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THE NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER: FAIR OR FOUL?

by Kim Cole

On Thursday, May 2, 2002 believers all over the nation will gather to celebrate their faith through public prayer. There will be rallies, picnics, and speeches, but more than anything else, prayer. Theoretically, any religious observer with a belief in prayer is welcome to join in, but of course the different religions and denominations will each have their separate celebrations.

Perhaps you wonder what is wrong with this faith-filled gathering. Nothing, in and of itself. The religious, of course, are entitled to freedom of assembly the same as anyone else. The problem comes when you consider the nature of these gatherings, and who has declared them.

By both local and federal officials, May 2 has been declared a National Day of Prayer. Proclamations have been issued by the governor of the State of Oklahoma, Frank Keating, and also by the President himself, George Bush Jr. That's right. The highest officials of our state and our country have stepped forward to officially declare that Americans should take time out of their day on May 2 to pray.

The full text of these proclamations can be found online at NationalDayofPrayer.org. This is the National Day of Prayer site which, by the way, supports only those groups which agree with its interpretation of what Christianity is. (continued on next page)

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PRAYER – IS IT GOOD?

by Noam D. Plume

May is upon us, bringing with it all the attendant joys and resplendent beauty of an Oklahoma Spring. The sun shines brightly in cloudless blue skies, flowers bloom in the wake of the copious April rainstorms, yellow dandelion patches make quiltwork of our lovely green lawns, and our various arboreal flora cast their seed far and wide in hopes of finding fertile ground. What better time to glory in the awe and majesty of the natural world?

Of course, many people will inevitably feel the need to give thanks to a personal being in such circumstances, just as our primitive ancestors were compelled to anthropomorphize the various forces of nature, making gods out of wind, rain, earth, and fire. It is perhaps fitting, then, that those who encourage belief in and reliance upon the supernatural have chosen this particular month to proclaim and celebrate an annual, national day of prayer. (cont. on page 3)

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Let's take a look at some selected passages. Keating's proclamation includes great enduring pieces of wisdom, such as "...eminently fitting and proper that we ... acknowledge our many blessings, and express gratitude for them while recognizing the need for the strengthening of religious and moral values in our land..." It may seem fitting for some, perhaps, but by no means for all. And let's not forget, "... it is appropriate to turn to God for spiritual faith, guidance, support and healing..." Appropriate. Well, I guess you can just call me inappropriate. Finally, "... the power of prayer provides hope and light to give each of us a sense of spiritual fulfillment..." I don't get a sense of spiritual fulfillment from prayer; I get a sense of wasted time and wasted energy.

I don't know about you, but I'm feeling a little left out here. Is this a government official speaking, or a Sunday School teacher? Do we truly feel that a proclamation of this type really embodies the concepts of a religion-neutral government? Or do we feel that we basically have an Oklahoma governor endorsing his ideas of religion?

Well, let's take a look at the Presidential proclamation. Do we think that perhaps Bush will be a little better, and realize that he's standing at a presidential podium and not a pulpit? Not likely. "Since our Nation's founding, Americans have turned to prayer for inspiration, strength, and guidance." Well, some Americans have, anyway. "Especially since September 11...We have all seen God's great faithfulness to our country." We *all* have? What I've seen is terrorism, knee-jerk reactions, a lot of dead people, and sad survivors.

It gets better, though. Bush goes on to say, "We give thanks for our families and loved ones, for the abundance of our land and the fruits of labor, for our inalienable rights and liberties, and for a great Nation that leads the world in efforts to preserve those rights and liberties." Oh. Okay, more of that 'Christian nation' junk. Religion has nothing to do with our rights and liberties.

It is our secular, religiously neutral government that has allowed us this degree of freedom. A pity the man in charge of that government doesn't seem to realize that. "I urge all our citizens to join in observing this day with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities." I guess those of us who aren't willing to observe prayer (since we don't believe in it) are either inappropriate or not good citizens.

Okay, putting aside for a moment the infuriating remarks given by our Governor and our President, let's look at whether they really have the right to engage in this particular practice at all. If you're saying to yourself that this is not a law requiring prayer, you are correct. But, does the first Amendment mean only that they cannot require religious practices, or that the government is not to endorse religion at all?

To decide this, let's look at a few sources. Let's look at the first portion of the First Amendment itself. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" Okay. So we know the government cannot make laws establishing religion, or limit its exercise. Fair enough. But is this all the First Amendment was intended to do?

Thomas Jefferson seems to indicate that there might be more to it than that. In his letter to the Danbury Baptists, he states, "that the legislative powers of the government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and State." If, as Jefferson says, the government is concerned with actions and not opinion, why then do we have our highest government officials lauding opinions in favor of prayer? Whether people engage in an action of prayer is certainly far beyond the scope of government's civil interest.

National Day of Prayer... (continued)

You may ask what the Supreme Court has to say on the issue, since they are the legislative body entrusted with interpreting our Constitution. In *Santa Fe Independent School District V. Doe* (2000), the Court ruled that school prayer over the intercom at school sponsored events was unconstitutional, even when a student chosen by the his/her peers spoke the prayer. The reasoning was that this practice involved an unconstitutional endorsement of religion by the school. Court ruling after ruling has used the phrase, "unconstitutional endorsement of religion", saying that it was or was not occurring. There seems to be little question that the Supreme Court believes in the principal. Are then our highest government officials to be held

to a lower standard than the principle of a school?

It may be possible to make an argument that the proclamations cited above do not actually break the wall of separation. But at the very least they are weakening it, stretching it beyond its usual conception. They create divisiveness, not just between believers and non, but between different types of believers. Even if the law has not been broken (and I tend to believe it has), these proclamations do more harm than good, enforcing the "us against them" mentality that is so prevalent today. In fact, the proclamations remind me of my older brother when we were children, waving his hand inches from my face and chanting, "I'm not touching you!" Funny, that never seemed to stop him from getting in trouble.



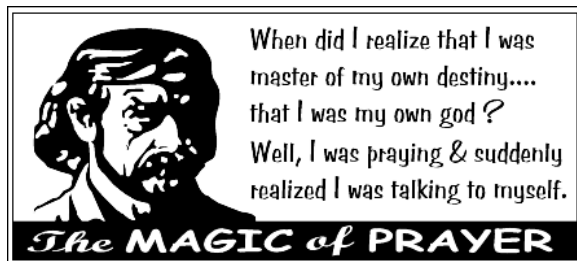
Prayer – Is it good? (continued from front page)

Across the country on the first Thursday of May, devout believers will gather to pray for this nation. In our own hometowns, in churches and public parks all around us, they will gather. Certainly these folk enjoy every right to do as they please, regardless of whether our national leaders have acted morally (or legally) in their endorsement of an annual religious celebration. But while we must respect their freedom of religion, we may nevertheless ask ourselves, "Is prayer good?"

I mean, really, is it good? Bad? Indifferent? We unbelievers obviously do not think it *effective* in yielding a supernatural response, but there is more to prayer than simply asking God for personal favors. Is it just another waste of time and effort, like daytime television? Or does it actually have certain deleterious or beneficial effects?

We have all seen various studies purporting to show the benefits of prayer, from easing stress and lowering blood pressure to aiding in the healing process. I'll leave the detailed debunking of such work to the fine folks at the

skeptical society and CSICOP. However, I will ask this, what sociologists or psychologists have dared to pursue studies into the *negative* effects of prayer on emotional and mental health? The deliberate subjugation of the conscious self to an imaginary figure of impossible power and unfathomable will, the endless and vicious cycle of unwarranted guilt and humiliating confession, the crushing disappointment of falsely elevated hopes as they come crashing down – surely this pattern of behavior resembles psychological illness far more than well-being.



Now I am not in any position to comment on other people's faiths or the content of their prayers, but I will happily share some of my personal experience, growing up as a Southern Baptist right here in Oklahoma City. We were instructed to pray every day, in conjunction with Bible reading, for around a quarter to half an hour, this period was referred to euphemistically as our "quiet time." After ruminating upon the (church-approved) interpretation of a (carefully selected) biblical passage, we prayed in four phases: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

Adoration involved telling God just what a wonderful fellow he is, and how much you really, really like him. Monty Python perhaps captured it best in *The Meaning of Life*, "Oh Lord, you are so big, so absolutely huge, gosh we're all really impressed down here, I can tell you. Forgive us, O Lord, for this dreadful toadying and barefaced flattery, but you are so strong and, well, just so super...fantastic. Amen."

Now aside from the fact that it seems fairly pathetic to bow worshipfully before your imaginary friend, such behavior is disturbing. Even if we consider this from the theistic point

of view, why in all the heavens would an all powerful creator care about what *we* think of him? Can he be that terribly egotistical? Does he require emotional validation? I suppose so, if we are to take the first commandment at face value.

At least we can say something positive about this first aspect of Christian prayer, and that is that the petitioner is practicing (albeit on an imaginary figure) an emotional state (extreme devotion and reverential respect) which has *some* proper place in our lives, such as the love of a child for its mother, or in my case a husband for his wife.

Confession, on the other hand, involves a groveling (preferably in dust and ashes) before God in hopes that he will forgive your sins. Again, Monty Python captures the essence of the petitioner's thoughts, "Oh Lord, please don't burn us, don't grill or toast your flock, don't put us on the barbecue, or simmer us in stock, don't braise or bake or boil us, or stir-fry us in a wok. Please don't lightly poach us, or baste us with hot fat, don't fricassee or roast us, or boil us in a vat, and please don't stick thy servants Lord, in a Rotissomat..."

Now this parody may be a *little* over the top, especially for devout Calvinists who tend to see themselves as indubitably saved (and infidels as hopelessly depraved). Nevertheless, the essence of confessional prayer is to plead mercy and forgiveness for a host of imagined transgressions, such as being aroused at the sight of Britney Spears, being angry at the fellow who stole your Pogs™, or laughing at lewd and blasphemous jokes on *The Simpsons*. We have no need of an advanced degree to confidently claim that living with such gratuitous and incessant guilt is psychologically unhealthy. In my own experience, it was emotionally crippling, especially for adolescent youths.

Thanksgiving, quite naturally, involves thanking God for all of life's blessings, from the shirt on one's back (Hecho en Mexico) to the food on one's plate (raised and slaughtered on lands formerly belonging to rainforests). Now we're all keen on gratitude, when well-placed, but it

would seem silly to thank someone else for those things which one has earned for themselves, or had given to them by other humans. I was raised to thank the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus for every meal, but never to thank my parents for earning and cooking it. How very silly is that?

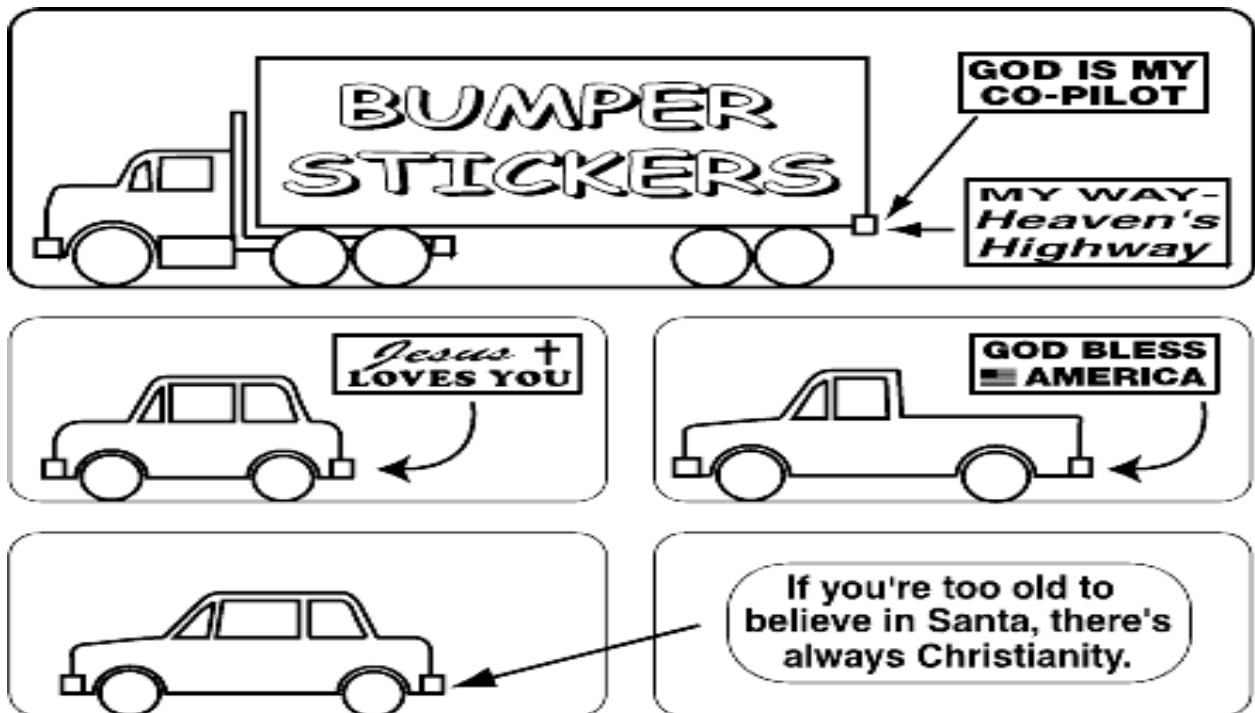
By displacing gratitude that one should feel for one's fellow humans and pride that one ought to feel in one's own accomplishments, and turning it all into gratitude directed at an impossibly powerful and inordinately frightening imaginary being, this aspect of Christian prayer robs its practitioners of full and healthy relationships and self-image.

Supplication is the final phase of a good evangelical prayer, and it basically consists of asking God for favors for oneself and for others. If this really worked, we unbelievers would have the hospitals entirely to ourselves, we would be the only ones needing them since accidents and sickness would not befall the praying saints. Of course, it is doubtful that there would be any unbelievers left, between the constant miracles wrought by prayer and the believers praying for our salvation.

Yes, they pray for our salvation. They pray that God will show us the light, that we may avoid being eternally tortured at his hands. They do not pray that God will have mercy upon us in the hereafter (such would be blasphemous) but rather that he will somehow change our minds.

In reality, of course, such prayers have no effect. In spite of their entreaties, family and friends become injured, take ill, and even die. Sometimes they perish without first being "born again," thus leaving the believer in anguish over the state of their "eternal soul" (whatever that is supposed to be). All in all, believers routinely face great and unnecessary disappointment as a result of false hopes raised in prayer.

What then should we say about prayer, as a whole? There is little to commend it which cannot be achieved in silent meditation or else empathetic conversation with an actual human being. On the other hand, there is much to condemn it. All too often, it goes well beyond mere uselessness into the realm of psychological self-abuse. Accordingly, it may truly and profoundly be said that, indeed, "Nothing fails like prayer."



National Day of Prayer

"As a nation, bend your knees,"
They say, "It's time to pray."
But since I do not believe,
Who shall I speak to today?

This is no Christian nation
Unless you claim, my friend,
That the deists, Muslims, Jews,
And co. are Christian within.

This country does not belong
To you, and not to me.
Our country was founded to
Be a free plurality.

So now our officials must
Be brave and stand up tall
They were elected not to
Speak just for one, but for all.

Not to take the part of one
And throw the rest aside.
We have made all men equal
Or at the least, we have tried.

It is time for all of us
To stand up and say, "No!"
This Day of Prayer is no way
For a free country to go.

Religion from government
Is divisive, it's true.
Atheists and agnostics,
We deserve their respect too.

Kim Cole
April 29, 2002

Parting Thoughts on the Efficacy of Prayer by Day "Me In Fine" Heart

The common theistic defense of prayer may be expressed compactly in the cliché found on altogether too many bumper stickers and church placards throughout our state, "God answers prayer."

Oh, does he? If God answers prayer, one might expect the occasional, well, answers. Even though there were (*contra* Kathleen Parker) plenty of atheists in the planes which crashed into New York and D.C. on September 11th, you could probably make a safe bet that most of the theists (devout or not) were praying their hearts out.

Any yet, no giant hand emerged from the clouds to catch the planes before they crashed. The terrorists were not suddenly overtaken by plagues of frogs, locusts, boils, and other such nastiness found throughout the religious literature as "plagues of God." Neither were they stricken with sudden strokes, embolisms, ulcers, fainting spells or any of the other crippling maladies that (an alleged) God sees fit to visit upon innocent humans throughout the world. Even something as benign as severe muscle cramps or debilitating gas might have done the trick.

What do we call someone who would simply stand by and let these things happen? *Evil*.

So, if God exists, then it is not at all the friendly chap that so many seem to think. Atheism, then, is not *bad* news, it is *good* news. We humans are on our own to figure things out for ourselves, and it could be *far* worse.

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