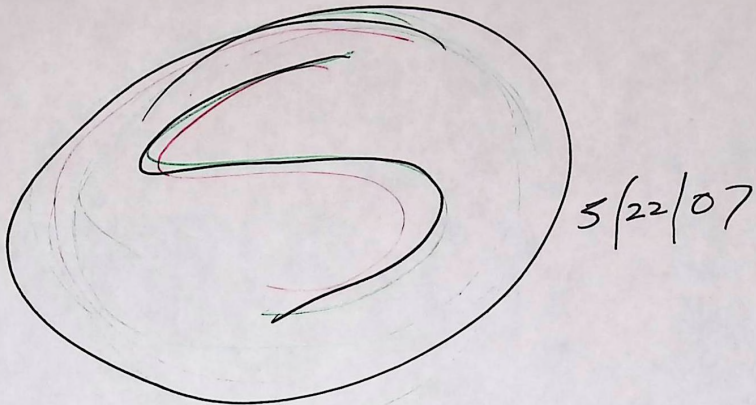




INTERVIEW ~~IX~~ X

ML: In earlier interviews you said you doubted the efficacy of prayer because most prayers were requests for personal gains or status; money, a job, a new car or what have you. I agree, but there is also a huge number of requests when people pray for guidance, for forgiveness, for strength to avoid sin. These types of prayers may exceed the grasping, greedy type. Who could say?

NM: I would agree. They do exceed it. But there is a natural assumption in humans that prayer is noble. In other words, if it isn't asking for something from God ... "God, how can I possibly, as me, my meek, humble self, how can I possibly help you because I wish to help you." This is seen as nobler

than saying, "I would really like an Impala." Ok, sure. But my point is that God may not pay great attention to prayer. Think of it as an immensely abused communication system which is overwhelmingly present in human affairs. I would suppose that God can pick up human messages without the need for prayer. I will admit that a prayer can have, on occasion, such vibrancy that God is cheered by it. But I would also say that most prayer is wasteful, and self indulgent, ^{an exercise in} ~~a species of~~ narcissism. Over the years, I've heard so many people say, "I'm praying for you." My reaction is, "Go fuck yourself." I don't need it. It's not helping. You're just invading my presence. So often it's no more than another petty human weapon. It could be well intended. They do care about you, they want to do the best they can for you. But do you really need to pray if that is the case? If they love you, then you are probably going to reap a benefit whether they pray for you or not.

ML: How?

NM: Through the warmth you receive from them. The honest warmth of their feeling rather than the oratorical "I'll pray for you."

ML: You feel that prayer is usually meretricious?

NM: Meretricious may be too strong a word. Ninety percent of prayer doesn't necessarily lead to anything. I think a lot of people pray in order to

intensify their sense of focus. What I don't like about prayer is the enormous baggage that goes with it, the stultification of society that is served by prayer; the number of mediocrities who pray for something that they know nothing about with a huge confidence that goes nowhere—you can see humungous examples of that on television every night, crowd-routers speaking of the efficacy of prayer while seizing every false advantage they can find.

ML: Static.

NM: Worse. I think the interception of prayer may be one of the Devil's most powerful instruments. Whenever a prayer is offered that is lacking whole integrity, the Devil ^{may} knows how to work ~~the crowd~~ ^{such a message}.

ML: Many religious people find solace in praying together. They believe that group prayer, at a religious service or in a group of people, is a more efficacious way of reaching the Lord. Now, the Lord may be too busy for a single cry for intercession, but he can hardly neglect a full house of prayers from, say, St. Peters, led by the pope on the Son's birthday. Quantity changes quality as you are forever saying.

NM: There is no question in my mind that St. Peter's would attract God's attention. Still, ^{we} ~~you~~ ^{enter} must ~~get~~ into the nature of the prayer. For example, ~~we~~ ^{is being raised} are right now, engaged in a war between Islam and ourselves. If there is a

particular phenomenon that characterizes Islam it is that they pray together five times a day. They put their ~~nose~~ ^{and forehead} to the ground, they raise their buttocks towards heaven and they pray. And we in the west look down on it. We, of course, consider that excessive. We don't necessarily believe that Allah is well intentioned. To us, he is an alien God. So, the fact that a number of people get together for such prayer, and have a community of opinion doesn't make them seem virtuous to us. For that matter, when a theater audience laughs as one, does that have any relation to prayer? To feel that one is part of a great group of people is reassuring regardless of the venue or the content. But whether prayer is beneficial to us is quite another matter. All over America there are now prayers to Christ for our soldiers in Iraq, whole communities praying that our soldiers don't run their Humvees over terrorist's explosives. Of course, you've also got Islamics praying just as powerfully and just as intently that their enemies will be wiped out by the same explosives.

ML: Why not also say that the people at St. Peters, may be praying for us to get out of that war.

NM: All right. Exactly. I believe there is a certain telepathic power that humans have. And with a thousand people together, or ten thousand, yes, the effect is magnified. But to assume it's magnified to good purpose is a

very large assumption. It could be magnified to an evil one. Usually it is magnified to a complex but not particularly pertinent purpose. Humans are skewed off the point all the time. America spent close to fifty years believing that Russia was the evil empire while all the time that ugly, cruel place was getting weaker and weaker and growing worse and worse and less capable of destroying us. We never saw them for what they were, a

~~Communist~~ ^(Communist) constipated economy, an over-ordered society, slow in development, and ^{in relation} ~~as~~ ^{to us, as} boastful as it was empty ^(beginning) ^(economic) in relation to us. Its secret desire was to ^{rise to} ~~acquire~~ ^{some level of} equality with us. It lacked the inner wherewithal to believe it could destroy us, and all the while ^{our anti-Sovietism served} ~~to serve~~ the needs of the American power-seekers. ^{as the Soviets} ~~we~~ kept the American public afraid of ~~them~~ as the Evil Empire.

ML: We were praying against it too. Praying for its collapse.

NM: We weren't praying for its collapse, we were praying for its absolute destruction. We were hoping that when a war came we would destroy the Russians before they would destroy us.

ML: But when we read in the newspapers about what was going on in Russia in the seventies and eighties and how grim it was, I'm sure a lot of people were saying, "The Lord is bringing the Russians to their knees."

NM: Well, now you have a great many people saying, “maybe the Lord will bring Islam to its knees.” Islam is saying, “Allah will bring the great Satan to its knees.” The notion that a country is holy or entirely evil, I find offensive.

ML: Right. Even in the Islamic world we know there is such a chasm between the Sunnis and the Shiites. Their detestation of each other is profound.

NM: They certainly outdo the old animosity between the Catholics and the Protestants.

ML: You’ve spoken about dreams being a contested field. That is, Divine and Demonic forces use dreams to send their messages to humans. If this is true, why can’t God and the Devil also communicate their messages to a mind seeking a line of communication with something transcendental. I assume you believe that humans can pray to the Devil as easily as the Lord.

NM: Unwittingly. Let me put it this way, I think that people who believe in the Devil have ceremonies which are not exactly prayer, but invocations. There is a fundamental belief in magical groups, which is curious if you think about it, that you don’t reach the Devil by praying to him or her. You invoke him or her. Whereas in Christianity, certainly, the notion that you have such a ceremony to invoke God is considered dubious at best. The

only place it occurs is in the Mass during the substantiation of the wafer and the wine. Other than that, you pray to God, you don't invoke Him.

ML: Does your belief in Karma have anything to do with your less than enthusiastic feelings about prayer?

NM: I think I would say that if you live a life which is a little better, a little braver, a little more compassionate or responsible than what was expected of you, you may well be taken care of in your rebirth. This assumes that a foul-up in communication does not occur in reincarnation, but of that one can hardly be certain. In any event, let me argue that Karma is a substitute for prayer, a real and legitimate and profound substitute for prayer.

Nonetheless, I can see exceptional cases where a prayer is so beautiful and comes out of such depth in a human and has such inner resonance that divine attention is paid. But, I think such prayers are as rare as the work of a great artist. Let me add that you don't have to be an educated person to have a beautiful prayer. Such a prayer comes out of the depths of your experience and has a fine balance of perception and passion and forgiveness and true human need. All of those elements form an exceptional unity. We can understand a parent praying for the health of a sick child and find it honorable, and true whether the prayer is heard or not, honorable because of the intensity and focus of the love.

ML: You are arguing that if prayer is to be efficacious or to be heard at all it has to be all of those things you said, whole, pure and free of cynicisms.

NM: And free of buried motive, motive that is even concealed from one's self.

ML: The saints also have a role in prayer. The definition of a saint is...

NM: For Catholics.

JML: For Protestants too.

NM: It seems to me that Catholics have about five times as many saints as the Protestants. Is that true?

ML: Well, they do have saints. There are many that Episcopalians and Lutherans will recognize. Obviously, if there is a heaven and there are as many people up there as Christians think there are, there are untold numbers in heaven. However, to know for certain that someone is in heaven, that's the definition of a saint.

NM: Among Catholics? Literally?

ML: Literally. And Protestants too. I'm certain. So when you say, "Oh, he was a saint." Well, you'd say, "how do you know?" So when the Church says, this person is a saint...

NM: The Protestant's saints?

ML: Oh, yes.

NM: Who are the Baptist saints?

ML: I think among fundamentalists you almost never hear about saints.

NM: Jesus is their all-purpose saint. God, Archangel, Saint, law-giver, and ^{cheer-leader} coach all in one. I suspect that the mental and spiritual benefits some good honest people receive from referring in their thoughts to a particular saint comes because that helps to bring some kind of focus to their existence.

Yes, thinking about saints helps them to focus. That is one more reason that the church didn't last two thousand years for too little but, not being a Catholic, I also feel that the distortions of existence which also accompany Catholicism are immense. I am not, however, going to say that the Church has not been good for a good many people in a good many ways, but it has also stomped upon human imagination. So I would go so far as to say that Catholicism ultimately may be stultifying to God. And is half possessed by the Devil. I would say as much for any other religion. I don't need Catholicism ^{to be} the villain. All organized religions are, in that sense, ^{to separate us from a closer sense of} obfuscations upon the nature of God.

ML: But you have talked about God's involvement in some of the great religions over the years.

NM: How not. How not? How about the Devil's involvement? There they are, fighting it out in all the alleys of religion. There is not a seminary in the

world of whatever persuasion where you don't have God and the Devil working day and night right down into the acolyte's genitals—the temptations, the agonies, the repressions, the wonders. How many fine seminarians have to wonder finally whether they are working for God or the Devil?

Can one even be a fine seminarian w. that some concern over that.

ML: To conclude—can you begin to explain why so many people do pray? ~~Not~~

NM! The act is obviously cleansing for a good many. It requires some concentration on what is one's greatest need at the moment and for one's greatest hope. It can encourage modesty in men and women who are vain, and perhaps even inspire the courage in ^{a few} those who are afraid to ask for more in the fear that their wish might be granted. Prayer can ^{also} enable one to come ^{closer} ~~close~~ to what is most awful in oneself. Prayer can offer the only solace available when grief is overwhelming. All of those positive elements can be present. What I distrust, however, is the notion that prayers will certainly be heard and will prove efficacious. Believe in that as a fact and one is back in the depth of century-old superstitions that left our minds circling endlessly around the same empty tracks.