

Prayer as the Voice of Pure Devotion

by Suhotra Swami

In a spatio-temporal sense at least, this article on prayer is outside the Christian tradition. But space and time have only to do with physics. If there is anything accessible to human experience that is metaphysical (that is, "beyond physics"), it is prayer. I therefore believe that prayer is the true common ground upon which all religions and all humanity can find a unity that remains ever-unrealized within the physical realm.

My readers in Catholic Poland are likely to term my religious tradition as "Hindu." Now, that's not really a fact, even in a spatio-temporal sense. The word Hindu is nothing more than a foreign mispronunciation of the word Sindhu, the name of a river (also known as the Indus) in present-day Pakistan. It is not the proper name of my religion, no more than "Jordanism" is the proper name for Christianity, which began in the region of the river Jordan in Palestine. The real name of my tradition is Vaishnavism, which is derived from a name of God: Vishnu, meaning "He who dwells everywhere." For instance, Vishnu dwells within the hearts of all creatures as their conscience and inner guide, which we call the Paramatma or Supersoul. Vishnu dwells outside of each of us as the maintainer of the form and progress of the universe. And ultimately Vishnu is transcendental to the material universe altogether. In His most intimate form, known by the name Krishna, God enjoys eternally with His pure devotees in the supremely blissful spiritual abode known as Goloka, which is not a "place" in any spatio-temporal sense at all. Goloka is a place of pure consciousness. If our consciousness becomes pure, we are "there." Pure prayer is the means to enter Goloka and serve Krishna His pastimes of unending joy.

I have titled this article The Voice of Pure Devotion to draw the attention of my Catholic readers to the unity shared by the Christian Bible and the Vedic scriptures of India. In the New Testament, the Gospel according to St. John, Chapter One, it is said, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not."

The "word" mentioned here is a translation of the Greek *logos.* *Logos* has various senses of meaning. One is "word" or "language," from which we get modern words like dialogue. Another sense is the structure of thought, from which we get the modern word logic. A third sense is the structure of the world around us, which we study in our sciences of cosmology, geology, biology, anthropology and so on. All these words end in -logy, revealing the trace of *logos.* I said that *logos* has various senses of meaning. Actually, *logos* means "the sense of meaning" of speech, thought and the world--of everything we can know or communicate. And as we've seen in the passage quoted from John, in the beginning God gave the original sense of meaning to everything in creation by His word. Without God, there is no meaning to anything at all. Only with God can we sense the meaning of everything. And that, I hope to help you understand, is the true meaning of prayer: the giving of our voice to the sense of everything as in God, with God, and as God.

Greek is an ancient language full of profound concepts. Even more ancient and profound is the Sanskrit language. *Logos*, the word that was in the beginning, the word that was with God and is God, is known in Sanskrit as *vac* ("voice"). Vac is the feminine, devotional aspect of the Godhead. You see, in my tradition, God is known as the *adi-purusa*, the original personality. That original personality displays male and female aspects simultaneously. This is not to be understood in a mundane, biological sense. What I mean to say is that the energetic (*saktiman*) is male, while the energy (*sakti*) is female. And They cannot be separated, no more than the sun and its light can be separated. So Vac is the *sakti* (energy) of God, the energetic. She is with God in the beginning, in the eternity before creation.

We Vaisnavas address God as Radha-Krishna. Radha comes from *aradhanam*, a Sanskrit word meaning "worship." We also address God as Hare Krishna. Hare comes from *hara*, "the divine power." And Krishna means "the All-Attractive." Because He is the Perfect Being, She is ever-attracted to serve Him. Radha-Krishna, Hare Krishna--these are the eternal names and forms of the complete Godhead. Radha or Hare is with God, and actually She is God, for She is Krishna's energy. For instance, in school children play with rubber bands, stretching them and letting them fly at one another. When a rubber band strikes a child, she may cry out, "oh, you hit me." Actually there was no direct contact between the children. One child simply sent a rubber band flying at the other. But still, that one is

accused, "you hit me." What hit was the energy of the child. That energy is not different from the child. Yet again, it is different.

Similarly, the energy of God is God, and yet it is different from Him at the same time. This simultaneous difference and non-difference between God and His energy is the essence of our Vaisnava philosophy. All things are made by God through His energy of speech (*logos*, or Vac-*sakti*), and thus all things are in one sense the same as God, and in another sense different from Him. This oneness and difference are indicated in the Gospel of John with these words: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not."

Life is eternal. God is the Supreme Soul, ever-existing, and we tiny individual souls are His effulgence, each of us like a tiny photon (particle) of timeless life and light. In pure spiritual consciousness, God and the souls share the same quality of eternality, knowledge and bliss. They are One, but since it is a Oneness of love, there is a Difference of love too. For example, a boy and a girl who love one another are one in that they are inseparable. Yet again, the difference between them makes their mutual enjoyment possible.

As we see from the Gospel of John, the light of spirit, of eternal life and light, shines forth from God into darkness, or *avidya* (ignorance). According to the Vedas, God sends forth some of the countless effulgent souls into the darkness of material existence because of their desire to enjoy separately from Him. A soul in ignorance does not comprehend his eternal life. In ignorance, then, the oneness between the soul and God seems lost, while the difference between them seems terrifying. God is never in ignorance. But the soul in material existence is. The soul's ignorance is forgetfulness of God due to contact with matter. When we forget God, we instantly think, "I am matter." Thus instead of enjoying our true spiritual nature of eternality, knowledge and bliss, we suffer the opposite: repeated birth and death, ignorance and unhappiness in the material body.

The Vac-*sakti*, the Divine Voice by which the meaning of everything is understood, pervades both the spiritual and material realms. In the spiritual realm Vac is self-apparent: everything there exists only for the loving glorification of God. But here in the material world, Vac is hidden--hidden by our own ignorance. Therefore it must be revealed to us by one who is in knowledge. Knowledge, in the Sanskrit language, is Veda. Vac, the Voice of Pure Devotion to God, is the mother of the Vedic scriptures. Now, what kind of person is able

to know Veda in this world of ignorance? As Goddess Vac herself states in the Rig Veda:

"He whom I love, that one I make a saintly person, that one a seer of the truth, that one a wise sage." (RV 10.125.5)

Who does Goddess Vac, the mother of the Vedas, love? She loves that one who loves God. And to that person She gives the power of prayer, the Voice of Pure Devotion.

Thus true prayer is an expression of pure love of God. And pure love of God is the meaning of everything.

In a biography of St. Francis of Assisi, we find this statement: "The happiness beyond all happiness comes from loving God and feeling oneself loved by Him." This happiness beyond all happiness is the happiness of our original nature as pure spirit, which needs nothing material to sustain its existence. Some people pray to God for the happiness of physical satisfaction. Others pray for the happiness of wealth. Still others pray for the happiness of a long life in the body. But these kinds of happiness are not real happiness. Therefore these kinds of prayers are not real prayers.

Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, the original founder of the Hare Krishna movement in India five hundred years ago, prayed in this way:

"O Lord of the universe, I do not desire material wealth, materialistic followers, a beautiful wife or to achieve anything else the poets of this world describe in flowery language. All I want, life after life, is unmotivated devotional service to You." In the original Sanksrit, Sri Caitanya's prayer closes with the words *bhavatad bhaktir ahaituki tvayi*, "Let there be *bhakti* (pure devotion) with no motives unto You." This is the prayer of a pure soul to his pure God in pure love.

I have heard people say, "But if we pray like that, how will we live? After all, we are not disembodied souls floating in empty space. We have so many needs to attend to in our present condition." I answer their question with another question: "Do you think God is a miser? If you simply pray to God, `I want You and You alone, for You are the true and only shelter of my life," do you think He will neglect you in any way?" After all, God is a person--the greatest, kindest, gentlest, most loving and most beautiful person. What endears us to the people we know? Is it our friendship, or our demands of them? Obviously, if

you are a friend to someone and he is a friend to you, he will naturally want to help you in so many ways. But if you pester someone, "give me this, give me that," without showing any true feeling for him as a person, he'll not be pleased with your company.

What we Vaishnavas call "material religion" is based upon this pestering process. What we call "spiritual religion" is based upon love. Spiritual prayer is the echo within our hearts of the original Voice of Pure Devotion, which cries out for Her Lord in the acute anxiety of separation.

"O Govinda (Krishna)! Feeling Your separation, I am considering a moment to be like twelve years or more. Tears are flowing from my eyes like torrents of rain, and I am feeling all vacant in the world in Your absence."

This is another beautiful prayer composed by Sri Caitanya. There is a transcendental mystery to His identity. He appeared in this world as a *sannyasi*, a wandering ascetic. In fact, He is Radha-Krishna Themselves, Who mix together in loving ecstasy as one person stricken by the deepest of divine emotions. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu gave the world the simplest and most sublime formula for prayer: the Hare Krishna Mahamantra, which expresses the essence of all pure religion: "Oh my Lord Krishna, Oh Hare, Energy of the Lord, kindly engage me in your blissful service." The Hare Krishna Mahamantra is chanted thusly:

Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare

Each of us individual souls are the property of the Divine Couple, Radha and Krishna. We are meant only for Their pleasure (*rama*). That is the true meaning of our existence, and that meaning is revealed by the Voice of Pure Devotion, which is expressed in this world as the Vedic scriptures, the essence of which is the Hare Krishna Mahamantra. By Vedic scriptures, I do not mean simply a canon of religious texts from India. I mean the record of all the prayers of all pure devotees of all time and places whose motive was only love for God. All these saintly persons adhere to the *logos*, the Vac, the revealed word of God that cries out for Him and Him alone.