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Lead us not into temptation: on the proposed revision of the Our Father¹

Simon Hewitt

Forthcoming in New Blackfriars. Final draft.

*You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.*

T.S. Eliot – Little Gidding

When English-speaking Catholics pray the Our Father² we include the petition, ‘lead us not into temptation’, or perhaps the Latin phrase it translates: *ne nos inducas in temptationem*. Looking back to the prayer’s sources things are more complicated: Luke and Matthew, presumably following Q, agree in having Jesus say *me heisenegkes hemas eis peirasmon* – do not bring us into *peirasmon*:³ what that final Greek word means will detain us a little below. And scholars have speculated about the Aramaic words of the historical Jesus lying behind the gospel text.

Why does any of this matter? In terms of the day to day liturgical practice of Catholics it matters because there is a movement towards revising this petition as used liturgically. A revision to the Italian translation of the missal recently received papal approval⁴ renders the petition ‘do not let us fall into temptation’.⁵ The motivation for the change is widely believed to be that articulated by (the now) Pope Francis in an earlier article,

I’m the one who falls. But it’s not (God) who pushes me into temptation to see how I fall. No, a father does not do this. A father helps us up immediately.⁶

These words were spoken in 2002, well before Francis was Pope. They certainly communicate a right concern to emphasise the fatherly love of God, and nothing that follows should be understood as belittling that. However, as an argument for revising the Our Father, the line of thought evident here is inadequate. My purpose in the following two sections is to argue that case. I’ll then conclude with some reflections on the attitude towards scholarship implicit in leaving the Our Father as it is.

1 Thanks to Anastasia Philipa Scrutton and Helen de Cruz.

2 My use of the almost stereotypically Catholic ‘Our Father’, rather than ‘Lord’s Prayer’ is to emphasise that it is Catholic use with which I am concerned. Appeals to ecumenical practice have been made by both sides of the current argument. My own feeling is that changing texts merely on ecumenical grounds tends to feed into a lowest common denominator ecumenism, detrimental to genuine unity of faith and understanding. Be that as it may, I’m bracketing ecumenical considerations here.

3 Luke 11:4; Matthew 6:13. My translation.

4 As an aside, one has to wonder whether the revision is consonant with recent norms about the translation of liturgical texts. It is not unclear how *ne nos inducas in temptationem* ought to be translated, and it is not in the manner instanced in the new Italian translation! However, I think a case against revision on lexicographic grounds would be uninteresting – there are good theological and philosophical reasons to be sceptical about the change, and these are my concern here.

5 For details and background see Christopher Lamb (2019), ‘Lead us not into temptation’ falls out of Lord’s Prayer’, *The Tablet*, June 2019..

6 Lamb (2019).

Does God lead us into temptation?

A cursory glance at the book of Job might suggest that we should answer the title question of this section in the affirmative. ‘The Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job?”’.⁷ No doubt a determined exegete could render the significance of this book for God’s People in such a way that there is no commitment to God bringing about the temptation of human beings. We are, after all, not fundamentalists, and there are deep traditions of reading biblical narratives as figurative. My point here is not an attempt at proof-texting. Instead I want to draw attention to the fact that Job, which has spoken to suffering humanity over the centuries,⁸ articulates something which so many Jews and Christians have found to resonate with their experience, that God can somehow be spoken of testing his People.

Experience, of course, varies. Logic does not. And it is on the terrain of logic that the most immediate objection to the suggestion that God does not bring about temptation is to be found. For God is, so Christians are bound to believe, the ‘creator of all things visible and invisible’. Amongst the things visible and invisible ascribed to God’s creative agency have to be included the events of my falling into temptation, not to mention the mental states behind those falls (my noticing that the plate of cakes is unguarded, my hunger, my love of cake), and for that matter the actions whereby I succumb to temptation. God, in other words, cannot be got off the hook for responsibility for evil, and in particular for responsibility for temptation.

A good deal of confusion is at work in pulling us towards the contrary conclusion. There is the type of confusion common amongst philosophers discussing the so-called ‘problem of evil’ which assumes that if we think that God is in any way responsible for evil (as the creator of entities appropriately termed evil, say⁹) then God is *morally* responsible for evil. Since God cannot be morally responsible for evil, since God is perfectly good (and this goodness is assumed to be moral goodness), and since good beings are not morally responsible for evil, God cannot be in any way responsible for evil. This line of argument has, to my mind, been decisively answered by Brian Davies in a long series of books and articles,¹⁰ drawing deeply on Aquinas. God’s goodness is not moral goodness, and it is simply a category mistake, arising from the temptation to anthropomorphism, to think that God is like us, a moral agent, subject to rules and assessable by moral criteria. Thus Davies,

[T]here is no intelligible answer to questions like ‘Why did God do this to me?’ or ‘Why did God make the world as it is?’ Such questions, I think, just ought not to be asked if they are requests for reasons that God has. They resemble questions like ‘Why is my cat not humble?’ or ‘Why are you not your own father?’¹¹

7 Job 1:8 NRSV.

8 See e.g. Gustavo Gutierrez (1987), *On Job: God-talk and the suffering of the innocent*. Ossining: Orbis.

9 I put things in that round-about way because I accept the Augustinian-Thomist idea that evil is simply a privation of good. So I do not think there are entities which are evil insofar as they exist and are created by God. But I do think God, freely, creates entities in which there are privations of good (and remember that for orthodox Christians, as distinct from deists, creation is that act whereby God sustains an entity in being over and against nothing for every moment of its existence – God doesn’t just wind things up and let them run, such that he would not be responsible for the way things go with an entity after its initial creation. God not only creates the fertilised ovum which will grow into Donald Trump; God is freely, and directly, creating Trump even as Trump tweets his latest inanities.)

10 See especially Brian Davies OP (2006), *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, London: Continuum.

11 Davies (2006), pp. 218-9.

Another confusion thinks that the kind of entities I talked about above – the event of my falling into temptation, or those mental states which push me down the path towards that event – cannot be within the intended remit of the creeds statement that God is the creator of *all things*. For if that were the case, this worry goes, we could not be free. Again, the problem here is anthropomorphism. If you make me run naked down the high street, by holding my best friend hostage at gunpoint unless I do so, say, or by spiking my drink, then my freedom is diminished. It is in the nature of created beings that our agency crowds each other's out: to the extent that my action is caused by you, or by alcohol, it is not my own free action, caused only by my act of will. But God is not an entity in the world who competes for agency with us.¹² God isn't in the world at all, God is behind the world and intimately present to it as its creative cause. What goes for the world in general goes in particular for my seemingly innermost thoughts and my actions – as Augustine puts it 'you are closer to me than I am to myself'. Far from interfering with my freedom, God is the ground of it: even the act of my falling into temptation exists only because God created it, and its antecedents in my mental life. To suppose that God causing (by creating) my action would make it unfree is to be guilty of idolatrously confusing God with part of the universe, with the kind of thing that *can* interfere with my freedom (a gunman, say, or an alcohol molecule).

Those events which constitute my being tempted are created by God. Sometimes it is clear how they are incorporated into God's providential guiding of the created order towards the fullness of the Kingdom, 'O happy fault, that gained for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer'.¹³ Most of the time things are far less clear. This is part and parcel of the mystery of life. For the time being we trust, without having a clear sense of how our falls might be brought up by God into the story of salvation, and we pray 'lead us not into temptation'.

'We dare to say'

It is important that we understand that what we are doing when we say 'lead us not into temptation' is *praying*. Odd though the need to reinforce this might seem, the pressure to forget this (or, which is worse, to forget what we mean by *prayer*) is real in debates about the liturgy. Although the previous section is, I think, a correct response to somebody who says that it is wrong to say that God brings about temptation, the more fundamental (and more interesting) line of resistance to the revision of the Our Father is to deny that what we are doing when we pray the Our Father is putting forward some kind of theory about God, informing ourselves about how God deals with the world. There is misplaced didactic so-called prayer of this sort. I shudder at the memory of primary school assemblies 'Lord God we know that you are very good and don't like children telling lies...'. But what we are doing when we say the Our Father is not some kind of collective act of remembrance that God is not only our Father (although we certainly *show* that, recognising that what we show is expressed metaphorically, paradigmatically when we stand to say the prayer after the sacrificial act of thanksgiving for the Son who makes us children of God), but also that – depending on the translation – God may or may not lead us into temptation. Reciting the Our Father is not an act of catechetical revision; it is *prayer*.

Prayer, which Christians understand to be a sharing in Christ's prayer to the Father, is something which arises out of the depths of human life, out of our brokenness, our fallenness, and our fears (as well as our joys, our loves, and our thanksgiving). We cry out 'lead us not into temptation' not least because doing this reflects how things are: we are scared, and we so often feel as though we are being dragged towards situations and actions that part of us wants to resist. From this place of being torn, we say 'lead us not into temptation', and it makes sense to do so. That Christians, in so many

12 On this see Herbert McCabe OP (1980), 'God II: Freedom' in *New Blackfriars*, 61(725), pp. 456-69.

13 Liturgy of the Paschal Vigil, *Exsultet*.

languages, over the centuries have felt in natural to plead with God in this stark way,¹⁴ puts me in mind of Wittgenstein's words about Christianity,

The Christian religion is only for one who needs infinite help, therefore only for one who feels an infinite need. The whole planet cannot be in greater anguish than a *single* soul. The Christian faith – as I view it – is the refuge in this ultimate anguish.¹⁵

We'll return to Wittgenstein, below. First: the current text of the Our Father is the what we have learned to say. For most of us, coming to pray this way is inseparable from learning how to practice Christianity.¹⁶ Familiar words come to the tongue: of all liturgical forms of prayer, the Our Father is probably the one first learned by children, last forgotten by dementia patients. These facts alone ought to make ecclesiastical authorities intensely wary of change. Nor is the manner in which saying the Our Father unites us with other Christians merely synchronic. In saying these words, we feel, we are sharing in the story of God's people – God's useless, broken, and temptation-prone people, but still loved by God – over the centuries.

Prayer is emotionally and existentially laden, and it is communal, to do with belonging. These features are all too easily forgotten if too distanced and academic an approach is taken towards liturgy. Wittgenstein wrote an influential series of comments on Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Here he criticised the view, ever present in Frazer that magic and religion are failed attempts at science,

[Frazer's account] makes [magical and religious] notions appear as mistakes.

Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the *Confessions*?¹⁷

Later on he insists that the view of even the kind of religion Frazer regarded as 'primitive' as a false start at science doesn't stand up to scrutiny,

The same [person] who, apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks his knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy.¹⁸

The practitioner of this rite is not lacking theoretical knowledge or technical expertise. He is simply engaged in something distinct from these things when he performs the rite. There is a parallel with a passage in the *Lectures on Religious Belief*,

You might say: 'For a blunder, that's too big.' If you suddenly wrote numbers down on the blackboard, and then said: 'Now, I'm going to add', and then said: '2 and 21 is 13,' etc. I'd say: 'This is no blunder.'¹⁹

We cannot think so little of the person writing that we take them to be making a catastrophically simple mistake of arithmetic. They must be doing something we don't understand: 'this is no blunder!' Somebody who takes Christian prayer to be a matter of informing God of a number of

14 It is only a philosopher who would make the mistake of thinking that because we cannot but, and rightly, plead with God that we must therefore believe (contrary to faith) that God is some kind of malleable entity who can be brought round to our way of thinking. Praying is an activity; it does not commit one to a metaphysical theory about God, any more than do gospel passages such as Luke 11:5-13.

15 Norman Malcolm (1993), *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, London: Routledge p. 17.

16 Note in this respect the presentation of the Our Father at a Lenten scrutiny for RCIA participants.

17 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1979), *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. Translated by A.C. Miles and Rush Rhees. Rexford: Brynmill Press. p. 1.

18 Wittgenstein (1979), p. 4.

19 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1966), *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Oxford: Wiley. pp. 61-2.

propositions we hold to be true (such as that God can lead us into temptation) and of our desires (such as that we'd rather not be led into temptation) is making a mistake of a similar sort. Prayer is not an inefficient means of communicating calm beliefs and desires – it is a motley of rages, censings, bowings, pleadings, joyful exhortations, recitations, silences; it is a bubbling up of fear, a reminder that I am, in spite of it all, a baptised child of God – all of this, and so on, in a list that could not even in principle be completed. Prayer is a *sui generis*, irreducible phenomenon, which we, as Christians, believe somehow, incredibly, is a participation in the triune life of God through the Incarnation of the Word as one-who-prays.

'I will teach you differences'²⁰

Forgetfulness of prayer's nature as prayer, particularly in the case of liturgical prayer, has been a feature of parts of the Church since the Second Vatican Council. Didacticism has both liberal and conservative forms, and no reader of this journal is likely to require anything by way of example. In conclusion, however, it is worth emphasising that nothing in the foregoing implies that it is not interesting or potentially worthwhile for the Christian life to enquire into the meaning for the evangelists of *peirasmon* or the roots of this expression in the historical Jesus.

Pegola, for example, follows the NRSV in translating *peirasmon* 'time of trial', adding in a footnote that this 'is not [a plea] to be free from temptation or testing, but for help to avoid falling into the trap'. He offers this exegesis,

We are weak exposed to all kinds of dangers and risks that can ruin our life, and remove us permanently from God's reign. We are threatened by the mystery of evil. That is why Jesus teaches us to pray: "Do not let us be tempted to reject your reign and your justice definitively. Give us your power. Don't let us be defeated in the final trial. In the midst of temptation and evil, let us depend on your powerful help."²¹

Speaking for myself, I find this immensely useful for understanding the mission of Jesus and Christian life. Reflection on this sort of material is likely to inform my reading of scripture and my prayer. But this ought not to lull us into forgetting that study and liturgy are radically different types of activities. Whilst both can be orientated towards the Kingdom of God, the nature of that relationship is different in each case. And whilst each can have a bearing on the other, that bearing needs to be recognised as complex and multiply mediated. My point in the previous section was not, then, an anti-intellectual one, or a side-sweep at biblical criticism, but rather a request that we recognise the distinctive character of two human activities: prayer and study.

We all know people who don't recognise the distinction. The well-read lay-person who inflicts his extensive reading of Hans Kung on what was supposed to be a parish prayer group is one example; the parish priest who prefaces every reading at mass with a commentary culled from the shelves of the presbytery is another. Many of us have been a version of one of these characters at some point. Were other regions to follow Italy in re-translating the Our Father we would be in the odd situation of the Church corporately failing in this way. Well might we pray, 'lead us not into temptation'.

²⁰ *King Lear* 1.4. Wittgenstein considered the quote as an epigraph for the *Philosophical Investigations* – the point being one about the diversity of language use.

²¹ José A. Pagola (2009), *Jesus: an historical approximation*. Translated by Margaret Wilde. Miami: Convivium. p. 316