

ON WHETHER GOD HEARS PRAYERS

Norman Mailer, who died in November, was one of the seminal novelists of the 20th century. He also had unconventional ideas about God, as his last book reveals

God may not pay great attention to most 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 narcissism.

Over the years, I've heard so many people say: "I'm praying for you." My reaction is: "I don't need it. It's not helping. You're just invading my presence." Often, it is 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 they really need to pray to make their feelings legitimate?

If they love you, then you are probably going to reap a benefit whether they try to talk to God or not — through the warmth you receive from them, the honest warmth of their feeling rather than the oratorical "I'll pray for you."

On bad prayer

Ninety per cent of prayer may not necessarily lead to anything. I think a lot of people pray in order to intensify their sense of focus. They are doing it for themselves.

What I don't like about prayer is the enormous baggage that goes with it, the stultification of society that is shored up by prayer, the number of mediocrities who pray for something that they know nothing about. You can see humongous examples of that on television every night, crowd-rousers invoking the holy efficacy of prayer while seizing every false advantage they can find, including — how not? — quick appeals for money.

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 know how to profit from such shoddy work.

On quantity of prayer

If there is a particular phenomenon that characterises Islam, it is how they pray together five times a day. They put their foreheads to the ground, they raise their buttocks toward heaven, and they pray. And we in the West look down on it. We tend to consider that kind-of-excessive. Moreover, 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 appear virtuous to us. To feel that one is part of a great group of people is reassuring, regardless of the occasion.

But whether prayer is beneficial 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 terrorists' 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.

On why so many people pray

The act is obviously cleansing for a good many. It requires some concentration on what is one's greatest need at the moment and what might be one's greatest hope. It can encourage modesty in men and women who are vain, and perhaps even inspire courage in a few.

Prayer can also enable one to come closer 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 on high and thereby 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 intellectual places. It's a mystery; so don't think about it. Be philosophical!

Norman Mailer gave these views in conversation with Michael Lennon, his literary executor. This is an edited extract from *On God: An uncommon conversation* (Continuum).