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Prayer and Our Image of God

Summary

The content of a curriculum for prayer education is being developed from a politico-theological perspective. One of the dimensions of this content is concerned with the five images of God: God as near, coming, biased, powerless and reconciling. Empirical research on the basis of this curriculum shows that the participants, after the treatment, have a significant increase in knowledge of and insight in these five images of God. The affective results vary for the different participants in this curriculum about prayer. This variety is being discussed in terms of the formation, conversion, accentuation, regression and neutralization of attitudes.

Every contribution to the development of theological theories, and a fortiori, every contribution to the development of pastoral theological theories, attempts to arrive at a clearer understanding not so much of God, nor of divine reality, but of man’s relation to this God, or to divine reality. Moreover, since pastoral theology places its peculiar accent on the theoretical development of pastoral care, that is, of care which is directed toward the spiritual guidance, formation, nurture, and support of people in the context of their current situation, the above statement applies to it in a special way. That means that from the outset, the (traditional) religious and faith-related values and concepts which occur in people’s lives play a central role in the development of theological theories.

For an investigation into the possible meaning of prayer, this means that it is difficult nowadays to speak of prayer without also taking into account the concrete situation of the prayer. This fact is particularly significant for the investigation on which this essay reports, since it relates less to human prayer itself than to the teaching of prayer. On this point, it seeks to make a contribution.
1. The Current Prayer Situation

In order to understand the investigative question, it is important to describe the current prayer situation. In the undeniable situation of a secularized world, the meaning and influence of religious institutions and symbols are on the wane, indeed are even disappearing (Berger 1967).

Religion is becoming ever more privatized, and this both on the structural-societal and cultural-societal level, as well as the structural-individual and the cultural-individual level (van Gerwen 1983). That means that religion is becoming ever more 'ecclesiasticalized' and is losing, or has already lost its overarching universal validity (on the structural- and cultural-societal level). This furthermore means that the participation of individuals in religious institutions is becoming ever more partial, and that religious experience and meaning is ever more forced to the periphery of peoples' consciousness, and therefore no longer fulfills its identity-forming and integrative function with respect to the person (structural- and cultural-individual level).

It is then no wonder that prayer is becoming, or already has become, problematic in this situation of secularization and privatization. There is currently not only the crisis of a specific theology of prayer, or specific formulas for prayer, but also the practice of prayer as such has fallen into crisis (Cornehl 1971). The self-evident meaning of prayer is becoming lost, or has already been lost. Not only the 'How?' but much more the 'Whether?' and the 'Why?' are defining the crisis of prayer.

Apart from the various factors and causes which are relevant to the 'Whether?' and the 'Why?', such as the unrest of contemporary society; and the related inability to find inner peace; the mistrust of one's own feelings and judgments (Weidmann 1973); and the growing impossibility of authentic interpersonal communication (Stachel 1975, 182), it makes sense, in light of the attention which this essay pays to the problematic aspects of God and images of God, to point to that which is referred to as the darkness or absence of God. There are authors who refer to the fact that many aspects of the traditional prayer culture still betray a past image of God while we ourselves live in a post-theistic age, that is, in an age in which full attention is directed to one's self-responsibility and social commitment, also in one's prayer (De Schrijver 1981). In many forms of traditional prayer expression, God is addressed in a way which throws the individual back on his own powerlessness; that is, God is addressed for his ability to intervene in this world. However, people must ascertain that their prayer is not heard, that God shows himself in their experience as the one who is not able to intervene in this world, thus at least G. Otto. Other authors point to the problems that people can have with God as person, since perhaps the understanding of God as person is so closely bound up with his Being-in-Fullness and with his All-ness (Schoonenberg 1977). When people have taken leave of their initial naïveté and have not yet reached their second naïveté, God probably appears as too great an obstacle (Van der Ven, Ber-