

Interfaith 'prayer': What is it and should we do it?

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

A contemporary reader of the New Testament letter we call 1 Corinthians is likely to be a little puzzled by the amount of attention it gives to whether the Corinthian Christians could eat meat that had been offered to pagan idols. Chapters 8-10 treat this question, though not in a straight line entirely free of digression. By the time St. Paul completes his discussion he has distinguished three different sorts of cases and has outlined his response to each.

In one case Christians might buy in the market and eat meat that had been offered in sacrifice to a false god. This Paul allows. But in a second, related case this eating might be done at a meal with fellow Christians who, not fully seeing that an idol amounts to nothing, fear that eating this meat involves one in the ritual worship of a false god. In that case, concern for the conscience of one's fellow Christian means that one should not eat food that might otherwise be permitted.

Then there is a third case: eating meat at the pagan sacrificial feasts themselves. That St. Paul absolutely prohibits—and not simply because it might harm the conscience of a fellow Christian whose faith is less robust. No, that Paul forbids because—just as sharing in the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper involves communion with the Lord Jesus—participating in ritual idol worship brings one into communion with powers opposed to the God who raised Jesus and thereby subverts the Christian's pledge of covenant loyalty.

Paul's discussion of the issue is not unsophisticated. At one level he accepts and applies the prophetic critique of the gods of the nations: they amount to nothing, having no real existence. Yet he also recognizes that behind the "nothingness" of the false gods lies real power, evil power whose goal is that we should bend the knee or bow the head before a false god, that we should give a kind of reality to what is nothing. "I do not want you to be partners with demons," Paul says. Although ours is a world in which gods are often not taken seriously—thus, for example, the

newly named archbishop of Canterbury can think nothing of participating in a Druid ritual of induction—it does not pay to toy with them.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*, the Calormenes, who worship Tash, have plotted to take over the land of Narnia, whose inhabitants are pledged to the great lion Aslan. The Calormenes have been helped by some Narnians, who, without actually believing in Tash's existence, have pretended that Tash and Aslan are one and the same—and have invoked Tash's presence. Then one day the sky suddenly clouds over, it becomes cold, a foul smell overpowers—and a creature with the shape of a man but the head of a bird, with a cruel curved beak, flies over. The grass seems to wither beneath its shadow. Tash has been called for—and now has come. As one of the dwarfs says: "People shouldn't call for demons unless they really mean what they say." False gods must be taken seriously.

What this involves and how rightly to do it is not, however, always easy to determine. So, for example, in a contretemps nearly unintelligible to many, David Benke, president of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, has been suspended by the Synod for his participation in an "event" (what to call it is part of the argument) at New York's Yankee Stadium held 12 days after the September 11 attacks. At this event, representatives of a variety of religious traditions spoke to and prayed with the assembled crowd in order to honor those missing and dead in the attack. Pastor Benke offered a clearly Christian prayer, having asked those present to join hands and pray with him—and for that has been suspended. (The suspension is under appeal.)

I do not want to discuss this case itself—and that for several reasons. For one thing, the Missouri Synod has sometimes applied 1 Corinthians 10 to prayer with other Christians—even though in 1 Corinthians Paul clearly has in mind those who pray to and worship false gods. So focusing on the Missouri Synod itself would divert me from what I find truly puzzling and thought-provoking. Moreover, my own view of the matter seems likely to please no one. I doubt that it was really wise for Benke to participate in the event, but the Synod's (juridical) way of handling his participation seems misguided and heavy-handed. (Understandable, perhaps, for those who know the ins-and-outs of the Synod's history in the past quarter century, but misguided nonetheless.) But the case provides an occasion that ought to provoke us to larger thoughts, and I find myself very puzzled about those larger questions.

Suppose a group of Catholics, Lutherans, Jews, Muslims, Episcopalians, Greek Orthodox, Sikhs, Buddhists, Presbyterians and Hindus come together to pray about some shared concern. Thinking now from within the Christian faith, what should we say about questions such as the following: What are they doing? (Before we decide whether doing it is a good idea, it might be nice if we could say what they are doing.) Are they praying together? Are they praying alongside each other but not with each other? Are they addressing the same god? If they are addressing the same god—and it is that One whom Christians confess as the true God—does that mean their praying with each other is unproblematic?

For me at least, none of these questions has an obvious answer. Most discussion of “the religions” has tended to reduce all significant questions to just one: that of salvation. Important as that issue surely is, my concern is a different one that ought also, I think, to puzzle us. I am not asking whether all these people, who seem (at least) to worship different gods, will one day all be saved. My puzzles are less ultimate but nonetheless significant. I simply want to think about what they do when they pray “together”—not only whether we can approve whatever it is they are doing, but also whether we can talk clearly about what they are, in fact, doing. (It is important to keep in mind that I want to think about these questions from within a Christian perspective. I am not developing some general theory about “religion” or asking what we might say from some purportedly neutral perspective. I begin from within the Christian faith and ask how things look from there.)

Suppose we start by remembering that Christians pray to God in and through Jesus. The simplest—though by no means simple—case may be that of Christians and Jews (who, though not Christians, are, of course, also not pagans). If they pray with/alongside each other, how shall we think about what they do? Christians pray to their Father in heaven in and with Jesus—who himself prayed to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If Christians pray in and with him, they too pray to the God of Israel. Of course, they know Israel’s Lord not only as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but also as the Father of their Lord Jesus Christ. But it makes some sense to say that, praying in and with Jesus, they address the same God—the true God—to whom Jews pray.

I recognize, of course, that the matter would (subjectively) look somewhat different if we began not from a Christian but from a Jewish perspective. Jews, after all, are not about to pray in the name of Jesus when they address—as he did—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Therefore, even if it makes sense for Christians to think of

themselves as praying “to” the God whom Jews also address in prayer, a certain asymmetry does (subjectively) exist and must be recognized and honored. Acts 2:46 makes clear that the first Christians prayed regularly in the temple; nevertheless, it is hard to suppose that Christians could do that today while confessing Jesus as Lord. Still, the case of Christians and Jews is the easiest, the least puzzling, to consider.

If there may be an intelligible sense in which—at least from a Christian perspective—Christians and Jews might pray “to” the same God, can we extend this sense any further? To Muslims, for instance? After all, in the language that has become common in the academic study of religion, Islam is—together with Judaism and Christianity—one of the Abrahamic religions. Thus, the sacred story that Muslims narrate acknowledges Abraham as their forefather—indeed, as one who submitted to God’s will and, hence, was a true Muslim. But theirs is the god of Abraham and Ishmael—not of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is hard to think of Jesus as having prayed to that god and, therefore, hard to suppose that Christians address that god when they pray in and with Jesus. And if we cannot make the case with respect to Muslims, it is surely folly to try with respect to Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs—i.e., all those “non-Abrahamic” traditions.

This is about as far as I can get, starting from the premise that Christians pray in and with Jesus. It may give us an intelligible sense in which Christians and Jews address the same God, but it doesn’t seem to give us more than that. Is there any other starting point—still not, I hasten to add, one grounded in some general theory of religion, but one grounded in Christian faith?

John Baillie’s *A Diary of Private Prayer* is probably the best prayer book I know. True, its language is by our standards a bit archaic (which is to say, beautiful), but its prayers are profound. Even when prayed time after time, they continually uncover new depths. One of his evening prayers begins with the following paragraph:

O God, the Father of all mankind, I would bring before Thee tonight the burden of the world’s life. I would join myself to the great scattered company of those who, in every corner of every land, are now crying out to Thee in their need. Hear us, O God, and look in pity upon our manifold necessities, since Thou alone art able to satisfy all our desire.

Who are those, I wonder, who “in every corner of every land are now crying out to Thee in their need”? Does the prayer here invite us to think only of Christians

scattered in various lands? Or does it contemplate the possibility that all sorts and conditions of people, by whatever name they may address god, are in fact crying out in their need to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the Father of Jesus? What Baillie had in mind I cannot say for certain, but the question is worth puzzling over.

“From the rising of the sun to its setting,” says the prophet Malachi (1:11) in an oracle of the Lord, “my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.” For almost 2,000 years, at least some Christian thinkers have taken Malachi’s oracle to mean that wherever genuine sacrifice is offered, it is (objectively, though not, of course, subjectively) made to YHWH, the one true God. C. S. Lewis gives a kind of literary incarnation to Malachi’s statement in the person of Emeth in *The Last Battle*. Emeth is a young Calormene soldier, a noble soul who has loved the god Tash with his whole heart and who longs to see Tash. Those plotting to take over Narnia, who have claimed that Tash and Aslan are one (and who call this god “Tashlan”), have said that anyone who goes through the stable door will see Tashlan, though they actually plan to kill faithful Narnians who go through the door.

But Emeth says he wants to go through that door, “for gladly would I die a thousand deaths if I might look upon the face of Tash.” He does, and later, when the faithful Narnians have gotten into Aslan’s world, they find Emeth (a Calormene who had not worshiped Aslan) there. He tells them his story: How the Lion had met him. How he had thought the Lion would kill him, since he had been a devotee of Tash. But how the Lion had said, “Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me. . . . Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him, for I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. . . . But I said also (for the truth constrained me), Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.”

Alongside Malachi’s oracle we need to set another from the prophet Amos (9:7) to Israel:

“Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel?” says the Lord.
“Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from
Kir?”

Amos is the prophet who also says to Israel, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth” (3:2). Yet, although Israel has been specially called by God, Amos suggests that other peoples may have their own callings from that same God. The prophet parallels Israel’s exodus from Egypt with the exodus of the Philistines and that of the Syrians. They too have had a history of dealing with the one true God, even if that history is not known to us in the way Israel’s is. They too have had a calling from YHWH. (It is important that we emphasize here that their callings are not from some generic god whom all experience in their different ways. Were that the right way to talk of it, we would be on our way toward a theory of religious experience according to which all people have some kind of fundamental experience—call it absolute dependence—which then gives rise to different ways of being religious. All gods are then fundamentally articulations of the same primordial experience. Tash and Aslan are indeed the same, and we can make no sense of Paul’s concern in I Corinthians, with which I began, about the worship of false gods. On the contrary, I take Amos to be saying that other peoples have their own history of dealing not with a generic god but with YHWH, the God of Israel, whom we can identify rightly only through the story of his dealings with Israel, even though those are not his only dealings.)

I want to be careful, though, not to press the argument beyond my particular concerns here, and the example of Emeth may have begun to do so. I am not, as I noted above, asking whether all these other peoples, who have had their own history of dealing with Israel’s God, will be saved. After all, alongside Amos’s oracle we must set the word of the psalmist (147:19-20):

He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and ordinances to Israel.
He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his ordinances.

I am asking simply whether, when the peoples of the world cry out to god in their need, there are Christian grounds for supposing that, at least sometimes, it may be the true God whom they address.

Christians, after all, believe with the psalmist (19:1) that the heavens declare the glory of God. They believe, as St. Paul says in Romans (1:20), that God's "eternal power and deity" can be and have been discerned in the things he has made. Even Karl Barth, that staunch critic of natural theology, could write: "In spite of all the worldliness and unfaithfulness and ignorance of people, does not God in fact see to it that the knowledge of God is not ineffective, that people must . . . know about God and therefore know what they do not want to know or in fact seem to know?" No one can live entirely out of touch with God. Indeed, no one can live entirely out of touch with that God who is the Father of Jesus Christ—through whom, St. John says, all things were made, and who is both the life and the light of the world. Jesus simply is the light of the world, as John's Gospel says more than once. Hence, to be a human being is, as Barth puts it, "to stand already, even if with closed or blind eyes, in this light, the light of life." The true God is objectively present to all, even if subjectively unknown.

We have, therefore, grounds for thinking that—at least sometimes—the peoples of the world pray to the true God when they cry out in their need. Although they do not fully know that God, he still is present to them and may receive their prayer as directed to himself. Perhaps there is a sense, then, in which a Christian and a Hindu, praying alongside each other, might also be said to be praying "to" the same God—both directing their prayer to the objectively present God who is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, though that God is incompletely known to one of those who prays.

The reader will, I hope, recognize the interrogative and tentative quality of these reflections. Granting that quality, I have tried to think through whether and how it might be that Christians and non-Christians could be said, in their shared moment of need, to pray "to" the one (and only) true God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the Father of the Lord Jesus. Suppose there is a sense in which that can truly be said. Shall we then conclude that their praying "together" is unproblematic? Hardly. We have not come to the end of our puzzling yet.

Recall the case in which a Christian might himself have no qualms about eating meat that he knew had been offered to a pagan god but, at table with other

Christians, would find that some of them had qualms. He should not say to them, “An idol is nothing.” He should be alert to the fact that behind the false god stands real evil power and that, if we bend the knee to that idol believing to some extent in its reality, we risk handing ourselves over to demonic power. And that is why Paul absolutely forbids Christians to participate in the pagan sacrificial rituals. To do that is to live a lie. It is to acknowledge as real and powerful some god other than the Father of Jesus—and thus, to deny Jesus.

Keeping in mind the train of thought I developed above, we might suppose that Paul could, with some theological justification, have told the Corinthians that in those sacrificial rituals the pagans were actually reaching out unwittingly to the true God. This same Paul, after all, as Luke recounts in Acts, could tell the men of Athens that their altar erected “to an unknown God” was, though unknown to them, built for the worship of the God whom he preached. It would have been another matter entirely for him to have joined in their worship of that unknown god—as if he were not able to identify the One to whom all worship must be directed. So it would be possible for Christians to acknowledge that they and their pagan neighbors pray, in the complicated sense I have specified, “to” the same God. And there might be a sense in which they could pray “alongside” each other, with the Christians knowing that, in the sense specified, all were praying to the same God. But it would be harder to specify a sense in which, even granting all this, they could avoid seeming to deny the Lord Jesus if they were to present themselves as praying “with” their pagan neighbors.

Switch back to the Yankee Stadium event that generated these puzzles for me. What were those who gathered there doing? And do Christians have any reason to draw back from what they were doing? My own (tentative) view is that Christians might have grounds for thinking that they were all, in their shared time of need, praying “to” the same God (objectively present to all though subjectively unknown to many). But to the degree that they thought of themselves as praying “with” each other—or, perhaps, to the degree that they encouraged others to suppose that they were praying “with” each other—it was to some power other than Jesus that they were looking as the bond of their union, the power that brought them together “with” each other.

Nor is it terribly hard to identify what that power might have been at Yankee Stadium: namely, “America the Beautiful.” I say this hesitantly, not wishing to seem insensitive to those who suffered the loss of loved ones in the September 11 attacks.

Still, Christians need to be careful how we react to that evil deed. A “national crisis” is a terrible moment for us all, but it is no time to forget that it is often hard to draw clear lines distinguishing civil religion from ersatz religion—and from, dare we say it, pagan religion. A national crisis is a time in which to bend every effort and energy to serve the lives of our fellow citizens—and even, I would add, to defend them by force if need be. Nevertheless, for almost two millennia Christians have made clear, as Justin Martyr put it, that “we worship God only,” though in other matters we serve our fellow citizens and those who rule.

We live in a time when Christian congregations have come increasingly to realize that we can no longer count on the surrounding culture to do much of our work for us—and that to become a Christian may be experienced as a more decisive break from the surrounding culture than it was 50 years ago. Hence, we revive the adult catechumenate, and we make increasingly clear that baptism involves a new birth into the new people of God. We cannot do this in earnest and then revert to the rituals of civil religion the moment some national crisis comes upon us. To be sure, a people—with the will to sustain itself as a people over time—needs civic rituals. But Christians need to think about what form they should take—about the form they may take if Christians are to share in them.

It is no easy thing to be fellow citizens with pagans—not to say with the pagan that lies buried within each of us. (And likewise, we ought to acknowledge, it may not be easy for pagans to live with us as fellow citizens.) We need to think more, and harder, about how to manage this.

Barth wrote that, because Christ is the light of the world, Christians are eager to tolerate non-Christians, and that this “may have to be for a very long time, even his whole life.” But this is not, Barth added, toleration “in the absolute sense.” The Christian cannot grant to the non-Christian “a right to be blessed in his own way, for he knows of himself that to his salvation there is no such right even for him. Absolute tolerance towards him would mean not taking him seriously. . . . In effect, then, the Christian cannot leave the non-Christian at peace.”