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A Muslim Response to Christian Prayer

Caner Dagli

I can recall that on one occasion my mother, a pious Muslim who grew up in a town in central Anatolia in Turkey, asked her professor son the basic question, "Do Christians pray to Jesus?" with a tone of puzzlement and, it must be said, impending disapproval. Her difficulty stemmed from thinking about her own daily prayers and supplications to God—forehead on the ground or hands raised towards the heavens--and what it would be like to direct those prayers to Jesus. For any Muslim, the substance of prayer consists in gratitude for blessings bestowed, repentance for wrongs committed, petitions for good in this world and the Hereafter, and glorification and remembrance. These pillars of prayer and devotion, for the typical Muslim, approach something like self-evidently good ideas that are uncomplicated and direct. My mother knew enough about Christianity to know there is this idea of the Trinity, and that it involves something about Jesus being the Son of God or Jesus being God, and in her own mind she put these ideas together with her own understanding of what makes prayer prayer and came up with that sincere question, "Do Christians pray to Jesus?"

What she said was hardly ever absent from my mind as I thought about how to approach writing a Muslim response to Christian prayer. The answer I gave her then, and which I would still give now, is no, Christians do not pray to Jesus in the way that Muslims pray to God when they stand and bow for the *ṣalāt* or raise their hands in supplication, nor do they say or believe, for example, that Jesus *as such* created the heavens and the earth. I told her that when Christians pray to God, they really are praying to God, to one God. But when Christians talk about God, they do say that He is triune, and that Jesus is the son of God, and God incarnate, and to a Muslim this is already and necessarily a tension.

For me the answer to the general question, "To whom do Christians pray?" and by extension, "How do Christians pray?" is, from the Muslim point of view, a complex one. The most important reason for this is that the Qur'ān, the basis for any Muslim's theological position, provides a picture of Christianity that is often misunderstood, and which is more nuanced and complex then many commentators and theologians—both Christian and Muslim—seem to give it credit for. It is clear that the Qur'ān does not render just one judgment about Christians, neither always condemning them nor always praising them.

For example, if we were to ask what the Qur'ān says about monks, we would come across 5:82 which reads: "And you will find the nearest of them in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, 'We are Christians.' That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant."[1] But in 9:34 we read: "O you who believe! Verily many of the rabbis and monks consume the wealth of people falsely, and turn from the way of God. [As for] those who hoard gold and silver and spend it not in the way of God, give them glad tidings of a painful punishment." The complexity is perhaps evidenced most clearly in a single verse regarding Christian

[1] Translations from the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth are my own, drawing on various versions.

monasticism, 57:27: "Then We sent Our messengers to follow in their footsteps, and We sent Jesus Son of Mary and We gave him the Gospel and placed mercy and kindness in the hearts of those who follow him. And monasticism they invented—We did not ordain it for them—only to seek God's contentment. Yet they did not observe it with proper observance. So We gave those of them who believed their reward, yet many of them are iniquitous." This complexity comes out in the facts that 1) God characterizes followers of Christ as being kind and merciful; 2) Christians themselves, not God, ordained monasticism; 3) monastic practice was originally well intentioned, but Christians were not faithful to it (by which some commentators understand the introduction of the Trinity); 4) there was in fact a right way (*ḥaqq riʿāyatihi*) to be a monk; and 5) some of these who practice monasticism have a reward, while others are iniquitous.

Finally, in light of all this, we still read in 2:62 (and a similar verse at 5:69): "Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve." There are many more relevant passages of the Qur'ān which I could cite, but for my purposes here it is enough to say that I view all of the Qur'ān's statements about Christians--in the framework of the Qur'ān's description of sacred history, sectarian disagreement, and uncompromising monotheism--as variations of two underlying principles: first, that for Christians who believe in God and perform righteous deeds, "no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve"; and second, that Christians utter *kufr* or unbelief when they say that Jesus was the Son of God or that he is God, and when they worship Jesus and Mary as gods. That is, I understand the Qur'ān to be saying that the Christians worship well but have terrible ideas. The challenge of approaching Christian worship and devotion is that these two principles or axioms exist in a kind of tension.

This basic distinction that the Qur'ān makes in its treatment of Christians and Christianity, and which can serve as a reliable basis for which to compose a Muslim response to Christian prayer, is the difference between devotional attitudes on the one hand and metaphysical propositions on the other. It is the difference between how one encounters God and how one describes God, and the Qur'ān generally praises Christians in their devotion to God, while generally condemning them for their theology. It is within this framework, this tension, that I would like to explore some aspects of Christian worship and prayer from the point of view of a Muslim believer.

The Sacraments

Distinguishing between what one might call the theological background and the devotional foreground can be helpful when thinking carefully about Islam and Christianity. It is usually said that Islam has no sacraments. But it certainly has rituals that seem to have some overlap with what would be called sacraments in the Christian context--if not in their precise form, then in the attitude or posture one takes in performing them. Muslims tend to conceptualize the Christian sacraments against the backdrop of a drastic distinction between the sacred and the profane, between what is spiritual and merely natural. This impression is often reinforced by the limited number of "sacraments" which act as conduits of divine grace, and also by statements such as, "Give unto Caesar

what is Caesar's" and the Christian doctrine of original sin and the Fall; it is also exacerbated by the general lack of understanding by Muslims of the theological explanations of the sacraments. Moreover, there is a problem here of terminology. What are called "sacraments" in the West are in the East called "mysteries" (from the Greek *mystērion*), a more fluid term not restricted to the seven sacraments but also including, for example, the Incarnation itself. Indeed, posing a question using the word "sacrament" already has the potential to leave out too much and lead to misunderstanding.

The Christian sacraments or "sacred mysteries" operate within a universe that is determined by the Christian view of the fallen state of human beings and the special manner in which they stand in need of God's grace, and because Muslims conceive of this fallen state and its remedies differently, there is often an assumption made, by both Muslims and Christians, that Islam has no sacraments. Also, because in Islam there is no priesthood and no church hierarchy, and because sacraments are typically (though not in all Christian traditions) administered through them, Muslims again will usually say there are no sacraments in Islam, and that Islam is not a sacramental religion.

My contention is that a Muslim can have a more positive appreciation of the sacraments than is typically afforded by conceiving of "sacraments" as a distinctively Christian feature of religion. To be sure there are decisive differences between the theological and metaphysical apparatus surrounding these acts of worship in Christianity and their counterparts within Islam, but I believe we can understand the similarities and differences in liturgy and ritual between the two religions if we do not insist on categories such as "sacramental" and "non-sacramental".

After all, Christians describe a sacrament or sacred mystery as consisting of 1) an outward sign (the form), and 2) inward grace, that is 3) instituted by God. This latter is crucial, because it distinguishes mysteries of the special kind from the general mysteries of the world as God's creation expressing His wisdom and power.

If we take the Christian definition of sacrament or "sacred mystery," and keep to these essentials, it turns out to be a decent rough-and-ready description of the Five Pillars--the canonical prayer, the fast, the pilgrimage, the alms. If one message comes out from reading the Qur'ān, it is that everything God created is a sign conveying a grace (we would say *baraka* or blessing), some being natural and others most certainly being instituted specifically by God. When I reflect upon the central practices of Islam as "sacraments," to my mind the description seems to fit--so long as we hold firm to the conception of 1) an outward sign 2) having an inward blessing or grace 3) instituted by God.

I know, in my own spiritual universe, what it is like to a believer to gravitate towards *baraka*, and that believers automatically conceive of some kind of inward element, often thought of as angelic support, that flows through the rites. In a ḥadīth the Prophet said that God says, "My servant continues to approach Me with voluntary devotions until I love him, and when I love him I am the eye by which he hears, the eye by which he sees, the hand by which he grasps, and the foot by which he walks."

My remarks about the sacraments are more of an appreciation than anything else, since space and time do not allow me to address each of them individually. What I would like to point out is that the specifically Christian notion of what it means to be fallen, and the transformation these sacraments or mysteries are meant to effect, seem to be a major part of what makes Christian sacraments opaque and well-nigh impenetrable to Muslims, and it may be part of what masks the spiritual ambience of Islamic rites to some Christians. That is to say, if we get too lost in the respective theologies and hierarchies, we can lose sight of the obvious similarities in that actual moment and experience of prayer and ritual--when an infant is baptized and a father recites the *adhān* into his newborn's ear, when a Christian receives the Eucharist and a Muslim recites the Qur'ān, holy orders and the bestowal of the Sufi cloak, not to mention matrimony.

The Lord's Prayer

Though I could have structured my entire talk as a Muslim response to the Lord's Prayer, the *Pater Noster*, I would like to focus on two of its themes: fatherhood and forgiveness.

The words "Our Father" already seem to complicate the plain sense of Trinitarian doctrine, since Christ is not the Son of God the way that Christ describes believers as being sons and daughters of God in Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." Commentators upon the Lord's Prayer (from Tertullian and Origen through Calvin and Luther to the Catholic Catechism) are placed in the position of elucidating how the "Our" spoken by believers in the "Our Father" does not change the "My" of "My Father" when spoken by Christ. In reading these meditations and explanations of the Lord's Prayer a Muslim reader such as myself is somewhat frustrated in not finding clearer solutions to the problem of equivocality when one encounters "Father" in the prayerful statement "Our Father," and when one reads it in what might be called the metaphysical statement, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). By equivocality I mean that the word "father" is not said univocally in these two instances, as when one says "man" of both Socrates and Plato, and neither is it a homonym, as when one speaks of the "bank" of money and the "bank" of a river. As they might say in Islamic philosophy, it lies between synonymy and homonymy.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān the theologian Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī notes that the appellation "father" must have originally denoted priority, authority, and love, not unlike the description of God as "Lord" or "King", and on this score he sees no irreconcilable problem with it, but in his view it then became exaggerated to the point of being a theologically untenable limitation of God, being bound up with the Incarnation and the Trinity.[2] It does seem significant to me that in this central prayer--taught to believers by Christ--the Father is the kind of father even an Ashʿarite theologian like Rāzī would be able to pray to. One feels a tension between the doctrine bound up in the phrase "God the Father" and the natural attitude expressed in the prayer, "Our Father who art in Heaven." So to register a Muslim puzzlement on the matter: when a believer

[2] Please add reference for Razi comments.

says, "Our Father" in the *Pater Noster*, is it closer to the Father as Rāzī conceives of it, or is it closer to being the Father of the Nicene Creed? When one is actually praying, what does it actually mean to call God Father?

Later in the Lord's Prayer we find the petition, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." In a Muslim's mind, a prayer for forgiveness is a hope that God will consider one to be forgiven, that He will show compassion and mercy and not take us to task for everything we have done. A Muslim knows that for a Christian forgiveness is bound up totally with Jesus' experience on the cross, but also beyond that with baptism, and moreover is intimately related to concepts such as justification and sanctification. Taking all this into account, and trying to capture the spirit of my mother's question, I would ask: when a Christian prays for forgiveness, what is he or she praying *will happen*? I formulate it in this way to highlight that, from the outside looking in, the economy of forgiveness, of getting right with God, of being reconciled—however one formulates it—seems complex and difficult to capture in a single insight.

For example, one has difficulty in juxtaposing the direct, intuitive forgiveness that seems to be described and hoped for in the Lord's Prayer, with the various versions of atonement, whether it be the ransom theory, penal substitution, or variations thereof. I am not here trying to decode or decide between these theories; rather I am trying to understand how, in the actual articulation of the Lord's Prayer and the petition for forgiveness, these theories (so intimately bound up with the central doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation) actually guide and provide substance to the supplication for forgiveness in the moment of worship. The analogy that is bound up in this petition—"as we also have forgiven our debtors"—announces to my mind a certain simplicity of act: I know what it is like to forgive another human being, and it does not seem easily modelled on any of the mainstream theories of atonement (except perhaps that of Abelard, the moral influence theory). The plain sense of the Lord's Prayer strikes one as limpid and straightforward, providing a kind of commentary upon itself when it reads, "...as we also have forgiven our debtors." Often in the commentaries upon this particular verse of the Lord's Prayer one is directed to Luke 6:37 – "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" – and Matthew 18:21–22: "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'"

Christian theology and devotion in Qur'ānic perspective

It is now worth reconsidering, in light of this discussion of Christian worship and devotion, some significant Qur'ānic passages related to Christian theology and devotion. These are 5:116: "And when God said, "O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, "Take me and my mother as gods besides God?" and 5:73: "They certainly disbelieve, those who say, "Truly God is the third of three," while there is no god save One God."

I would not be the first to see the possibility that the statement "Take me and my mother as gods" does not have to be interpreted as some version of a doctrinal Trinity, but as a subjective association of objects of worship with God. Still, it is commonly thought that somehow the Qur'ān got the Trinity wrong here, or that this is referring to

a long-dead sect that did in fact worship this Trinity of God, Jesus, and Mary. The same is often said of the statement "God is the third of three", again interpreted to be a misunderstanding or perhaps a record of a way of describing Jesus that was common in Syriac at the time the Qur'ān was revealed. To me it is important to note that this verse critiques the assertion that "God", not "the Father", is the third of three. "God" is not the third of three for Christians; rather God is the three. I interpret "God is the third of three" as I do the taking of Jesus and Mary as gods beside God: as describing an attitude of worship that the Islamic perspective cannot accept.

To my mind one key to interpreting these verses has always been 9:31: "They have taken their rabbis and monks as lords apart from God, as well as the Messiah, son of Mary, though they were only commanded to worship one God." No Christian theology places monks as objects of worship, and the grouping together of monks and Christ in this verse shows that what is at stake is an attitude, the orientation of the soul in the act of worship, not a matter of official theology. Is there any doubt that in the economy of Christian devotion there is a kind of devotional Trinity of God, Jesus, and Mary, which is not coterminous with the doctrinal Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit? Who receives prayers and devotions in the Christian tradition, if not these three and in this order? From the Islamic perspective, when the veneration of Jesus and Mary go too far, God--and not the Father of the Trinity--becomes the third of three objects of worship.

I favor reading these verses as being critiques of the actual devotional posture of some Christians because elsewhere (4:171) the Qur'ān does provide a head-on critique of Christian theology: "O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor utter anything concerning God save the truth. Verily the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and His Word, that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not "Three." Refrain! It is better for you." This is, to my mind, as direct an indication that the theology is at question, not the practice. The bare and unqualified command "say not 'Three'" does not implicate the devotional life of Christians or their acts of worship, drawing attention to what they say, not what they do, and does so in a remarkably gentle fashion.

The issue at hand is that a mainstream Christian does not view Trinitarian theology and Christology as theological afterthoughts to their encounter with God in prayer, to be toyed with in an armchair after the serious business is done. Rather, the Trinity is what God is, and one really cannot come to the Father but through the Son, who is God incarnate. A Muslim will wait in vain for the Christian to say that "Father" and "Holy Spirit" are just different names for God. They are not. And this is what leaves Muslims often baffled when looking closely at both Christian ritual life and Christian doctrine together. It leads people like my mother to ask, "Do Christians pray to Jesus?"

To the Muslim soul, the actual encounter between a human being and God, the attitude of devotion, the resolve to a life of virtue, are realities which converge upon a unity that is not analyzable or divisible into a conceptual trinity, and the Christian Trinity is, no matter how formulated, a conceptual three-ness since the minimum definition has at least three ideas in it, actually more because their relation must also be taken into account.

While Muslims famously attribute to God many Names, these are Attributes of one Object. When I bring my attention upon another human being, my wife for example, with all her attributes and actions, I am conceiving of her as a single person with those attributes. But the hypostases of Christian theological discourse are not attributes or names of a single essence. The "three" of the Trinity does not collapse or get transcended in mainstream Christian theology. And so the Muslim wonders how or whether Christians address themselves to three persons in prayer, or to one of three, and if so, how?

When an activity becomes most human and spiritual and most alive it converges on simplicity—a simplicity of the whole, not of the part. When we first play a musical instrument, we necessarily visualize our actions as a sequence of motions, and as an aggregate of parts. When we achieve true mastery, this complexity becomes a simplicity. We no longer see ten different fingers on white and black keys, each key with a separate name and sound. We see an inseparable whole. In prayer, from the Muslim point of view, the conceptual oneness we ascribe to the object of our worship can accompany us, as it were, along every level of prayer and contemplation until we leave off the level of ideas and enter into pure contemplation or silence. But a Muslim has difficulty understanding how the conceptual non-unity of the Trinitarian idea ever becomes simple. That is, as we focus our attention and our heart upon God, does not the relationality of the three Persons have to give way to the immediacy and simplicity of the I-Thou encounter in prayer? And if so, does it not behoove the supplicant or worshipper to begin and end simply with that "Thou" and to conceive of It as simply as is possible? Is there not a hiatus from the three elements in the mind to the unity of the lived encounter, to the oneness of the actually existing experience that happens in prayer?

The Islamic attitude in prayer originates from the content and indeed the very form of *lā ilāha illā Allāh.* As a matter of prayerful meditation or meditational prayer, the formula, "No god but God," continuously wipes away all other objects of thought until one is left with only *Allāh*, and as the Sufis would say then the final *h* of *Allāh* and finally just the breath and the death of the soul. The idea of "one" comes with us at each step of that spiritual journey, right up to the point where we cannot or should not any longer think our thoughts. But it seems, from the outside, that the Trinity as an idea in the mind (again, not as a reality that is encountered) cannot come so far with us. It must stay behind as the human being's consciousness of God becomes increasingly simple and integrated.

Conclusion

I am not here trying to solve any metaphysical puzzles, or even to mount a critique of Christian theology from the Muslim perspective, but to convey what I think is a faithful Islamic response to and also appreciation of Christian worship. I base my reflections on what I think the Qur'ān literally says about Christians because I think that is the only legitimate starting point for a Muslim. My whole premise is that the Islamic attitude to this question is necessarily complex, because what the Qur'ān says about Christians is not simple or lacking in nuance. And in reading what the Qur'ān has to say, I have found

it most helpful to make a basic distinction between what human beings actually do in their souls when they worship or pray, and the intellectual and symbolic framework within which they situate those actions. I am not trying to disentangle them, because they are inseparable, like the dimensions of breadth and depth. But they are not the same thing, and they often exist in a state of tension. They usually do, in fact.

Postscript: evangelism as ritual

Though it does not fit neatly together with my foregoing remarks, I would also like to reflect briefly upon worship in the evangelical community, and here a Muslim is struck (indeed I believe most Muslims have not the slightest inkling of this) by the fact that worship and ritual share the same plane of priority with evangelism and sharing the good news. Muslims naturally relate to the devotional structure of Catholicism, Orthodoxy, or Anglicanism, which assume that preaching and conversion of others is a special vocation belonging to a select few. That is, Muslims easily conceive of a core of beliefs and practices, and although just and charitable behavior is part of that essential set of obligations, the specific imperative to find new converts and change the hearts of others is not thought of as an obligation upon every last believer. Rather, at a maximum it is a special vocation, and at a minimum one is called to be witness or human testimony to one's own faith by simply living it, leaving God to guide whomsoever He will.

The elevation of evangelism to what seems to be a core act of worship--one which a person cannot as a good Christian omit--does not, despite the facile assumptions made by some evangelicals, have any counterpart within the Islamic universe. You can find a certain current in the Muslim community who believe they have to justify their residence in so called non-Muslim lands by preaching Islam, but this stems more from a distorted understanding of Islamic political structure than from a theological conviction about the saving of souls. And naturally there exist many Muslims who, because of a spiritual imperative and inner drive, make part of their life the preaching of Islam to others in hope that they will become Muslim, or become better Muslims.

To be frank, I think the vast majority of Muslims are unaware of this elevation of evangelism to the rank of a central ritual, and assume that evangelicals situate the preaching of religion at a level of obligation akin to what one finds in Islam. From the outside looking in, this focus on what some have called "conversionism" has all the hallmarks of a sacrament or mystery: one does it as a kind of divine institution, one is guided or moved by the Spirit in doing so, where one's own person or the Gospel itself is the outward sign which conveys the inward grace that effects the conversion. It is hard to deny a certain ritual quality to the preaching that results from this conviction that the saving of souls is at the heart of religious obligation, which one may judge to be good or bad. I dwell upon it as part of a Muslim response to Christian worship and prayer because it is a dimension of Christian worship with which Muslims have to directly grapple as an ongoing matter, and it is not trivial. That Muslims are unaware that many of the Christians with whom they interact view their evangelism this way is of utmost significance.

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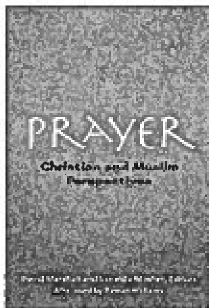
Table of Contents (#toc)
Reviews (#reviews)



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PRAYER
Christian and Muslim Perspectives
David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher, Editors
Afterword by Rowan Williams

Prayer: Christian and Muslim Perspectives is a rich collection of essays, scriptural texts, and personal reflections featuring leading scholars analyzing the meaning and function of prayer within their traditions. Drawn from the 2011 Building Bridges seminar in Doha, Qatar, the essays in this volume explore the devotional practices of each tradition and how these practices are taught and learned. Relevant texts are included, with commentary, as are personal reflections on prayer by each of the seminar participants. The volume also contains a Christian reflection on Islamic prayer and a Muslim reflection on Christian prayer. An extensive account of the informal conversations at the seminar conveys a vivid sense of the lively, penetrating, but respectful dialogue that took place.

David Marshall is director of the Anglican Episcopal House of Studies and associate professor of the practice of Christian-Muslim relations, Duke Divinity School and the academic director of the Building Bridges seminar.

Lucinda Mosher is the faculty associate for Interfaith Studies, Hartford Seminary and the assistant academic director of the Building Bridges seminar.

Reviews

"While many of the current interfaith projects are strictly theological in nature, *Prayer: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* breaks new ground by looking at what religious human beings all over the world do: pray. In learning about the rituals that gives shape to our deepest yearning and highest aspirations, we also come to grapple with how we see God, and our own true nature. Recommended for all who are interested in the Christian tradition, the Islamic tradition, and the dialogue between the two."—**Omid Safi**, professor of Islamic Studies, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill

Table of Contents

Participants

Introduction, *David Marshall*

Preface, *Rowan Williams*

Part I: Surveys
1. Lived Prayer: Some Examples from the Christian Tradition, *Michael Plekon*
2. A Qur'anic Theology of Prayer, *Reza Shah-Kazemi*
3. Muslim Prayer in Practice, *M. M. Dheen Mohamed*
4. Christian Prayer in Practice, *Philip Sheldrake*
5. A Muslim Response to Christian Prayer, *Caner Dagli*
6. A Christian Perspective on Muslim Prayer, *Daniel A. Madigan*
7. Response, *Rowan Williams*

Part II: Prayer and Scripture
8. The Lord's Prayer, *Susan Eastman*
9. Al-Fatiha, *Rkia Elraoui Cornell*
10. Prayer in the Spirit in Romans 8, *Philip Seddon*
11. In Reverence of the Almighty: Understanding Prayer and Worship in Qur'an 3:190-194 and 29:45, *Asma Afsaruddin*

Part III: Learning to Pray
12. Learning to Pray With and In the Christian Tradition: Personal Reflections, *Lucy Gardner*
13. Learning to Pray as a Muslim: The Foundational Stage, *Ibrahim Mogra*
14. Growing in Prayer as a Christian, *Timothy Wright*
15. Growth in Prayer as a Muslim: Reflections and Lessons of a Struggler, *Timothy J. Gianotti*
16. Conversations in Qatar, *Lucinda Mosher*

Afterword, *Rowan Williams*

Personal Reflections on Prayer

Index

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