

# Prayer: a case study in mimetic anthropology

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The following is the tentative text of one of the twelve sessions of “*The Forgiving Victim*” – the Adult Introduction to Christianity on which I am currently at work.

## 1. Introduction

One of the strangest features of that weirdly under-religious collection of texts known as the New Testament is how little there is in it on prayer. In fact, given that almsgiving, prayer and fasting are usually the visible pillars of what we call “religion”, it is odd how little the New Testament attends to any of them. The only place where all three are treated with something like rigour is in the first eighteen verses of the sixth chapter of St Matthew’s Gospel. And there they undergo, as I hope to show you, what appears to be a gross relativisation. They are completely subordinated to, and reinterpreted by, a penetrating understanding of the working of desire.

It would be tempting to see this as something proper to Matthew, and so to talk about “Matthew’s understanding of desire”. Nevertheless the same understanding can be detected at work in Luke and John as well as in St Paul. In fact, I suspect that we are here in the presence of what René Girard refers to in *The Scapegoat* when he talks about the texts of the New Testament bearing witness to an intelligence greater than that of each of the (admittedly highly sophisticated) members of the apostolic circle who composed them. Ockham’s razor would suggest that this is an intelligence that goes back to Our Lord himself.

What I would like to do here is to show how accurately that intelligence has been rendered in Girard’s mimetic theory by showing what happens if we read some of these texts on prayer in its light. You will see quite what a difference this makes by comparison with a reading which depends on a folk-psychology approach to desire.

So, a brief reminder of each of these two approaches. First the folk-psychology approach, which I sometimes characterise as the “blob and arrow” understanding of desire. In this approach, there is a blob located somewhere within each one of

us and normally referred to as a “self”. This more or less bloated entity is pretty stable, and there come forth from it arrows which aim at objects. So, “I” desire a car, a mate, a house, a holiday, some particular clothes and so on and so forth. The desire for the object comes from the “I” which originates it, and thus the desire is authentically and truly “mine”. If I desire the same thing as someone else this is either accidental and we must be rational about resolving any conflict which may arise, or it is a result of the other person imitating my desire, which is of course stronger and more authentic than their secondary and less worthy desire. Since my desiring self, my “I”, is basically rational, it follows that my desires are basically rational, and thus that I am unlike those people who I observe to have a clearly pathological pattern of desire – constantly falling for an unsuitable type of potential mate and banging their head against the consequences, or hooked on substances or patterns of behaviour that do them no good. Those people are in some way sick, and their desires escape the possibilities of rational discourse. Unlike me and my desires.

If this is an accurate understanding of how we desire, then of course the New Testament is weirdly quaint and inaccurate, for all it would be doing when talking about prayer is urging us to whip ourselves (and how can “we” whip our “selves”?) into wanting more. Furthermore, following this view the New Testament would contain within itself the seeds of the destruction of its own teaching about prayer, for in the text from St Matthew’s Gospel at which we will be looking in more detail, there appears the phrase

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him<sup>1</sup>.

The logical conclusion to this, given the premise of the blob and arrow understanding of desire, is to stop praying. There is literally no point expressing your desire, since it is known independently of its expression, and its expression makes no difference at all. The New Testament text seems to be a pointer on the road towards the self-contained and religiously indifferent modern “self”.

Please notice also that since desires are arrived at by the self without need of instruction or intervention from outside and don’t need to be expressed in order to be real, the self-contained and self-starting “blob” with its arrows is also radically private. Part of the self-understanding of the “blob” is that it has a

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:7-8.

defensive role, protecting and hiding the “real me” and my “real desire” which is always under a certain amount of threat from the fundamentally “flaky” public world, the world of commerce, of business, of politics and of war, in which no forms of discourse are really truth-bearing. So, what I say in public, how I act in public, and what I say I want in public, are always a certain form of dissimulation, since it is only the private “self” which is real. And please notice how miraculously the New Testament text, once again doing itself out of a job, seems to flatter this picture of the self. For if there is one verse from this section of Matthew that almost everyone seems to remember it is where Jesus, having disparaged the attention-seeking public prayers of the Pharisees says this:

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.<sup>2</sup>

Behold the apparent Scriptural canonisation of the modern individual self (who is, of course, “spiritual”, but not “religious”)!

Now let’s see whether we can’t rescue this text from its imprisonment by the “blob and arrow” understanding of the self and learn how, rather than flattering our prejudices, it challenges us.

## **2. Desire according to the other**

The understanding of desire which Girard has been putting forward for almost half a century, and which is often referred to as “mimetic” is about as far removed from this picture as you can get. The key phrase which I never tire of repeating is “We desire according to the desire of the other”. It is the social other, the social world which surrounds us, which moves us to desire, to want, and to act. This doesn’t sound particularly challenging when it is illustrated in the way the entertainment industry creates celebrities, or the advertising profession manages to make particular objects or brands desirable. For few of us are so grandiose as to deny that *some* of our desires show us as being easily led and susceptible to suggestion. It becomes much more challenging when it is claimed that in fact it is not *some of our desires* that are being talked about, but the whole way in which we humans are structured by desire.

For what Girard is pointing out is that humans are those animals in which even

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:6.

basic biological instincts (which of course exist, and are not the same thing as desire) are run by the social other within which the instinct-bearing body is born. In fact, our capacity to receive and deal with our instincts is given to us through our being drawn towards the social other which inducts us into living as this sort of animal, by reproducing itself within us. And what makes this draw possible is the hugely developed capacity for imitation which sets our species apart from our nearest simian relatives.

Thus, to cut a long story short: gesture, language and memory are not only things which “we” learn, as though there were an “I” that was doing the learning. Rather it is the case that, through *this body* being imitatively drawn into the life of the social other, gesture, language and memory form an “I” that is in fact one of the symptoms, one of the epiphenomena, of that social other. This “I” is much more highly malleable than it is comfortable to admit. And even more difficult: it is not the “I” that has desires, it is desire that forms and sustains the “I”. The “I” is something like a snapshot in time of the relationships which preexist it and one of whose symptoms it is.

This picture is severely unflattering in that it seems to un-anchor the “I” from a cosily sacred certainty of being “something basically good in the midst of a somewhat ‘iffy’ world”. Instead it points out that it is not so much that we are afloat on a dangerous sea, as that we are the dangerous sea we are afloat on. Our economic systems, our military conflicts, our erotic life, our ways of keeping law and order are all part of each other, run by the same patterns of desire. Or in other words, we humans are not only slightly affected by, but are actually run by, a culture of war, and of violence. We are found as the species which acts in groups to grab at identity “over against” some conveniently designated other; and which relies on a violent contrast in order to survive, and to define value and forge culture.

As you can imagine, prayer is going to look somewhat different if this is the sort of animal who is to be doing the praying. Because in this picture, prayer is going to start from the presupposition that we all desire according to the desire of the other. It is going to raise the question: Yes, but which other? We know there is a *social* other which gives us desire and moves us this way and that. But is there *Another Other*, who is not part of the social other, and who has an entirely different pattern of desire into which it is seeking to induct us? That of course is the great Hebrew question, the discovery of God who is not-one-of-the-gods, and our texts on prayer are part of our way into becoming part of the great Hebrew answer.

### 3. Which other?

So thoroughly do we assume the “blob and arrow” model of self and desire that we find it difficult to imagine that the New Testament authors might be closer to the world of what we would consider primitive animist cults than to our own. For in the world of animist cults it is perfectly obvious to everybody that people are moved by what is other than themselves. Indeed, in the various trances or dances into which the participants are inducted by mixtures of music and chanting, “spirits” will “come down” and “possess” or “ride” the participants, whose normal demeanour will be temporarily displaced by the quite recognisable public persona of the spirit in question.

Given this, it is perhaps interesting to see how much closer to that world St Paul is than we sometimes imagine:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.<sup>3</sup>

To paraphrase: “We are part of a new social other that is being brought into being, painfully, in the midst of the collapse of a dead-end way of being human. This new social other is being brought into being through our learning to desire it, which is something we want, but are very poor at articulating. The tension of being pulled between two sorts of social other is absolutely vital for us – and what enables us to live it is hope. Given that we don’t know how to desire and express our desire, the Spirit is Another other desiring within us without displacing us so that it will actually be *we* who are brought into the New Creation.”

Please see what Paul and the animists have in common: the understanding that we are more desired-in than desirers. And that this is, in itself, neither a good nor a bad thing. It is just what we are. The difference between the animists and the Hebrew question is not *whether* we are moved by another, but *by which other* are

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:22-27.

we moved? For “spirits”, idols and so forth are merely violent disguises by which the social other moves us, such that those spirits temporarily displace us, make us act “out of character” and trap us into being functions of themselves, usually demanding sacrifice. Whereas the Spirit of God is the Spirit of the Creator, and thus is in no way at all a function of anything that is. Quite the reverse, everything that is is a function of the Creator. The Creator is not in any sort of rivalry with us, and is thus able to move us from within, bringing us into being, without displacing us.

Let us not be fooled by a difference of language here: traditionally we refer to spirits *possessing* people, and there is, in the word “possess” a note of violence concerning the relationship between the spirit and the person possessed. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, we refer to the Spirit *indwelling*, or inhabiting the person, words without any connotation of violence. However, please notice that the human mechanism of being moved is the same in both cases. What is different is the quality of the “other” that is doing the moving.

I hope that we are now in a better position to look at some of the Gospel texts on prayer.

#### **4. The public nature of desire**

The first thing I want to point out about them is that they take for granted the public nature of human life and relationships including prayer. As one would expect, given the understanding of desire which I’ve been trying to flesh out with you, it is not the case that there are two equal and opposed realities: who I am in public and who I am in private. Rather it is the case that there is one reality: who I am in public. Privacy is a temporary subsection of an essentially public way of being. Jesus, and the New Testament as a whole, simply takes for granted the public nature of religious, cultural and political life. Given that, it becomes more plausible to see why Jesus is described in various places as withdrawing to pray. Typically these moments of withdrawal come in the immediate aftermath of a major interaction with a crowd following a miracle. And it is not hard to see why. The risk which any leader runs, especially one who is enjoying a certain success, is becoming infected by the desires of their followers, allowing themselves to believe about themselves what the followers believe, and to be flattered into acting out the projections which have raised them up, and thus to become the puppet of their crowd’s desires.

Jesus’ moving off to pray shows that he understood his need to detox from the

pattern of desire which threatened to run him – people wanting to make him King, or proclaim him as Messiah in a way that was far from what he was trying to teach them. He was acquainted with what we call temptation – the risk of being lured by the social other into a pattern of desire which is presented under the guise of being good but is not good. So, he needed to spend time having his “I” strengthened by receiving his pattern of desire from Another Other. One classic recognition of Jesus’ being tempted, and his refusal to be beguiled by it, comes when he tells Peter “Get thou behind me, Satan!”<sup>4</sup>. He rejects Peter’s attempt to dissuade him from entering into the pathway of suffering that will lead to his death. Peter is linked to the Tempter, the stumbling block, and is told that his mind is disposed according to the culture of men, and not according to the culture of God.

Given this, let us turn to Jesus’ explicit teaching about prayer, especially as we find it in Matthew 6, but with some reference to Luke also.

The first thing we notice is that Jesus’ comments on prayer are embedded in a teaching about patterns of desire.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them*; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, *so that they may be praised by others*. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”<sup>5</sup> (Italics mine)

Before he gets to talking about prayer, Jesus is already demonstrating an understanding of desire. His presupposition is that we are all immensely needy people who long for approval and rewards. He doesn’t say “Really, this is too infantile. You shouldn’t be wanting approval or rewards. Grow up and be self-starting, self-contained heroic individuals who act on entirely rational grounds”. On the contrary, he takes it for granted that we desperately need approval. The question is: whose approval is going to run us? The danger of seeking approval from the social other is that you will get it, and thereafter you will be hooked on that approval. It will literally give you to be who you are and what you will become. You will act out of the pattern of desire which the social other gives you.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 8:33.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:1-4.

I used to think that the phrase “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward”, especially when pronounced in booming tones by a Scots-accented Calvinist preacher, was a euphemism for sending someone to Hell. But it makes much more sense if you see it as an anthropological observation: the trouble about seeking the approval of the social other, is that you will get it. You will act in such a way as to get that approval, and then become its puppet. And because of that you will be selling yourself short. You won’t be wanting enough, you will have too little desire. Your “self” will be a shadow of what you could be if you allowed the Creator to call you into being.

(As an aside: isn’t it interesting that Jesus gives as an example of how one should give alms something which is physiologically almost impossible. What on earth does it mean, in practice, for the left hand not to know what the right hand is doing? It suggests the kind of lack of personal coordination that only a person who isn’t a stable self can manage. I’m not quite sure what is being recommended here, but I got a hint of what it might mean not long ago. After some time of going along with the seemingly endless requests for money from a friend whom I had been supporting, I was tempted to do some accounting and work out how much I had given him over time as part of a way of trying to put some parameters into place as to what my giving and our relationship might look like in the future. Mercifully I’m not a very good accountant, but in any case, half-way through my record-checking exercise, I realised that I was, as it were, grasping onto my own generosity, attempting to make of it something that defined me over against him, in such a way that it became a bargaining chip in a relationship. And I also realised that in that very moment of grasping, what I had been doing had ceased to be an act of generosity, and I had ceased to be someone through whom Another other’s generosity might flow.)

When Jesus turns to prayer the understanding of desire is identical: what people really want is approval, a particular reputation in the eyes of others and this leads them to act out in such a way that they will get that approval – and that is the problem. They get the approval, and with it, they are given a “self” that is the function of the group’s desire. Belonging and approval go together. This means, incidentally, that someone is thereafter exceedingly unlikely to be self-critical in relationship to their group belonging. They will agree to cover up whatever in themselves and in other group members needs covering up in order for the group to maintain its unanimity, and for themselves to keep their reputation, which means their “self”.



And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.<sup>6</sup>

Instead Jesus urges his disciples to receive their “self” from “Another other” (and the Matthean code for “Another other” is “your Father who sees in secret” or “your Father who is in heaven” – that is, the Creator who is absolutely not part of the give and take, the tit-for-tat reciprocity of the social other). The image Jesus uses here is curious, since mostly our translations refer to a “room” into which we are supposed to go, which we in turn tend to associate with our bedroom, assuming that to be a private place. Yet the word *ταμειον* is more accurately rendered “storeroom”, larder or pantry. This was the room, in an ancient Middle Eastern house, which was totally enclosed inside a building, with no windows. The purpose of such a space in a culture which had neither central heating nor refrigeration was to ensure that perishable food stored in it would be less susceptible to extremes of either cold or heat. It also meant that once you had shut the door from the inside, you could neither see out, nor be seen.

Here in short, Jesus is recommending the psychological equivalent of the physiological dislocation we saw in the previous example. He is saying: “You are addicted to being who you are in the eyes of your adoring public, or your execrating public, it doesn’t matter which, since crowd love and crowd hate give identity in just the same dangerous way. So, go into a place where you are forcibly in detox from the regard of those who give you identity so that your Father, who alone is not part of that give and take, can have a chance to call your identity into being.”

## **5. The interface of desire and voices**

Now here’s the trouble with spending time in the larder, removed from the eyes of your public, unable to act out. You gradually start to lose “who you are”. You start to dwell in the strange place which I call the interface between your “own” desire, very small, and only tentatively coming into being, timidly and somewhat shamefacedly, and the voices which run you, and which you have in fact so perfectly ventriloquised. I presume I’m not unique in having, after some time spent alone, occasionally detected the person who was speaking through me – the

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6: 5-6.

voice of my father or mother, or a headmaster, or some admired teacher, or political or religious leader. In other words, I had been giving voice to a pattern of desire taken on board from someone else. And of course, doing it with all the conviction of it being really *me* who was talking and desiring.

And that can be quite a shocking moment, as I realise how easily I have allowed myself to put aside, and indeed even to trample on, whatever delicate hints were pulling me in other less strident directions, and have instead rushed headlong into the first “persona” that seemed to give me a chance of being someone who counts. It is only with time spent in the larder that I may find that the One who sees me in secret is actually calling forth a quite different and richer set of desires, without such an easy and narrow straightjacket as my current persona. Furthermore, the One who sees in secret seems to be in much less of a hurry for me to avoid shame and “measure up” than I normally am.

Imagine, if you will, a childhood scene. Little Johnny is about to go to bed. Mummy comes to tuck him in and says “Little Johnny, did you say your prayers?” “Yes Mummy”. “Good, little Johnny. And what did you ask for in your prayers?” “I asked for... chocolate pudding tomorrow and for Arsenal to win on Saturday” “Oh no, little Johnny, you shouldn’t ask for chocolate pudding tomorrow and for Arsenal to win on Saturday. You should be praying for an end to suffering in the Middle East, relief for the famine in Bangladesh and the Holy Father’s Mission intentions for the month of May!”. Well, of course, little Johnny will take this on board. His smelly little desires have been urinated upon from a very great height, and he has been taught to despise them and instead to want much more “noble” things, things that will make him stand tall in the world of his parents. In fact, he has been taught St Matthew’s Gospel in reverse: desire according to the social other so as to get approval.

Here’s the thing: little Johnny is fast on the road to becoming a perfect puritan, a dweller in a world in which there are things that are nice but naughty, things one wants but shouldn’t say so, but also one in which there are things which are good but boring, which one doesn’t really want, but should at least say you do.

The curious thing is that, if we are to believe the Gospel, this is the reverse pattern of what God wants. It would appear that “Your Father who sees in secret” doesn’t despise our smelly little desires, and in fact, suggests that if only we can hold on to them, and insist on articulating them, that we will actually find for ourselves, over time, that we want more than those desires, but we really do *want* something with a passion. In other words, he takes us seriously in our weakness and unimportance, even when we don’t. If we learn to give some voice to those

desires, then there's a chance over time that we may move through them organically until we find ourselves the sort of humungous desirers who throw ourselves into peace work in the Middle East, or into famine-relief in Bangladesh, or even into being the sort of missionary for whom the Holy Father wants people to pray in May. But we'll be doing so because we, who start from not really knowing what we want, by not despising our little desires, and learning to articulate them, have discovered from within that this is what we really want. And in our wanting will be who we come to be.

## 6. The importunate widow

Before returning to our Matthew text, let me give a couple of further examples of the pattern of desire the Gospel texts on prayer point to, for they fit well into this larder or pantry where we find ourselves dwelling in the interface between our desires and our internal "voices" – the voices of the social other which we have internalised. Here is the model who Jesus puts before us for prayer in Luke's Gospel: an importunate widow.<sup>7</sup>

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

OK, hold that thought. At first blush this sounds as though Jesus is giving advice about not becoming discouraged. I want to suggest that it is rather more than that. It is about how, through becoming insistent desirers, we will actually be given a heart, be given to be. If we do not desire, we will not have a heart.

He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people."

Please notice that this judge is a perfectly non-mimetic person. In fact he is more like a concrete block than like a person, since he is able to be moved neither by the social other, nor the Other other.

"In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.'"

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 18:1-8.

Now we have an inconvenient person, the sort of person who has no one to stand up for her, who is not held in high regard, and whose satisfaction is of no importance to those living in the city. She is the equivalent of a smelly desire. But she is persistent, and just keeps on with her demand.

“For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'”

The judge has an enviable degree of self-knowledge, for he understands perfectly well that he is a concrete block, hermetically sealed from mimetic influence. Even so, he eventually concedes, anxious to avoid a drubbing at the hands of this redoubtable widow. I say “drubbing”, for the word *υπωπιαζη*, which we translate as “wear out”, was apparently the language of the wrestling arena or the boxing ring.

And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?”

Does Jesus really think that God is like an unjust judge? Indeed not. But he knows how all of us are inclined to have an unjust judge well-installed into our consciousness. In fact as part of our socialization we acquire a voice or set of voices which seem to be completely impervious to anything. This voice or voices, should we be so bold as to want something, will quickly send down little messages to us: “Shouldn’t want that if I were you – better not to want much, so as not to be disappointed” or “Getting above our station are we?” or, as in the famous Oliver Twist scene “More?!!”. And the point of these messages is to shut down our desire – to get us to mask our discontent with remaining mere puppets of our group. Our unjust judge is internal to each one of us, a glowering “no” in the face of our potential happiness.

Yet what Jesus recommends is a long-running, persistent refusal to have our smelly little desires put down. Instead to engage in a constant guerrilla warfare of desiring, so that eventually even the block in our head starts to yield, and what is right for us starts to become imaginable and obtainable. God is not like the judge, a hermetic block, he is like the irritating desire which gets stronger and stronger. It is only through our wanting something that God is able to give it to us.

“Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Curiously, at the end of this teaching Our Lord shows a certain ambivalence about us: imagination and desire feed each other positively, and this is a vital element of faith: becoming able to imagine something good, and so to want it, and then as one wants it more, finding it more possible to imagine it more fully. Here he seems aware that despite what he is attempting to implode in our midst, we are frighteningly likely to be content with far too little, to go along with our internalised unjust judges, and so not to dare to imagine a goodness which could be ours, and thus not dare to want it, let alone become crazed single-minded athletes of system-shattering desire. He wonders whether we will really allow ourselves to be given heart.

Before moving along from this image, I'd like to point out an important part of the way the new “self” of desire is brought into being. That is by *saying* “I want”. Please notice that this simple act of *saying* something, and in fact saying it frequently is much more important psychologically than it seems. For it is not that there is an “I” that has such and such a desire, which it is now expressing. Rather, among the patterns of desire which are running this body, this body is having the humility to recognise that it needs to be brought into being by being directed in a certain way, and so is, as it were, making an act of commitment to a certain sort of becoming. “I want such and such” is an act of commitment to be found in a certain becoming, an act of alignment. “I” am agreeing that in my malleability, the desire according to the other, which precedes me, and which I'm agreeing to take on board, will bring me into being. Language makes this public, which is why it can be such a relief finally to be able to say “I want such and such”, even “privately”, because saying it has involved me in getting over the shame of being found to be the sort of person who wants such a thing.

A couple of final examples of the Gospel teaching the same pattern of desire as regards prayer. In Luke 6,28 we read:

“Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

I hope it now makes much more sense why this is emphatically not a way of saying “Jesus wants me as a doormat”. On the contrary. Jesus knows very well how we become intimately involved with that subsection of the social other which are our enemies in just the same way as we become intimately involved with those whose approval we seek. He knows how susceptible we are to taking

our enemies on board, and becoming just like them by acting out reciprocally towards them. So he offers us this recipe for freedom: do not allow yourselves to be run by those who do you evil. This involves a refusal of negative reciprocity and a learning to move from the heart towards them in a way which has nothing to do with what they have done to you. In fact he is saying “step out of the pattern of desire in which you are enthralled by, and in thrall to, your enemies, and step arduously instead into a pattern of desire such that you are not over against them at all, but are able to be, as God is, *for* them, towards them, without being their rival”.

In case you think I’m making this up, Matthew’s version of the same saying is perfectly instructive:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*<sup>8</sup> (Italics mine)

The rationale for praying for those who persecute you is set out clearly: it is so as to become part of the pattern of desire of the Other other, who is not part of the reciprocity, the tit-for-tat, the good and evil of the social other, but is entirely outside it, not in rivalry with it, and perfectly generous towards it.

## **7. Seeing myself through the eye of Another**

Let us step back now, into our larder or pantry, to consider further the oddity of this place of the interface between our desire and the voices which run us. So far I’ve emphasized the negative – the rupture – what we are becoming dislocated from – the way we have been run by the regard of the social other. Now please note that there is no alternative to being run by the regard of another. It is not the case that we can strip off the false-selves given us by the social other, and that there, underneath it all, radiantly, will be our true self, untrammelled by the social other.

No, we always receive ourselves through the eye of another. The really hard matter of prayer is learning to receive ourselves through the eye of Another other. For what on earth is it like to be looked at by Another other? What does that “regard” tell us of who we are, and who we are becoming?

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5: 44-45.

My sense is that the collapse of the “self of desire” which begins when we step out of the regard of the social other is much easier to notice than the much quieter and more imperceptible calling into being of a new self-of-desire, without any flashy over-against, or bits of grasped self, sodden with the wrong sorts of meaning. But it is here that the work of imagination, to which Jesus was appealing in his example of the importunate widow, has its proper place. For it is as we stretch the boundaries of our *imagination* formed by the social other that we may catch glimpses of being looked at by One who is not part of that at all.

What, for instance, is meant by the *deathlessness* of God? And here, I don’t mean the usual associations which come with “immortality” or “eternity” – meaning something like invulnerability, or going on for an awfully long time. Rather, part of what we mean when we talk about being looked at by God is that we are held in the regard of someone who is *αθανάτος* – deathless. Someone for whom, unlike anyone we know or have ever known, death is not a parameter, a reality, a limit, a circumscription. Someone, therefore, for whom mortality, existence in limited time, our reality, looks entirely different. Someone who can wish us into acting as if death were not. This is the sort of regard that can suggest into us the possibility of believing it is worthwhile to undertake projects whose fruition we may not see. The sort of regard that is unhurried enough not to be bothered by my failure, that empowers me to share the space of those who are despised because secure about my long term prospects. It is the sort of regard for whom Keynes’ famous phrase “in the long term, we’re all dead” is simply meaningless, for the only long term that exists is one in which death has no incidence.

Or again, what does it mean to be looked at through eyes that only know *abundance*, for whom scarcity is simply not a reality, for whom there is always more? Think of the rupture this produces in my patterns of desire! “If you want more, there won’t be enough to go round” or “there’s no free meal at the end of the universe” or “Grab what you can before it all runs out”, or just the gloomy depressed “euugh” of disappointment with things, life, and so on not matching up to expectation, the way of being in the world and perceiving everything which the ancient Hebrews referred to as Vanity, or futility. What does it look like to spend time in the regard of One for whom it is not, as the whole of our capitalist system presupposes, scarcity that leads to abundance by promoting rivalry, which we then bless and call competition? Rather it is a hugely leisured creative abundance that is the underlying reality, and an endless *magis*, “more”, is always on the way.

What does it look like to spend time in the regard of one for whom *daring* and

adventure, not fear and caution underlie the whole project of creation, for whom everything that *is* is open-ended and pointing to more than itself, and for whom we are invited to share in the Other's excitement and thrill, to want and to achieve crazy and unimaginable things?

What is it like to sit in a regard which is bellowing at us "something out of nothing, something out of nothing"? Our pattern of desire says "unnhh, nothing comes from nothing" and feels sorry for itself. Yet the heart of the difference between atheism and belief in God-who-is-not-one-of-the-gods is not an ideology, but a pattern of desire which thrills to "something out of nothing". The wonderful verses of second Isaiah, fresh from the great breakthrough into monotheism in the sixth century BC shout this out:<sup>9</sup>

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

This is a definition of God as quite outside the pattern of desire into which the social other inculcates us: "something out of nothing".

Well, these terms – deathlessness, abundance, daring and something out of nothing – are just a few of the sorts of phrase by which the Scriptures attempt to nudge our imagination into spending time undergoing a regard that is not the regard of the social other, one which has a wish, a longing, a heart that is *for* us, much more for us than we are for ourselves, one which we can trust to have our long-term interests at heart. And in each case, spending time in the regard of the Other other will work to produce in us a way of being public which seems to go directly counter to the expectations of the patterns of desire which the social other produces in us. Our temporary abstraction from public life will not have made us private. It will have empowered us to be public in a new way, whose precariousness and vulnerability rests on an unimaginable security.

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<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 55:1-3.



## 8. Not leaving Las Vegas

Let us get back then, finally, to Matthew and the conclusion of Jesus' remarks about prayer. I hope that they will read somewhat differently now:

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.<sup>10</sup>

I remember standing on a hill overlooking Lake Titicaca and watching the local Yatiris, shamans or priests, plying their wares. You could go to them, and for an appropriate offering, they would then light candles around little portable shrines, burn incense, and say the requisite prayers or incantations, which were in an amazing mixture of Latin, Quechua, Aymara and Spanish. The prayers or incantations were for a fairly repetitive list of things: protection from a neighbour's evil eye, quick riches, death of a troublesome mother-in-law, to get an unwilling prospective love-match to fall for me, various forms of vengeance.

The pattern seemed to be simple: God, or the gods, are a sort of celestial Las Vegas slot machine, full of amazing bounty, but inclined to be retentive. So prayer is the art of conjuring this capricious divinity, by exactly the right phrases, repeated exactly the right number of times, into parting with some of its treasure. As if the priest were a particularly expert puller of the slot machine handle, one who could ensure that three lemons, or five bars, line up and so manipulate the divinity into disgorging its riches.

What this presupposes is a pattern of desire where we are subjects who are in control, and God is an object who must be manipulated: we are back to the blob and arrow picture of desire. What Jesus is teaching is exactly the reverse of this. In Jesus' picture it is God who is the subject, who has a desire, an intention, a longing, and who knows who we are and what is good for us and *we* who are capricious and somewhat inert slot machines who are always getting our handles pulled by the wrong players. In this picture it is precisely because our Father knows what we need before we ask him that we must learn to pray: our Father's only access to us, the only way he can get to our slot-machine handle, is by our asking him into our pattern of desire.

You remember that with the blob and arrow understanding of desire, Jesus'

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 6,7-8.

phrase about “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” works as a way of making prayer pointless. But with the mimetic understanding of desire which I hope to have shown to be at work throughout this passage, the same phrase works in exactly the opposite way. It becomes the urgent reason why we need to pray: so as to allow the One who knows what is good for us, unlike we ourselves, whose desire is for us and for our fruition, unlike the social other and its violent traps, to gain access to re-creating us from within, to giving us a “self”, an “I of desire” that is in fact a constant flow of treasure. We are asking, in fact to become a symptom of his pattern of desire, rather than that of the social other which ties us up into becoming so much less.

## **9. Concluding remarks on the Our Father**

It is with this then, that Jesus leads up to teaching the “Our Father”.

Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.<sup>11</sup>

Space and time prevent me from going into a line by line reading of this. For our purposes, I just want to point out two things which I hope are obvious. First, the Our Father is all about desire. It begins by addressing the Other other who is manifesting himself, has a desire, an intention, a project and a reality which are way prior to anything that the social other knows, and yet which can begin to have incidence in the life of the social other. And secondarily, it takes for granted, and underlines, the fact that we are entirely mimetic animals. The goodness of the Other other can only be unbound in us, flow through us, to the degree that we agree to be unbound towards our co-members of the social other. Just as our “selves” are what they are entirely thanks to the social other, so our “new selves” are only going to be “new selves” in the degree to which we unbind the social other. It is strictly in our relation with what is other than us that we will be found to be. Please notice that this, the insistence that letting go of the social other, and being let go by the Other other is exactly the same thing, is the only part of the Our Father which Jesus repeats, rubbing in the basic anthropology once again.

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6: 9-15.

I hope you will agree then that “desire according to the desire of the other”, and the absolute and mechanical mimetic working of our desire do not seem to be a foreign import into these texts, but to offer a rich reading of them that goes with their flow and can help us to be found on the inside of the adventure of prayer.

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