REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER

SPIRITUAL SECURITY

To attain a degree of spiritual security one cannot rely upon one’s own resources. One needs an atmosphere, where the concern for the spirit is shared by a community. We are in need of students and scholars, masters and specialists. But we need also the company of witnesses, of human beings who are engaged in worship, who for a moment sense the truth that life is meaningless without attachment to God.

We often discover that a human being is a being driven by alien pressures, by false fears. Living becomes drifting, aimless moving. To pray is to stand still, to rise above enforced digression, and to await signs of direction. Tearing off inner masks, imposed makeup, delusions, conditionings, conceits, a spark breaks through all thoughts: what is worth being thirsty for?

THE SYNAGOGUE

What does a person expect to attain when entering a synagogue? In the pursuit of learning one goes to a library, for esthetic enrichment one goes to the art museum, for pure music to the concert hall.

Many are the facilities which help us to acquire the important worldly virtues, skills and techniques. But where should one learn about the insights of the spirit? Many are the opportunities for public speech. Where are the occasions for inner silence? It is easy to find people who will teach us how to be eloquent. Who will teach us how to be still? It is surely important to develop a sense of humor. Is it not also important to have a sense of reverence? Where should one learn the eternal wisdom of compassion? The fear of being cruel? The danger of being callous? Where should one learn that the greatest truth is found in contrition?

Important and precious as the development of our intellectual faculties is, the cultivation of a sensitive conscience is indispensable. We are all in danger of sinking in the darkness of vanity; we are all involved in our own egos. Where should we become sensitive to the pitfalls of cleverness, or to the realization that expediency is not the acme of wisdom?

We are constantly in need of self-purification. We are in need of experiencing moments in which the spiritual is as relevant and as concrete as the esthetic, for example. Everyone has a sense of beauty; everyone is capable of distinguishing between the beautiful and the ugly. But we also must learn to be sensitive to the spirit.

THE SELF IS SILENT

We never pray as individuals, set apart from the rest of the world. The liturgy is an order which we can enter only as part of the Community of Israel. Every act of
worship is an act of participating in an eternal service, in the service of all souls of all ages.

In a sense, our liturgy is a higher form of silence. It is pervaded by an awed sense of the grandeur of God which resists description and surpasses all expression. The individual is silent. He does not bring forth his own words. His saying the consecrated words is in essence an act of listening to what they convey. The spirit of Israel speaks, the self is silent.

PUBLIC WORSHIP

Public worship aids us by liberating our personality from the confining walls of the individual ego. Imprisoned in self, we easily fall prey to morbid brooding. Interference with our career, personal disappointments and disillusionments, hurts to our vanity, the fear of death—all these tend so to dominate our attention that our minds move in a fixed and narrow system of ideas, which we detest but from which we see no escape. With a whole wide world of boundless opportunities about us, we permit our minds, as it were, to pace up and down within the narrow cell of the ego prison. But participation in public worship breaks through the prison of the ego and lets in the light and air of the world. Instead of living but one small and petty life, we now share the multitudinous life of our people. Against the wider horizons that now open to our ken, our personal cares do not loom so large. Life becomes infinitely more meaningful and worthwhile, when we become aware, through our participation in public worship, of sharing in a common life that transcends that of our personal organism.

REFLECTIONS ON GOD

WE PRAISE BEFORE WE PROVE

Understanding God is not attained by calling into session all arguments for and against Him, in order to debate whether He is a reality or a figment of the mind. God cannot be sensed as a second thought, as an explanation of the origin of the universe. He is either the first and the last, or just another concept.

Speculation does not precede faith. The antecedents of faith are the premise of wonder and the premise of praise. Worship of God precedes affirmation of His realness. We praise before we prove. We respond before we question.

Proofs for the existence of God may add strength to our belief; they do not generate it. Human existence implies the realness of God. There is a certainly without knowledge in the depth of our being that accounts for our asking the ultimate question, a preconceptual certainty that lies beyond all formulation or verbalization.

SILENCE IS PRAISE

God, may He be exalted, cannot be comprehended by the intellect. None but He Himself can comprehend what He is .... Thus all the philosophers say: “We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which He becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes that are too weak to apprehend it.” This has been expounded upon in words that it would serve no useful purpose to repeat here. The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the statement in the Book of Psalms, “Silence is praise to You” (65:2). Interpreted, this means, “Silence with regard to You is Praise.” This is a most perfectly put phrase regarding this matter. In regard to whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, we find that
while it may have some application to Him, may He be exalted, it does have some
deficiency. Accordingly, silence is more appropriate.

KNOWING

The sum total of what we know of You is that we do not know You.

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

The meaning of having been created in the image of God is in a mystery. It is
impossible to say exactly what it means to have been created in the image of God.
Perhaps we may surmise the intention was for man to be a witness for God, a
symbol of God. Looking at man, one should be able to sense the presence of God.
But instead of living as a witness, man, in so many ways, has become all imposter;
instead of becoming a symbol, he became an idol. In man’s presumption he has
developed a false sense of sovereignty which fills the world with terror.

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