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Prayer, the Life of Faith and Belief in God

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the meaning of prayer in Abrahamic religions. To do this, it applies the Wittgenstein's 'Language Games' theory. At first it explains these language games as 'forms of life'. Secondly it describes that form of life which is a model for prayer. At the end it shows how the prayer can be away for a better understanding of god in Abrahamic religions.

Key Words: 1- Prayer 2- Language Games 3- Abrahamic Religions 4- Theisem

1. Introduction

As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued, every 'language-game' is imbedded in the context of some or other 'form of life' and derives its meaning from the way in which it functions within this form of life. This also applies to the language-game of prayer. It too derives its meaning from the form of life in which it functions within human existence. This requires some further explanation. What does Wittgenstein mean by a 'language-game' and a 'form of life'? Wittgenstein himself defines the term 'language-game' as 'the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven.' (27, I, p: 17) This suggests that language-games are primarily forms of action involving the use of language. Wittgenstein states that his use of the term 'is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the

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speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.'(Ibid, p: 23) But what does he mean by a 'form of life'?

George Pitcher explains the term form of life in the light of Wittgenstein's remark that 'if a lion could talk, we could not understand him.'(Ibid, II, p: 297) Of this Pitcher writes as follows: 'Suppose a lion says, "It is now three o'clock," but without looking at a clock or his wristwatch - and we may imagine that it would be merely a stroke of luck if he should say this when it actually *is* three o'clock. Or suppose he says "Goodness, it is three o'clock; I must hurry to make that appointment," but that he continues to lie there, yawning, making no effort to move, as lions are wont to do. In these circumstances - assuming that the lion's general behaviour is in every respect exactly like that of an ordinary lion, save for his amazing ability to utter English sentences - we could not say that he has *asserted* or *stated* that it is three o'clock, even though he has uttered suitable words. We could not tell what, if anything, he has asserted, for the modes of behaviour into which his use of words is woven are too radically different from our own. We could not understand him, since he does not share the relevant forms of life with us'(22, p: 243). Of course this lion is very different from speaking animals occurring in children's stories. In Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* we can understand the Rat, the Mole and the Toad since they do not merely utter English sentences. While doing so, they also behave as Englishmen would do when uttering these sentences, and not like rats, moles and toads.

Clearly then, the meaning of a linguistic expression is its use within the form of life which forms the context within which it is uttered. Divorced from the form of life, it is meaningless. We can only understand what someone says when we interpret it within the context of the form of life within which it is said. This also applies to the 'language-game' of prayer. The meaning of the 'language-game' depends on the way it is imbedded in the context of human action. Prayer and action are necessarily connected with each other.

The context of human action is varied and complex. We could say that human beings participate in a large variety of 'forms of life' or

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contexts of action. This complexity gives rise to many misunderstandings regarding the things people say. A specific 'language-game' only makes sense within the context of a specific 'form of life'. If we were to interpret it in terms of some other form of life, the result would be conceptual confusion. Gilbert Ryle would say that we are committing a 'category mistake'. We are confused by the words of Wittgenstein's lion because they are uttered within the 'form of life' of a lion and not within the context of human behaviour where for us these words make sense. It is clear that with regard to every 'language-game' we should ask: within which 'form of life' or context of human behaviour does this 'language-game' make sense? Within which context of behaviour in human life does the 'language-game' of prayer make sense?

We live in an age where technical skill is highly valued. We are beings who want to get things done, and therefore we are always looking out for the most effective means, methods and techniques to realise our aims. In the (technical) sciences we experiment with all possible techniques in order to determine which of these are most effective and produce the best results. This form of life of 'efficiency' is so obviously central in the lives of many people, that they intuitively interpret the 'language-game' of prayer in terms of it.[1] When I am ill, I ask myself: What shall I do? Shall I call the doctor or shall I pray to God? Or if things go wrong in society I ask myself: shall I pray or shall I demonstrate in the streets? If on television I see poor people without food or shelter in Africa I ask myself, shall I pray for them or give some money to an organisation that provides food for them? And many people then doubt whether prayer is effective. Does it help in solving all our problems? Are medical doctors, political demonstrations and financial aid not much more effective than prayer? Or will prayer be more effective if we get a large number of people to pray for the cause of our choice?[2] These questions about the effectiveness of prayer cause many people to doubt whether prayer is still a meaningful 'language-game'. The question is, however, whether these uncertainties and doubts are not the result of a 'category mistake'? Is the 'form of life' of efficiency

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the one in which prayer can make sense? But in what 'form of life' does prayer in fact make sense? I would like to argue that prayer only makes sense within the religious 'form of life', that is the life of faith. Let us therefore examine the nature of the religious 'form of life' and see what role the 'language-game' of prayer can fulfil within it.

2. The Religious Form of Life

All our experience involves interpretation: I experience x as y (the sound on the telephone as the voice of my friend, the image on the T.V. as a picture of president Khatemi, etc.). Such interpretation is always aimed at our understanding of what we experience, and always involves some form of comparison: I understand x by comparing it to y and noticing that in some way it is like y. Interpretative comparison can take on many different forms and be aimed at different kinds of understanding.

One way in which we interpret our experience is by means of classification concepts: we note that x is like y because it belongs to the same class or category as y. We classify things intuitively (and often deliberately) in order to be able to cope with them. Thus we can cope with x in the same way as with y because it has the same characteristics as y, can be explained like y, can be treated like y, reacts in the same way as y, should be approached in the same way as y, or because the same attitude or course of action is appropriate in relation to it, etc. In this way classification is a basic function of our human form of life in the world.[3]

Apart from classification concepts, we also interpret our experience by means of metaphors and conceptual models. According to Sallie McFague (17, p: 15)[4] 'a metaphor is seeing one thing *as* something else, pretending "this" is "that" because we do not know how to think or talk about "this", so we use "that" as a way of saying something about it. Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.' Such metaphorical thinking is fundamental to all scientific discovery and explanation. I discover how x works by noticing that it is like y - even though y is something very different. Thus, for example, Newton discovered something about the moon by noticing that it is like an

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apple - both being subjects to gravity. However, scientist also use *conceptual models*, i.e. 'sustained and systematic metaphors'[5], in order to explore and explain the workings of physical phenomena. Thus they explain the behaviour of gasses by comparing it systematically with the behaviour of billiard balls, and they explain the behaviour of light rays in terms of waves or in terms of moving particles.[6]

Models and metaphors also play a basic role in religion and theology. Here, however, they are not introduced to help us discover or explain the way physical phenomena work, as in science.[7] Religious models provide an understanding of the *meaning* or significance of our lives and of the world in which we live and in relation to which we act.[8] In this way they determine our actions and attitudes. Different religions and views of life provide their adherents with different models in terms of which life and the world can be understood, and which are definitive for the religions and views of life in question.

A similar point is made by Wittgenstein[9], who argues that participating in religious belief is being able 'to use a picture' In learning how to use the appropriate pictures in the appropriate ways, the believer must come to see which conclusions are to be drawn from the picture and which are not. In discussing this point in Wittgenstein, W.D. Hudson (15, p: 38f) distinguishes two sets of conclusions, which a believer must learn to draw. First of all, he must learn to see how the expressions employed in the 'picture' resemble, and how they differ from their employment in ordinary non-religious contexts. Thus for example, if we use personal models in talking about God and his relation with human persons, we must determine the limits of the models: how is the relation between God and ourselves like and how is it unlike human relations? Here we have to discover which implications of personal relation concepts, as these are used with reference to human relations, do, and which do not apply to the way we are to understand the relation between God and ourselves. Secondly, the believer must come to see what implications the models and metaphors have for his actions and attitudes as he comes to interpret his own life and the world in the light of them. Sorting out these two kinds of implications in a systematic way, is one of the important tasks in theological thought. Thus Sallie McFague argues that 'the central role of models in theology is to

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provide frameworks for interpreting this relationship between the divine and the human. ... In order to interpret this relationship, conceptual clarity and precision is necessary: the structure implied in the relationship must be sorted out and its implications for personal, historical, social, and political life made manifest (17, p: 125).

Religious models determine the actions and attitudes to which believers commit themselves, in mainly two ways. First, in understanding themselves and their own lives in terms of the models, believers discover the role they have to play in life and action. Thus Iris Murdoch says that 'man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture (8, p; 122).Secondly, in interpreting the world in terms of religious models, believer come to see which actions and attitudes are appropriate in relation to the world and in the various situations in which they have to act. These two points could be illustrated with reference to the Christian faith.

First of all, both Christians and Moslems look on their own lives as lives lived in fellowship with God. Their role in life is therefore that of children of God, who live and acts in fellowship with God. Thus believers commit themselves to enable God to realise his intentions in the world by means of their actions.[10] Secondly, believers interpret the world in terms of the intentional activity of God. This entails that much of what they experience in the world is for them an object of praise and thanksgiving to the God who brings it about. However, much else of what believers experience, is seen as contrary to God's will and therefore to be opposed or changed. This entails a task which believers are called upon to perform in fellowship with God. In these ways the models and metaphors in terms of which believers interprets their lives and the world, express commitments since, in accepting the interpretation, the believers commit themselves to the specific attitudes and forms of action which belong to a life of fellowship with God.

Helen Oppenheimer describes this life as a kind of triangle (20, p: 73). My attitudes and actions in relation to the world are determined by the way I understand the world and my role within it in relation to God. This means on the one hand that my relation to the world is a relation that I have in fellowship with God. On the other hand, my relationship with God is expressed in the ways in which I act in the world in fellowship with God. There are always three elements involved: God, the world and myself. The triangle, which connects

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these three together, determines my 'form of life' as a believer. This triangular relation also determines the role that the 'language game' of prayer plays within the religious 'form of life' of the believer.

3. The Language-Game of Prayer

In praying believers establish, restore, and acknowledge their fellowship with God.[11] In asking things of God we acknowledge our dependence on God and this acknowledgement is a necessary condition for establishing personal fellowship with God. Confessing our sins and asking God's forgiveness is a necessary condition for restoring the fellowship that we have damaged through our sins. In prayers of thanksgiving and praise we acknowledge the fact that God in his mercy wants to maintain a relationship of fellowship with us. In this sense we can agree with Calvin in defining prayer as an 'exercise of faith'. In the light of our argument in the previous section, we can now say the same about the 'form of life' of the believer. This life is the realisation of the same fellowship. Thus, too, both prayer and the life of the believer are characterised by a triangle, since both involve three terms: God, the believer, and the world in which the believer lives and acts. In their lives believers relate to the world in fellowship with God, and in their prayers they seek the fellowship with God in which they relate to the world.

Because of this very close connection between prayer and the religious life, it is not surprising that they have often been identified in some way or other. Thus, for example, Origen (21 XII, p: 2) interpreted the life of the believer as itself a kind of prayer: 'the whole life of the saint is one mighty integrated prayer.' From the opposite point of view one could also say that not only is the life of a believer like a prayer, but prayer is also like the life of the believer. Thus Ian Ramsey suggests that a time of prayer can be like the believer's life in miniature (24, p: 22). Or one might say that prayer is an explicit expression of what is implicit in the whole of the believer's life.

This identification of prayer and the religious life would seem to make explicit prayer unnecessary. If the whole life of the believer is a life of fellowship with God, why is it necessary in praying to repeat this whole in miniature? Why is it necessary to make explicit what is implicitly present in any case in the life of the believer? Should we not say with Emil Brunner (10, p: 311) that in principle prayer ought

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not to be something alongside of other things, just as God is not something else alongside of the world?

One might respond to this by referring to human imperfection. In a sense one might say that prayer would be unnecessary in heaven, since there all life will naturally be fellowship with God. However, in this life we need continual training in order to live our lives in this way. Sanctification requires special effort. It does not come naturally to us. Thus O.C. Quick writes that 'prayer represents the dedication of all human activity to God. It is the special part cut off, as it were, from our total activity in order that therein the dedication of the whole may be made self-conscious and thereby more complete (23, p: 289).

There is much truth in this view. The ability to see oneself and the world with the eyes of faith requires training and prayer is an important way in which we train ourselves in this. Thus Alhonsaari points out that 'when praying, the believer is ... repeatedly making himself see the world in a certain way in which everyday experiences are fitted into what he thinks is the proper reality; he is repeatedly bending his emotional life and his behaviour to conform to this reality (1, p:47-48). In this way prayer becomes what John Drury calls 'the school of seeing'(12, chapter: 1). In prayer we are trained to see our lives and the world in terms of our faith and to live our lives in accordance with this way of seeing. In different forms of prayer believers consciously face up to various aspects of their lives in fellowship with God, and in this way train themselves for this life of fellowship. Thus in *petition* believers face up to their own dependence on God; in *intercession* they face up to their own concern (or lack of concern) for the needs of others before God; in *penitence* they face up to their own faults as sins in which their fellowship with God is being damaged; in *dedication* they face up to their own commitment (or lack of commitment) to doing God's will; in *praise* they face up to looking on the world as an expression of God's goodness, holiness and glory; in *thanksgiving* believers face up to looking on they own capacities and opportunities and the fulfilment of their needs as gracious gifts from God. In this sense prayer is indeed a form of *meditation* in which believers consciously face up to the way in which they relate to God, to themselves, to the world and to other people in their actions and attitudes. Thus in prayer believers make the dedication of their whole life to the fellowship of God (in

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the words quoted from Quick) 'self-conscious and thereby more complete'.

Although these remarks on the relation between prayer and the life of believers are true, they are also one-sided. Although prayer does further the life of the believer, its significance goes further than merely being a means to this end. In their prayers, as in their lives, believers are *practising* their fellowship with God, and not merely *practising for* it. The practice of prayer is not like practising swimming strokes without going into the water. In praying believers aim at *really* establishing, restoring and acknowledging their fellowship with God. Although this fellowship does result in acts, these are the effects, and not the purpose of praying. William Temple is right in emphasising that 'the proper relation in thought between prayer and conduct is not that conduct is supremely important and prayer may help it, but that prayer is supremely important and conduct tests it.'(18, p: 30) Prayer and the life of fellowship with God are impossible without each other. Thus it would be absurd to think that we could enter through prayer into fellowship with God, if this is not manifested in the life we live. On the other hand it is logically impossible to live a life of fellowship with God, if this fellowship is not established and re-established again and again, and this fact acknowledged in praise and thanksgiving. This is what we do when we pray.

4. Belief in God

We have seen that religious pictures (metaphors and models) entail commitments: By understanding our lives and experience of the world in terms of them, we commit ourselves to the religious form of life expressed by them. Do they also express truth claims about reality? Does the language game of religion also require us to claim that these pictures are in some way factually true? Some philosophers deny that this is the case. Thus R.B. Braithwaite (4, p: 72-91) argued that religious beliefs are no more that stories in which we express our moral commitments and which inspire us to a moral way of life. For this purpose it is not necessary to hold that the stories are in some way factually true. They are no more that useful and meaningful fictions. They do not refer to a real God and his relations with us. On the contrary, such stories refer only to ourselves and our moral life in the world and God exists only as

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one of the characters in the story. The consequence of this is that prayer is not the exercise of real fellowship with God but merely a technique in which we are trained to understand our lives and experience in terms of the stories and to live our lives in accordance with this understanding. Thus Immanuel Kant (and following him Don Cupitt and others) held that prayer is merely a technique to strengthen our moral commitments in life, or in Kant's own words, prayer serves 'firmly to establish this goodness in ourselves, and repeatedly to awaken the disposition of goodness in our hearts'(16, p:181)[12]. Is this an adequate account of what we do when we pray?

Here again Wittgenstein's theory of language games is useful. According to Wittgenstein language games (like prayer) are necessarily imbedded in forms of life (like the religious form of life of believers). However, language games are also constituted by 'tacit presuppositions' about reality. It would be logically incoherent to participate in the language game and at the same time to deny the tacit presuppositions, which constitute it. In this way a language game like prayer does indeed entail truth claims about reality. Wittgenstein introduces the term 'tacit presupposition' in the context of some remarks on behaviourism (27, p: 179-180). In these remarks he makes use of the following example: If a doctor hears the groaning of a patient, he *tacitly presupposes* that the groaning is an expression of pain. However, he cannot feel the patient's pain himself. A behaviourist might reject this tacit presupposition as being empirically unverifiable, and would therefore look on the patient merely as an object exhibiting groan-behaviour. This behaviour could be terminated by treating the patient with analgesic. In rejecting the tacit presupposition, however, the behaviourist takes leave of the form of life of personal relations, since the presupposition that you have feelings, emotions etc. even though I cannot myself experience them, is logically constitutive for my treating you as a person rather than as an object.

Treating somebody else as a person also presupposes that the other is a free agent in the sense of being the initiator of his own actions and hence having the ability to have done other than he did. Since this is a counterfactual presupposition, it is also not verifiable empirically: I can only observe what you do in fact and not that you could have

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acted differently from the way in which you acted in fact! The determinist, who rejects this counterfactual presupposition, also takes leave of the form of life of personal relations, since the presupposition is logically constitutive for this form of life and for the language-game embedded in it. Since such tacit presuppositions are in this way *logically constitutive* for the language-game, they cannot be doubted or denied *within* the language-game itself. Doubting or denying them would entail doubting or denying the language-game as such.

Similarly the claim that God exists can be understood as a constitutive presupposition of the form of life in terms of which believers make sense of life and experience, and of the language-game in which this is expressed. Within the language-game this presupposition cannot be doubted or denied since denying it would entail taking leave of the form of life as such. This is well illustrated by the following example from R.W. Hepburn which is perfectly in accordance with Wittgenstein's views on tacit presuppositions: 'If I say "The Lord is my strength and shield", and if I am a believer, I may experience feelings of exultation and be confirmed in an attitude of quiet confidence. If, however, I tell myself that the arousal of such feelings and confirming of attitude is *the* function of the sentence, that despite appearances it does not refer to a state of affairs, then the more I reflect on this the less I shall exalt and the less appropriate my attitude will seem. For there was no magic in the sentence by virtue of which it mediated feelings and confirmed attitudes: these were *responses* to kind of Being to whom, I trusted, the sentence referred: and response is possible only so long as that exists to which or to whom the response is made' (14, p:148). Clearly then, understanding the meaning of life and the world in terms of theistic models, presupposes belief in the factual truth of these models. Conceptual models fail to provide the understanding sought for in religion if they are taken to be merely useful fictions.

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5. Prayer as a hermeneutical key to understanding God

Belief in the real existence of God is therefore a constituting presupposition of the language-game of prayer. But this is not all. Participating in this language-game also presupposes belief that God is a personal being with whom we can have personal fellowship and especially that he is the kind of being to whom we can address our prayers. By examining the kinds of things we do when we pray and asking what kind of being is presupposed as addressee of our prayers, we have a key to understanding the nature of the God to whom our prayers are addressed. In this sense Gerhard Ebeling (13, p: 193) states that prayer is a hermeneutical key to our understanding God and Gerhard Sauter (25, p: 219) claims that we can only speak *about* God on the basis of our speaking *to* God. According to Sauter theology is anchored in prayer since prayer expresses the fundamental distinctions which are constitutive for the believer's experience of reality.

We have argued above that the fundamental forms of prayer in theistic traditions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism are *petition* (in which we ask things of God), *intercession* (in which we pray for other people), *confessing our sins and asking God's forgiveness* (in which we seek to overcome our estrangement from God and to be reconciled with Him), *dedication* (in which we offer ourselves to God in order that he might through us realise His purposes in the world), *thanksgiving* (in which we thank God for his grace, mercy and compassion), and *praise* (in which we acknowledge God's greatness, holiness and glory). All these things that we do when we pray are constituted by tacit presuppositions about the nature of God and of our relationship with Him. Thus *petition*[13] presupposes that God is a mighty agent who is able to act in the world in order to bring about the things which we ask of Him. *Intercession*[14] presupposes that God is compassionate and concerned about the well being of every one of us. *Confession and asking forgiveness* presuppose that God is merciful and forgiving and that he desires to restore His fellowship with us when we confess those sins by which we have become estranged from him[15]. *Prayers of dedication* presuppose that God wants to act in the world through the things we do and thus to involve us in realising His purposes[16]. *Thanksgiving* presupposes that our well being and happiness are gracious gifts, which we receive from God. *Praise* presupposes that

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God has created the world in order to reveal his greatness, holiness and glory to us[17]. In general, all these things presuppose that God is a personal being with whom we may enjoy a relation of personal fellowship.[18]

All this has far reaching implications for the dialogue between Moslems, Christians and Jews. If the things they do when they pray are the same, then the fundamental beliefs, which these forms of prayer entail about the nature of God and their relationship with Him, are also the same. But then Islam, Christianity and Judaism are not different religions. They are merely different historical and cultural traditions of worshipping the same God. Moslems, Christians and Jews are all children of Abraham who in different ways worship the God of Abraham.

Notes

1. For critical analysis of this interpretation, see chapter 1 of (9).
2. On this point see (9, p: 85).
3. On the relation between classification and forms of life, see (8, p; 56f).
4. See also chapter 1 of (7) for a detailed analysis of the interpretative function of metaphors and conceptual models in religion and theology.
5. See (3, p: 67).
6. See (2, p; 30) on the billiard ball model and p.71 on the models of particles ands waves in the theory of light.
7. On this difference between science and religion, see the introductory chapter of (5).
8. On this concept of 'meaning', see chapter 9 of (8).
9. See (26).
10. On this relationship between divine and human actions, see chapter 5 of (9) and chapter 5 of (6).
11. For an extended explanation of this statement, see chapter 6 of (6).
12. For an extended analysis of this view see chapter 2 of (9).
13. On petition, see chapters 3-5 of (9).
14. On intercession, see chapter 4 of (9).
15.On the role of confession and forgiveness is being reconciled with God, see chapter 6 of (9) and chapter 8 of (7).
16. On the connection between divine and human action, see chapter 5 of my (9) and chapter 5 of (6).
17. On thanksgiving and praise, see chapter 6 of (9).
18. On the nature of personal fellowship with God, see chapters 7-9 of (9)

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