lake of memory,
 Cold water flowing forth, and there are Guardians before it.
 Say: “*I am a child of Earth and of starry Heaven;*
But my race is of Heaven alone. This ye know yourselves.
 But lo, I am parched with thirst and I perish. Give me quickly
 The cold water flowing forth from the lake of memory.”
 And of themselves they will give thee to drink from the holy well-spring,
 And thereafter among the other heroes thou shalt have Lordship...

A comparable understanding is to be found in ancient Egypt, Indeed the Pharaoh was known as the Lord of the two lands, of Lower and Upper Egypt, a title that has also been described as a metaphor concerning the terrestrial and celestial world. Indeed, the larger part of the religious life of Pharaonic Egypt was concerned with the relationship between them, and it is a matter of fact that no other civilisation has demonstrated so much interest in the

¹⁹ Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*. London 1963 p479

²⁰ Ibid p 573

comings and goings of the soul between them. In ancient Egypt it was understood that when a body died a spiritual body could be raised up from it, through the power of prayer. This art was known only to the sacerdotal orders, whose rites and the teachings concerning this process, were maintained in the strictest secrecy. Few people were privy to their mysteries, although it is on record that several non-Egyptians were given access to them, Moses being one,²¹ Orpheus another.²²

The following is a prayer used in the making of a *Sahu* or spiritual body. It was believed that “If the prescribed prayers were said and the appropriate ceremonies were properly performed over the dead body by duly appointed priests, it acquired the power of developing from out of itself an immaterial body called a *Sahu* which was able to ascend to heaven and dwell with the gods therein.”²³

*Of making a Sahu*²⁴

“Homage to thee, O thou that dwellest in the holy mountain of Amentet. Osiris the royal Scribe Nekhtu-Amen, victorious, knoweth thee, and he knoweth thy name. Deliver thou him from the worms which are in Re-stau, which live upon the bodies of men and women and which feed upon their blood, for Osiris, the favoured one of the god of his city, the royal scribe, Nekhtu-Amen, victorious, knoweth you, and he knoweth your names. Let this be the first bidding of Osiris Neb-er-tcher who keepeth hidden his body. May he give air and escape from the Terrible One who dwelleth in the Bight of the Stream of Amentet, and may he decree the actions of he that is rising up. Let him pass on to him whose throne is within the darkness, who giveth glory in Re-stau. O Lord of Light, come thou and swallow up the worms which are in Amentet. The great god who dwelleth in Tattu, and who is unseen, heareth his prayers, but those who are in affliction fear him as he cometh forth with the sentence of the divine block. I Osiris, the royal scribe Nekhtu-Amen, have come bearing the decree of Neb-er-tcher, and Horus hath taken possession of his throne for him. His father, the lord of those who are in the boat of father Horus, hath ascribed praise unto him. He cometh with tidings ... and may he see Annu (Heliopolis). Their chief standeth upon the earth before him, and the scribes magnify him at the door of their assemblies, and they bind his swathings in Annu. He hath led captive Heaven and he hath seized the earth in his grasp. Neither the heavens nor the earth can be taken away from him, for behold he is Ra, the first-born of the gods...”

Similarly, in Ancient Greece, the Eleusinian Mysteries,²⁵ ancient before Pythagoras was born, were concerned with the philosophical death and subsequent regeneration of the soul as a spiritual or divine being. The sacred rites of Eleusius were so honoured and respected throughout the ancient world that no-one ever broke the code of silence imposed upon those initiated into these Mysteries thereof, although fortunately they were alluded to in a veiled way by several writers such as Aristophanes, Plato and Plotinus. The following Hymn concerns these mysteries. It is attributed to Orpheus, the acclaimed reformer of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the version given here is the translation by Thomas Taylor:

²¹ St. Paul informs us that Moses was learned in all the wisdom of Egypt (Acts 7:22) also *The Works of Philo* trans. C.D. Yonge Pub. Hendrickson, USA 1993, p461-2

²² C.H. Oldfather *Diodorus of Sicily*, vol. 1, London, 1933 (Loeb Classical Library)

²³ Sir E.A. Wallis Budge *op. cit.* p lviii.

²⁴ *Ibid* p 47

²⁵ **Eleusinian Mysteries** were based at Eleusius, the most important town in Attica after Athens and Piraeus. Renowned throughout antiquity, the mysteries were celebrated in honour of Demeter, Persephone and Dionysus.

*Orphic Hymn*²⁶

I shall utter to whom it is lawful;

but let the door be closed, nevertheless, against all the profane. But do thou hear, Oh Musaeus, for I will declare what is true ... He is the One, self-proceeding; and from him all things proceed, and in them he himself exerts his activity; no mortal beholds Him, but he beholds all. There is one royal body, in which all things are enwombed, Fire and Water, Earth, Aether, Night and Day, and Counsel [Metis], the first producer, and delightful Love - For all these are contained in the great body of Zeus. Zeus, the mighty thunderer, is first; Zeus is the last; Zeus is the head; Zeus is the middle of all things; from Zeus were all things produced. He is male, he is female; Zeus is the depth of the Earth, the height of the starry heavens; He is the breath of all things, the force of untamed fire; The bottom of the sea; Sun, Moon, and Stars; Origin of all; King of all; One Power, One God, One great Ruler.

This hymn speaks plainly now of what was once a great mystery revealed only in metaphors and allegorical tales. Perhaps this was for the best. Perhaps, at first, it was the only way the integrity of the teaching, the liturgy, and the religious calendar, could be sustained in a world where literacy was generally irrelevant. After all, the world had survived for millennia without the need for a literate society; relying instead on historians, priests and poets who maintained reasonably accurate records in the form of stories and poems. However, times change, and with the introduction of an effective alphabet during the 6th or 7th century BC onwards more and more people learnt the art of reading and writing.

The following instructions from the *Enneads* of Plotinus describe a means by which initiates could elevate their consciousness to experience something of the divine. In this instruction Plotinus alludes to a spiritual teaching that was probably central to the Mystery schools, not only of Eleusis, but also of all the schools of that era:

*On the vision of God*²⁷

“Let us, then, make a mental picture of our universe: each member shall remain what it is, distinctly apart; yet all is to form, as far as possible, a complete unity so that whatever comes into view shall show as if it were the surface of the orb over all, bringing immediately the vision of the one plane, of the Sun and of all the stars with the earth and sea and all living things as if exhibited upon a transparent globe. Bring this vision actually before your sight, so that there shall be in your mind the gleaming representation of a sphere...

“Keep this sphere before you, and from it imagine another, a sphere stripped of all magnitude and of spatial differences; cast out your inborn sense of Matter, taking care not merely to attenuate it: call on God, maker of the sphere whose image you now hold, and pray to Him to enter. And may He come bringing His own Universe with all the gods that dwelleth in it – He who is the One God and all the gods, where each is all, blending into a unity, distinct in powers but all one god in virtue of that one divine power of many facets. More truly this is the one God who is all the gods...”

²⁶ Thomas Taylor *The Eleusinian & Bacchic Mysteries* New York 1875 (Wizard's Bookshelf ed., 1980) p166.

²⁷ Stephen MacKenna & B.S. Page (Trans.) *Plotinus The Six Enneads*, Chicago 1952, Fifth Ennead, tractate VIII Ch. 9 p245

Plotinus's model of the cosmos is significant, in that he describes in literal terms what previously had been taught through metaphor and allegory and only experienced by the initiate during the celebration of the Mysteries. At the centre of this celebration, with all of its pomp, ceremonial and drama, the consciousness of the initiate would have been elevated through the use of evocative prayer to experience the World Soul in the form of Demeter, and then after a different fashion, to experience the Divine Nous in the form of Dionysus. Plotinus believed that it was possible for individual souls, through the practice of contemplation, to rise to the level of the Divine Nous, and there, in spiritual union, be absorbed back into the One.

Plotinus describes what are undoubtedly the most important objectives of the Mystery Schools, direct experience of, and union with God. The first part, often thought of as the 'Lesser Mysteries', was in all probability concerned with the separation of the soul from the carnal nature of the physical body. The second part, described in one way or another as the 'Greater Mysteries', was essentially concerned with the elevation of the soul beyond the phrenic nature of the psychic world into the presence of divinity. Similar processes may be discovered in the Mysteries of many cultures, but such processes are particularly obvious in the western line that flowed out of Ancient Egypt.

In places, this line, or tradition, interacted with other traditions. One such interaction was with the cult of Mithras, a cult that originally emerged out of the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia. In Rome the two merged and the Mithraic Mysteries became a fundamental part of Roman life. Little evidence remains of the Mithraic cult and its Mysteries, other than the sculptures and inscriptions preserved in the ruins of its temples, and little of its liturgy has survived. Yet, Mithraism was once the religion of the Roman army with centres throughout the Empire. Indeed, it can be argued that if Constantine had failed in his objectives, Mithraism, and not Christianity would most probably have become the religion of the Empire. However, Christianity triumphed and in the centuries succeeding Constantine Mithraism faded into obscurity, albeit with some assistance from the Church. The following prayer is taken from what is accepted as a rare surviving ritual from the Mithraic Liturgy; it contains elements found in Egyptian, Judaic and Greek prayers and hymns that suggest a comparable understanding of the inherent spirituality of man.

*Mithraic Prayer of Invocation*²⁸

O Primal Origin of my origination; Thou Primal Substance of my substance; First Breath of breath, the breath that is in me; First Fire, God-given for the Blending of the blendings in me; First Fire of fire in me; First Water of my water, the water in me; Primal Earth-essence of the earthy essence in me; Thou Perfect Body of me – *name* – fashioned by Honoured Arm and Incorruptible Right Hand, in World that's lightless, yet radiant with Light, in World that's soulless, yet filled full of Soul! If verily, it may seem good to you, translate me, now held by my lower nature, unto the generation that is free from Death; in order that; beyond the insistent Need that presses on me, I may have vision of the Deathless Source, by virtue of the Deathless Spirit, by virtue of the Deathless Water, by virtue of the Deathless Solid, and by virtue of the Deathless Air; in order that I may become reborn in Mind; in order that I may become initiate, and that the Holy Breath may breathe in me; in order that I may admire the Holy Fire; that I may see the Deep of the New Dawn, the Water that doth cause the Soul to thrill; and the Life-bestowing Aether which surrounds all things may give me hearing. For I am to behold today with Deathless eyes – I, mortal born of mortal womb, but now made better by the Might of Mighty Power, yea, by the Incorruptible Right Hand – I am to

²⁸ G.R.S. Mead, *Echoes From The Gnosis* Vol. vi, A Mithraic Ritual. London, 1907, p18-21

see today by virtue of the Deathless Spirit the Deathless Aeon, the Master of the Diadems of Fire – I with pure purities now purified, the human soul-power of me subsisting for a little while in purity; which power I shall again receive transmitted to me beyond the insistent Bitterness that presses on me, Necessity whose debts can never go unpaid – *name* – according to the Ordinance of God that naught can ever change. For that is beyond my reach that, born beneath the sway of Death, I should unaided soar into the Height, together with the golden sparklings of the Brilliancy that knows no Death. Stay still, O Nature doomed to perish, nature of men subject to Death! And straightway let me pass beyond the Need implacable that presses on me; for that I am His Son; I breathe; I am!

It is obvious that from ancient times humanity recognised the spiritual dimension of life and sought to come into contact with it – an aspiration that inevitably evolved unique forms of expression according to the varying natures of different cultures. However, that was all to change as the ancient world was irrevocably transformed by the empire building of Alexander the Great, who gave the ancient world a new focal point and a common language that enabled the philosophical and religious beliefs of many cultures to interact. Alexander opened up the world in a way that was to have far reaching effects for within a century of his passing Rome became the focal point of the known world and succeeded to much of Alexander’s empire; subsequently, for more than five hundred years, ‘civilisation’ meant Roman civilisation. During the first centuries of our era the Roman Empire had become a melting pot of countless speculative ideas and belief systems, many of which were a pot-pourri of spiritual ideals and dynamics compiled from many sources and traditions. Out of this melee Christianity emerged as the dominant religious and political system. As times changed the schools of the Mysteries disappeared, partly proscribed, and partly absorbed into the mainstream of public religion; some moving beyond the immediate reach of the administration. The following hymn, written in the late fourth century by St. Gregory Nazianzen of Constantinople, clearly echoes something of the Mystery Schools:

O All-transcendent God (What other name describes you?)
 What words can sing your praises? No word at all denotes you.
 What mind can probe your secrets? No mind at all can grasp you.
 Alone beyond the power of speech, all men can speak of springs from you;
 Alone beyond the power of thought, all men can think of stems from you.
 All things proclaim You – things that can speak, things that cannot.
 All things revere You – things that have reason, things that have none.
 The whole world’s longing and pain mingle about you.
 All things breathe you a silent prayer, a silent hymn of your own composing.
 All that exists you uphold, all things in concert move to your orders.
 You are the end of all that is, you are one, you are all;
 You are none of the things that are, you are not a part and not the whole.
 All names are at your disposal; How shall I name you, the only unnameable?
 What mind’s affinities with heaven can pierce the veils above the clouds?
 Mercy, all-transcendent God, what other name describes you? ²⁹

If there was a place where the ethos of the Mysteries survived it was in the monasteries that appeared with so much force and vitality during the latter part of the fourth century. Nurtured at first in the deserts of the Levant by small communities of people dedicated to a

²⁹ Adalbert Hamman *op. cit.* p162

life of prayer and meditation, communities that in essence furthered the spiritual aspirations of the Mystery Schools, albeit after a different fashion. Alas, little of the schools has survived the test of time, except perhaps, in the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, who is thought to have been a Syrian monk whose life spanned the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth century. His work, the Dionysian Corpus, consists of five titles *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *Epistles*. These profoundly influential texts are not merely historical documents; they are essentially a spiritual teaching whose subject is the nature of the interior life of the soul and the permanent reality that is the substrate of its existence, and whose expression is an exquisite reflection of the mystical philosophy and spiritual life of the ancient world sublimated in Christianity. In the words of Dionysius himself;

“These things thou must not disclose to any of the uninitiated, by whom I mean those who cling to the objects of human thought, and imagine there is no super-essential reality beyond, and fancy that they know by human understanding Him that has made darkness His secret place. And if the Divine Initiation is beyond such men as these, what can be said of others yet more incapable thereof, who describe the Transcendent Cause of all things by qualities drawn from the lowest order of being, while they deny that it is in any way superior to the various ungodly delusions which they fondly invent in ignorance of this truth.”³⁰

“Unto this Darkness which is beyond Light we pray that we may come, and may attain unto vision through the loss of sight and knowledge, and that in ceasing thus to see or to know that which is beyond all perception and understanding (for this emptying of our faculties is true sight and knowledge), that we may offer Him that transcends all things the praises of a transcendent hymnody, which we shall do by denying or removing all things that are – like as men who, carving a statue out of marble, remove all the impediments that hinder the clear perspective of the latent image and by this mere removal display the hidden statue itself in its hidden beauty.”³¹

The influence of Plotinus, and indeed of much of the ancient world is obvious in the Dionysian Corpus. Indeed, it may be said that through Dionysius the ancient world was able to pass on a most important legacy – as many have since discovered. His work is a call to a life of prayer and meditation beyond the reaches of the mundane world, but this does not exclude the majority of us from engaging in prayer, nor of benefiting from what he has to say. Remember, prayer is communing with God and the only pre-requisite is that we engage attentively and with respect. However, prayer does also lie at the heart of a sacred science of spiritual development barely known beyond the quiet waters of the sanctuary. This sacred science requires spiritual tools and methods, and in prayer we have the most useful and effective tool that we can ever hope for, because it is part of us and is both readily available and immediately accessible. Prayer is the means by which we can open the doorway of the sanctuary that lies within the hidden temple of the heart. Thus it is said “Invoke often and inflame thyself with prayer” – a simple truth known to those who frequent its cloisters, and without which the work of spiritual regeneration would be virtually impossible.

The obstacles that stand in the way of entering that inner temple and engaging in such prayer are the attitudes and preconceptions that form the major part of our self-image and world-view inherited from our family values and convictions concerning spiritual things; our

³⁰ C.E.Rolt (Trans.) *Dionysius the Areopagite*. York, ME, Ibis Press 2004 p192

³¹ *Ibid.* p 194

environment, schooling and social connections contribute further. Inevitably some of this conditioning, which at some point was useful to us, is now redundant, yet we continue to hold onto it. Unfortunately, much of this redundant conditioning gleaned indiscriminately during formative years is little more than a medley of misconceptions and half-truths that have been maintained since childhood with such loyalty and determination that even in adulthood we frequently and often successfully, defend them against all reason. We forget, perhaps, that when we were children we were taught as children. The teachings we were given concerning the spiritual dimension of our existence, if indeed we were given any at all, were designed for the minds of children and not for the minds of adults. Thus, as we enter puberty our conception of God is inevitably childish, and if at first we believe that God is perfect and omnipotent, we believe this as children and not as adults. As juveniles the incongruities we find in the world, particularly concerning injustice, suffering, warfare and disease challenge our beliefs and turn many of us away from God – after all, if there is a God then surely He would not allow injustice and suffering to exist, would He? For some these incongruities are checked by a simple almost blind faith in what we have been taught, a naive trust just waiting to be challenged. Thus armed with a juvenile view of the spiritual dimension of our existence we sallied forth into adulthood.

However, the kind of prayer that opens the door of the inner temple requires something more than superstitious sentimentality and a vague belief in deity. It requires more than the mindless repetition of vaguely understood words, because prayer is first and foremost a personal relationship between the soul and God, therefore, the clearer the concept the soul has of 'God' the more able is the soul to focus upon God. Such an undertaking, when approached in the right way, is capable of releasing the soul from its prison of self-image, consequently, one of the most important tasks we can undertake is the conscious development of a more mature concept of God. But, if we are to do this, then we must begin with acknowledging that God is not some vague abstraction or distant entity, but the source, ground and destiny of our being, and that creation is both sane and full of love, proceeding in every detail as God planned it, and as such it is perfect. We may not understand that perfection, but then do we have a clear idea of what we mean by the term 'perfect'? The word describes that which is complete and without flaw and as such in its absolute sense applies to God alone, for God is by definition that which is perfect. Unfortunately, all we can rely on to assist our judgement are relative correspondences and reference points gleaned from our life experiences, which are as yet insufficient for comprehending the absolute nature of God, and because of our incomplete understanding there is always the possibility of assuming that creation is like God - in a state of absolute perfection, a condition that is obviously untrue.

Nevertheless, it is true to say that creation functions precisely as God intends, which is to say that the will of God is completely fulfilled in and by creation. If we understand this concept then we can accept that creation is in perfect harmony with divine will and as such is completely without error, consequently without flaw, although it has yet to attain a state of ultimate or absolute Perfection. This idea is not so difficult to understand if we accept that the Will of God is fulfilled in creation through the process we currently know as 'Evolution', a word that means 'to unfold', although it is commonly used today by the exponents of Materialism as a term to describe the progressive development of creation from simple to more complex forms. Nevertheless, from a spiritual perspective creation fulfils the Will of God by evolving to a predetermined goal as yet barely comprehended by humanity, for humanity like the rest of creation is evolving in accordance with God's Will, but has yet to attain the final state of absolute perfection that can give a complete understanding of the purpose and meaning of existence.

Prayer is also an art, an art that combines thought and feeling in a manner that is best summed up in the ancient formula; *'Enflame thyself with prayer and invoke often'*. This

means that one should involve real feeling when praying, for such prayer is a vehicle that will, under the right conditions, bear the soul aloft to higher and more sublime levels of consciousness. Yet, for so many people emotions are rarely experienced other than as a reaction to a specific event, and more often than not in association with powerful and very physical sensations. This is not surprising considering that society barely recognises the need for emotional development beyond the ability to function within the normal constraints of everyday life. Such primitive, self-focused conditioning limits the potential for spiritual development in that it imperceptibly supports egoism - which is the antithesis of spiritual Gnosis.

Self-less or non-selfish emotions, however, invariably involve *giving* – the joy felt when a gift is well received or when a deed is commended – and this elevates the soul. The simple pleasure experienced by everyday kindness inspires not only personal wellbeing but also the desire for the wellbeing of others, which is only a short step away from fulfilling the Lord’s wish that we “*do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”. Fulfilling this commandment is perhaps one of the most liberating steps we can take. It frees our thoughts and emotions from the selfish instinctive urges that dominate our life and engenders the realisation that inasmuch as we are part of creation, we are a part of the Divine. It is in this ideal state that we can best direct our combined thoughts and feelings towards God. This chemistry of the very substance of the soul drives prayer, like Cupid’s arrow, straight to its object of love – God.

In prayer the motive is of fundamental importance because when prayer is directed towards spiritual development its potential for effect is maximised, but when directed towards material objectives its potential is minimised. This must be understood in the context of the purpose of our existence, which we are taught is to seek the kingdom of Heaven³². Seeking the ‘kingdom’ is essentially an inner or transcendental quest that takes the seeker beyond the world of the senses into realms where there are more important factors to be considered than the demands of our worldly needs. In this interior world the soul discovers how its earthly experience is merely a reflection of events taking place therein. However, expecting changes to be made in the exterior world of the senses through our prayers would be imprudent, as that would require altering the patterns established by Natural Law, which is most unlikely to succeed *directly*. That it is noble to pray for the material well-being of others - praying for the health and safety of people, praying that they may have sufficient for their needs or that they may live in peace without threat or hindrance, is highly commendable and not to be under-estimated, for although our prayers may not have any obvious or direct effect they still have the power to influence - *indirectly*.

One of the most ancient methods of prayer is known today by the name ‘Lectio Divina’. It is an ancient spiritual discipline that originated in the pre-Christian Greco-Roman world. This method describes four stages of prayer: Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio and Contemplatio. It consists of the slow repetitive reading of a passage of scripture until it is known by heart, followed by meditating on its significance. Traditionally, the reading, or *Lectio*, was read aloud with the emphasis being upon the act of listening, and repeated continually until the passage became known ‘by heart’. If the sacred text was to be read by another person it was important for those listening to repeat the words with their lips, under their breath as it were. This listening was no mere act of hearing; rather it is an act of paying attention with the whole of one’s mind, engaging as much of one’s being in the reading as possible, thereby cultivating the ability to perceive something of the soul of the text. This attending or listening was called *Meditatio* or meditation.

³² Matt. 6:33

The response to the *Meditatio* varied, but often took the form of spontaneous extemporary prayer, singing etc. This was known as *Oratio*. At other times *Oratio* took the form of inspired writings that in some way related to the *Lectio* and *Meditatio*. Those who persevered with this discipline found that the *Oratio* subsided into a quiet state of rest in what has been described as the ‘presence’ of God and was traditionally called ‘*Contemplatio*’ or contemplation. Abiding in that ‘presence’ is the basis of true contemplation and the experience of that presence is the bedrock of unshakeable faith. *Lectio Divina* is one of the oldest methods of prayer used in the Church. It is embodied in the works of Philo of Alexandria and is clearly expressed in the work of the Pseudo-Dionysius particularly in his book *On the Divine Names*. It was enshrined in the Rule of St. Benedict and became one of the distinctive features of monastic life. The fathers of the Church originated *Lectio Divina*, with Jerome especially giving it structure. Benedict incorporated it into his monastic rule, and in the 12th century Guigo II (the ninth prior of the Grande Chartreuse) wrote an important letter on it entitled *The Ladder of Monks*. Furthermore, the system it embodies lies at the heart of Mystical Kabbalah – its methodology being applied by many renowned Kabbalists.

Herein is revealed a fundamental truth that so many have either forgotten or have never realised. Indeed, our civilisation has for so long thought of prayer as being simply a petition from the weak to the strong, from the poor to the wealthy, from the meek to the powerful, that the essence and purpose of prayer has long been hidden behind a veil of misconceptions. However, those who understand know that through the power of prayer the veil is removed, giving access to a greater world of consciousness than commonly imagined. Let us remember that the mundane world is not the only world, for we are not only children of earth but also “of Starry Heaven” indeed, “Our race is of Heaven alone” for the Divine is the source, ground and destiny of our being, indeed, the presence of the Divine is the kingdom of Heaven, and it is in that and in that alone we shall find the context and meaning of our lives.