

Talking to God: Portrait of a World at Prayer

John Gattuso

John Gattuso, Editor

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Some people go to church on Sunday / Kneel and pray / Well I say God bless them / If they can go that way / But me I have to wait / Until the sun goes down / Go to my holy shack / Out on the edge of town. — Joziah Longo

The urge to pray exists in all human cultures, and all religions call the faithful to some form of prayer, whether it be reciting prescribed words, meditating, singing, chanting, sacred dance, holy ritual, or simple mindfulness of the connectedness of all beings. Some pray in religious community or worship services; others, like Longo, of the musical group Gandalf Murphy and the Slambovian Circus of Dreams, find their own holy place and their own way of communing with the divine.

Whatever religious tradition or individual observance resonates, readers will find this book arresting, with essays on prayer from the world's leading spiritual minds—including the Dalai Lama, Thomas Merton, C.S. Lewis, Harold Kushner, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, and Karen Armstrong, along with the Prayer of St. Francis, an excerpt from Elie Weisel's *Night*, and a Navajo Blessing Way—accompanied by breathtaking photographs of people around the world engaged in prayer.

According to the editor, praying is actually *doing* something to make the world a better place. "The world's great mystics have been telling us the same thing for millennia," says Gattuso: "rational thought will only get us so far." It takes prayer, he says, "to help us recognize the humanity of other people and deepen our capacity for compassion and forgiveness."

The book is arranged in four sections: "Every Breath a Prayer" describes ways to conduct everyday life in a prayerful manner; "Praise and Supplication" discusses modern and post-modern uses of prayer; "The Still, Silent Moment" explores meditation and similar mindful states; and "Reaching Out" suggests how to use prayer to effect positive change.

Gattuso, who previously edited *Shadow Boxers: Sweat, Sacrifice & the Will to Survive in American Boxing Gyms* as well as nature books and travel guides, says that "the most prayerful moments" are "the moments when you feel most attuned to the divine." Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen master and peace activist, describes that attuned state as "a serene encounter with reality." In his essay, "Voice of the Rising Tide," he says: "In mindfulness one is not only restful and happy; but alert and awake." Bishop Desmond Tutu, recipient of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, writes in "Stillness" that in these moments of mindful, joyful quiet, "we hear that what God wants is for us to be godlike, for us to become more and more like God."

The diversity of prayer is depicted in the book's array of photos, taken by dozens of highly credentialed photographers. A Tibetan pilgrim achieves a godlike stillness in India, at the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, while prayer flags whirl around her like a carousel of prayer (photo by Olivier Föllmi). At the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Orthodox Jews pray and read Scripture illuminated by a golden light (Richard Nowitz).

The book highlights the interconnectedness of human spirituality. Michael Wolfe, whose books include *The Hadj, One Thousand Roads to Mecca* and *Taking Back Islam*, writes that while the Latin root for "prayer" is "*precor*, to ask, to beseech, to implore ... the conventional Muslim prayer, called *al-Salat*, is related to an Aramaic root meaning to bow, to bend, to stretch." Wolfe explains that Muslims perform salat several times a day, not to petition God, but for guidance, gratitude, and awareness. When people pray together, he says, they "are drawn by a desire to communicate with the divine presence that resides within themselves and connects them to all humanity."

Talking to God demonstrates with powerful words and images the common human awareness of a great transcendent holiness, and the human need to feel connected to it. All who pray desire the betterment of the human condition and the transformation of the human soul. As Gattuso says, prayer "works *on* us rather than *for* us." All who immerse themselves in this book—even in a holy shack on the edge of town—will be so transformed.

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