

Petitionary Prayer

Peter King

(A harbour-side café somewhere in the Peloponnese; the philosopher Anna Kalypsas and her students, Mel Etitis and Kathy Merinos, are strolling in the sunshine when they see Anna's friend, the lay clergyman Theo Sevvis, sitting at a table with a coffee and a newspaper. He sees them at the same time, beckons to them to join him and, when they do, orders coffee for them all.)

Theo: Now Anna, the other day you put off talking about prayer, but I think that you said that you were planning to discuss it today.

Anna: That's right, we are. I suppose it's something that you're interested in professionally, Theo.

Theo: Well, it is true that prayer is one of the main comforts that the Church offers.

Anna: Ah, well, we're not really going to be concerned with that; after all, the comfort, the psychological effect, would probably be the same whatever the truth of the matter, and it's truth that we're mostly concerned with. No, we were planning to talk about what's called *petitionary* prayer — when someone asks god to make something happen or not happen. It's going to involve the notion of miracles, though, which we discussed the other week.

Theo: Well, when I was back there in seminary school, there was a person there who put forth the proposition that you can petition the Lord with prayer. I remember one of my fellow students becoming quite heated in his rejection of that position, so I am acquainted with some aspects of the debate. Why does it have to involve miracles, though? After all, although many prayers ask for events that would be miraculous, not all of them do, surely?

Anna: I think they do, yes. You see, even if a particular kind of event can happen in the ordinary course of things, according to the laws of nature, still, if god makes it happen, then he's interfered with those laws. We might not be able to tell, but that's not the point.

Theo: Ah, like the lottery? Although any particular sequence of numbers *can* and *might* come up by the normal laws of chance, it would still be cheating if someone fixed the machine to make sure that a certain sequence does come up. You cannot look at the winning sequence and conclude that it must have been the result of cheating, because there is no obvious difference between a sequence obtained by chance and one obtained by trickery.

Anna: That's it exactly. Even if god causes something like a storm, which would normally be a natural event, the very fact that god has caused it means that he's interfered with the natural law.

Mel: I see. So if a miracle has to be caused by god, then it has to be a violation of a law too.

Anna: That's right. It just doesn't make sense to talk about *god* acting in the world in a non-miraculous way. Is everyone happy with that? (*They all nod agreement.*) OK; well, the main worry I've always had about prayer concerns the very idea of asking a god for help, especially as many prayers risk or even entail harm to others.

Theo: Of course you know, Anna, that god does not answer every prayer. If he did, we might begin to wonder whether or not he existed.

Kathy: (breaking in a little hesitantly)

I'm afraid I don't follow you Doctor Sevvis. If god answered all our prayers, wouldn't that make us think that he does exist?

Theo: Why, no Kathy. If every prayer were answered, we should doubtless begin to look for some connection of cause and effect between the act of prayer itself and its results. That is, we should think that the prayer produced the result, in the way that magicians think that their words and rituals do. It is the fact that prayers are answered selectively that leads us to think in terms of someone responding to us — someone who weighs our limited, often petty requests.

Kathy: Oh, all right, yes, I see.

Theo: But have I answered *your* worry, Anna? God does not answer prayers that would involve harm to others.

Anna: You've answered me up to a point. Still, you can't deny that the world is full of people whose prayers are of that type — and there are many who'd claim that such prayers have been answered. I suppose that you'd say that people who pray like that are mistaken about the nature of god and his relationship with the world, and that if they believe that their prayers have been answered then they're just wrong?

Theo: Well, I should have phrased it differently, but essentially I agree.

Anna: You see, what I find so puzzling is that although you say that some people who believe that their prayers have been answered are mistaken, you also say that some aren't. How can you tell which is which? I mean, assuming that both sets of people are sincere in their beliefs, and honest in saying that they prayed as they did, and in both cases what was prayed for actually happened, then are you just saying that in one set of cases what they prayed for would have happened anyway, and so actually god had nothing to do with it?

Theo: Ah, now you are making an unwarranted assumption there, Anna. You assume that, in order for us to say that god has answered a prayer — say, for the recovery of a loved one — it must be the case that the event in question would not have happened anyway. Yet we surely do not apply such a strict criterion in our everyday affairs. Imagine, for example, that I call the waiter over for another coffee, intending to buy one for you too, and you ask me to buy you one; now, it is certainly the case that I should have bought you the coffee even if you had not asked me to, but that does not mean that I have ignored your request. On the contrary, I think that we should most naturally say that I have granted your request.

Mel: I'm sorry, Dr Sevvis, but I'm a bit confused. Are you saying that whenever one person's action matches another person's request, the former is granting the request of the latter? That can't be right, can it?

Theo: No, it certainly can not. In my coffee example, what I did was because of Anna's request, though not only because of it. If I had not already intended to buy her a coffee, her request would have been adequate reason for me to do so. On the other hand, if I had planned to buy her a coffee because I wanted a favour from her, and if I should not have bought it otherwise, *even if she had asked me to*, then my buying her the coffee would not count as granting her request.

Mel: Hmm... I think I understand, but it doesn't sound right to me.

Anna: Yes, it's fascinating but a bit complicated. Let me get it straight. Take the example of a mother praying that her son Michael's life will be saved. OK, first the easy bit: if god saves Michael's life and wouldn't have done so unless it had been prayed for, then we can say that he's answered the mother's prayer — I think that we'd all go along with that. (*Everyone nods agreement.*) Secondly, the difficult bit: god saves Michael's life, but he would have done that even if it hadn't been prayed for. Now Theo, you say that there are two possibilities: we have to ask what god would have done if he hadn't had his own reasons for saving the life. Would he have answered the mother's prayer or wouldn't he? If the answer's yes, we can say that he did in fact answer her prayer; if it's no, we can't.

Theo: Well, I am not sure that you have made it less complicated, but that is certainly what I want to say.

Anna: To be honest, Theo, I don't think that it *can* be made less complicated... and that's one reason that I have my doubts that it's — what did you call it? — the way we think in everyday life.

Mel: There's another problem anyway, I think. The example of Dr Sevvis treating Anna to a coffee is very different from religious prayer — after all, god's supposed to be essentially omniscient and benevolent. If god was going to save a life, how can we talk about the possibility that he didn't have reasons to do it? The only way that that could make sense is if either the situation or god were different. If the *situation* were different, then we're not talking about whether god did answer the mother's prayer, only whether he would have done in other circumstances. And how could *god* be different?

Anna: Good point Mel — and it brings us back to the problem of evil.¹

Theo: Well, before we tackle evil again, Anna, might I try to answer Mel? I think that the problem is, Mel, that you are treating god and the world simply as two interacting individuals (and I suppose that I am partly to blame for that, with my example of buying Anna a coffee). Remember that god *created* the world. He created the natural order of cause and effect, and that includes human beings and their prayers.

Mel: I'm not sure... *was* I doing that? I don't really see how that deals with my problem.

Theo: You see, when the mother prays for her son's life, she is not trying to get god to do something that he would not have done anyway — she is actually taking part in a chain of causes and effects that god created in order to achieve a state of affairs that included Michael's recovery. In fact, as I should have realised earlier, it is also clear that this account of prayer rules out the need for what I was saying earlier about whether or not god would have acted anyway.

Anna: Hmmm... I must admit that it's not completely clear to me yet, Theo. Look, do you mean that we don't have free will — that all our actions, including our prayers, are simply part of a completely pre-determined series of causes and effects? If so, then I see that there's no need to worry about what god would have done if we hadn't prayed to him.

Theo: No. As you must be aware, Anna, I am committed to the view that god has granted us free will.

Anna: That's what I thought. But then I'm not sure what's going on in your account of prayer. If the mother's decision was freely made, then she might have decided not to pray for her son's life — so we're back with the question of whether or not god would have acted if she hadn't prayed to him.

Mel: I know this isn't really a philosophical question so much as a theological one — but I don't understand *why* god would have made prayer part of the causal order anyway.

Anna: No, I think that that's philosophically relevant, Mel — and again it links in with the problem of evil. So, Theo, given that your god is perfect, omniscient, and so on, why did he include petitionary prayer in the causal structure of the world?

Theo: Perhaps I expressed myself badly; of course we and our prayers are part of the causal order created by god, but god is not himself part of that order. As I said before, our prayers have no *causal* power — they are not magic spells. God chooses to respond to the world in certain ways, and our prayers are part of the world to which he responds.

Anna: Fair enough, but that doesn't answer Mel's question. Look, perhaps you want to say that the existence and rôle of petitionary prayer makes the world a better place, and that's why god included it in his creation. Is that it?

Theo: Well of course — but *anything* that god included in his creation makes it a better place, whether we understand that or not.

Anna: OK. I must admit that I'm still not satisfied, if only because I *don't* understand how petitionary prayer makes the world a better place, and I dislike the retreat to 'god moves in a mysterious way'. Still, rather than getting sidetracked, are you all happy if we accept for the sake of argument that god has *some* good reason for making prayer part of the world? (*They all signify agreement, Theo with the air of someone who*

would really like to say more.) Right — now, what do we have so far? Theo's picture is of a god who creates a world that contains beings with free will; these beings sometimes pray to the god, asking for various favours for themselves or others, and sometimes what they pray for comes about. Sometimes the god chooses to answer those prayers, and sometimes not. Of course, if they're prayers for what would be evil, then the god doesn't answer them. But what if they're prayers for what would be good?

Theo: You imply that there is a problem here, but I do not see it. If the prayers are for what is good, then god answers them. Of course, *we* cannot always tell what is good and what is not, but god can tell, and god decides.

Anna: But that's the problem; if we pray for what's good – genuinely good – then wouldn't god have done it anyway? (*Theo opens his mouth to comment, but Anna cuts him off.*) Yes, I know Theo — your claim is that god would be answering your prayer for something even if he was going to do it anyway. My problem with that isn't just that it makes for a very complicated story, and so isn't very convincing as an account of how we think in everyday life; it's also that you seem to take the notion of *answering* and turn it into something much weaker than what we started with — too weak to support your position, in fact.

Mel: Would it help to think about answering a question instead of a prayer or a request? Imagine that for some reason I'm about to remind Anna of the time, Dr Sevvis, and just before I speak you ask me for the time. What I say is certainly an answer to your question, but I didn't answer you. Is that what's going on with prayer? If god had been going to save the little boy's life anyway, then what he did was an answer to the mother's prayer, but he didn't answer her.

Theo: Ingenious, Mel, but unfortunately not really acceptable. You see, that would simply place god at the level of the natural world; he would be said to answer our prayers only in the sense that the coming of rain answers the prayers of the drought ridden, or the illness of a teacher answers the prayers of a schoolboy who has neglected his homework. The difference must be that god answers us in a personal sense. I confess, Anna, that I am unsure how to answer you. Perhaps I might be allowed to leave this issue for the moment – until I have had an opportunity to think about it – and instead try a very different argument. (*Anna signals agreement.*)

Theo: Well, think for a moment of the Lord's Prayer, which I think most Christian denominations share in much the same form. It contains such lines as: 'thy will be done, thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'.... Now, perhaps we should think of all prayer in this way, as signalling our acceptance of god's will. After all, in saying that prayer, we are not asking god to do as we ask, are we?

Anna: Maybe not, but then haven't you lost the petitionary part? If I say to you: 'Do what you want, Theo!' I'm not petitioning you, not asking you to do anything. Besides, it's just not true that that's what most people are doing when they pray; when the mother asks god to save Michael's life, she's not simply telling god that he should do whatever he wants — oh, and by the way it'd be nice if he wanted to save her son.

Theo: I suppose that you are right, though it sometimes seems to me that people *ought* to be praying in that way. I sympathise with my friend from the seminary: the idea that god can be petitioned does have a superstitious ring to it, with which I feel less than comfortable. Perhaps I could say this: when we pray, we are not simply saying to god that his will shall be done, but declaring our trust, our faith in him. And it is also possible that we do this, in part at least, in order to put ourselves into a certain state of mind.

Anna: I'm not sure what you mean, Theo.

Theo: Well, by praying, I might be attempting to correct in myself my tendency to want things to revolve around me; that is, the act of prayer might be an attempt to induce in myself a different state of mind — one of submission to god's will.

Anna: Well, perhaps — but, first, that's still not what most believers actually mean to do when they pray, so you're offering a prescription rather than a description.

Mel: You mean that Dr Seavis is trying to *change* his religion rather than *explain* it?

Theo: That is not fair, I think. My suggestion is more that, while believers once thought in terms of petitioning god, modern believers are more sophisticated in their understanding of the relationship between god and his creation. The form of our prayers has remained the same, more or less, but we no longer take that form literally.

Anna: But then aren't you saying that modern prayer is at best metaphorical (and at worst self-deceptive)? After all, you seem to hold that god doesn't alter his behaviour on request, so prayers that involve requests can't be taken at all literally. It's as if someone puts pancakes out on her roof every Epiphany eve, but says that she doesn't really believe in *kallikantzari* — that leaving the cakes is just an action designed to make her feel safe and secure.ⁱⁱ Even if we believe her, we surely have to ask why putting out cakes should make her feel safe if she doesn't believe in *kallikantzari*. Either she's deceiving herself, and she does believe, deep down — or her feeling of safety is produced simply because she's followed a familiar custom. And if it's the latter, then the effect has nothing to do with *kallikantzari* at all. So, Theo — are your apparently petitionary prayers based on your belief that god might answer them, or are they no more than a habit whose psychological effects you value?

Theo: The latter, in part — but more than that. After all, even though I take the petition aspect metaphorically, I still hold that prayer involves communication from me to god.

Anna: But one-way communication?

Theo: No, not necessarily. Even if I accept what appear to be petitions are in fact something else, so that there is no *answer* in the normal sense, I do not have to surrender the notion that god responds in some sense.

Anna: Well, perhaps we should leave it there; we seem to have come to an agreement over the petition part, and I suspect that we're about to step out onto some very deep philosophical quicksand. Besides, it's time for lunch. Join us Theo?

(The four get up and walk slowly away, arguing about where they should eat.)

References and Further Reading

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Eleonore Stump. 'Petitionary prayer' (*American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, 1979; & in Eleonore Stump & Michael J. Murray [edd.] *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999))

Robert Young. 'Petitionary prayer' (*American Philosophical Quarterly* 11, 1974)

ⁱ See my earlier dialogue 'The Problem of Evil' (*Philosophical Writings*, 9; 1998)

ⁱⁱ *Kallikantzari* are imps in Greek popular mythology, who have to be pacified with gifts of pancakes on the roof on Epiphany eve.