

Why I Believe in God and Prayer

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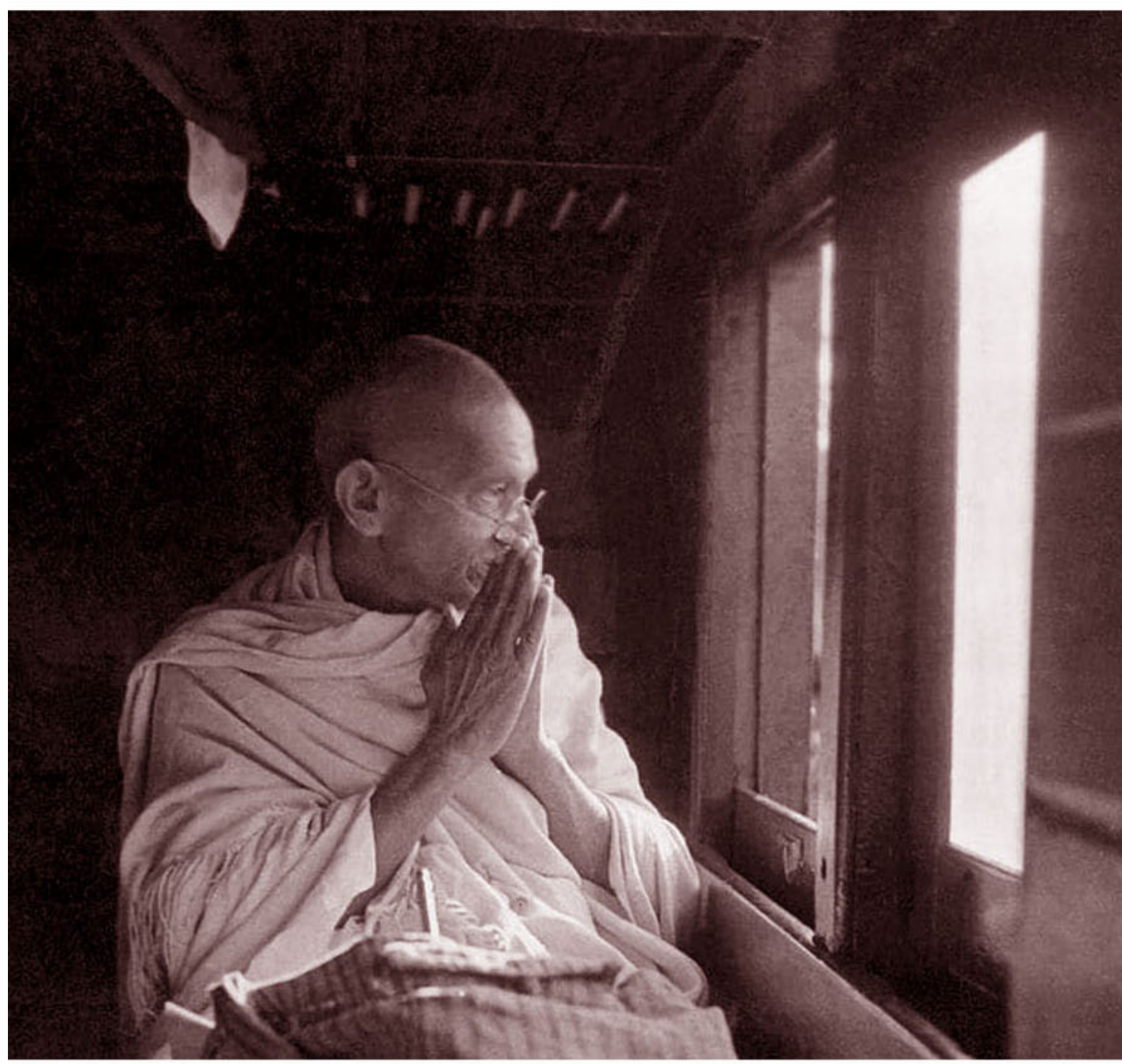


A great man of India sends a stirring message of faith to a world beset by war

★ **I AM** a firm believer in prayer. Of all things, it has been the most important to me in my life, the surest staff on which to lean. It is my advice to any who come to me in confusion or weakness or with a problem that is driving them to despair. For I believe that it has not only a spiritual but also a concrete, practical value.

Prayer is all too commonly regarded as a pious ritual, an easy and respectable habit, or even as a form of insurance. Considered in this light, it is meaningless; for the act itself is empty. Its tremendous inherent power lies entirely in what is given to it and the quality of the faith from which it comes. The mere attitude of worship, a mere sinking to the knees and bowing of the head, is without significance and devoid of value.

I have been asked what has made me so profound a believer in its virtues and efficacy. I know myself fairly well. By nature I am timid and anything but a brave man. I should never have been able to face certain crises with courage nor endure them with fortitude had it not been for prayer. Perhaps the most dramatic example I can remember is something that occurred a good many years ago in South Africa.



There was at that time a law directed expressly against Indians in South Africa, and I had come there to oppose it. My ship was met by a hostile mob and I was advised to stay on board for the sake of my physical safety, for the crowd of men had come with the announced intention of lynching me. I went ashore nevertheless. I was stoned and kicked and beaten a good deal; but I had prayed for the courage to face the mob, and that courage came and did not fail me.

I do not mean by this that I regard myself as particularly favored by the Divinity and able always to obtain that for which I ask; should I be so foolish, whatever strength I have found in prayer would at once be lost to me.

I believe, instead, that prayer has brought me only an infinitesimal portion of what it would bring me were my faith more perfect and my devotion more complete. The weakness is not in prayer; it is in the individual who prays.

Prayer implies and demands belief in God; not necessarily belief in God as He is interpreted by one special religion or one sect of that religion, but belief in the existence of Divinity, a wholehearted and firm belief without intellectual reservations.

But, the skeptic says, how can any intelligent man sincerely believe in the existence of an all-powerful, wise, and merciful God when such cruel and senseless things are committed on earth as we see around us today? How can we reconcile these, he asks, with the conception of Divinity? Is not prayer therefore demonstrably worthless?

Let us consider this familiar argument and attempt to answer in their own terms those who advance it. It appears to me that, whether or not they realize it, they are saying in effect that the Divinity is to be blamed for all horror and slaughter and oppression.

But is it not profoundly significant that we are able to recognize these things for the crimes that they are, rather than blandly accepting them without condemnation? In the final analysis, what is it that enables us to differentiate between good and evil? What is the quality in us that

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makes us instinctively abhor violence and, deep in our hearts, know it for the evil that it is, however much we may attempt to rationalize it?

I believe that without Divinity there would be no recognition of good and evil; there would be no conception of "right" and "wrong"; and therefore there would be no charity and devotion and nobility of spirit. Were these lacking in the world, then perhaps we might with reason declare there is no God.

In true democracy, I believe, is found the very essence and spirit of the divine principle. True democracy allows the people to govern themselves and decide for themselves; it grants them liberty of thought and liberty to express that thought. In so doing, they may often fall into error and perhaps commit crimes that cause untold suffering; but so long as they have liberty they will detect the error and finally overcome it at its root. The gain might be slowly won, but it will be lasting because it was achieved by their own will and effort. No gain is worth the winning, save that you win it yourself.

Would those who question the existence of God on the grounds of the mistakes that are committed in the world today prefer a God that struck down in death every wrongdoer, thus in principle establishing a benevolent spiritual dictatorship in which nothing would be won by the efforts of man himself?

It is the Fascist, not the democratic, state that relieves us of the necessity of thinking for ourselves and striving to work for our own improvement and the improvement of our fellow man!

The skeptic and the atheist point to those who worship God because it is the fashion to do so, or in order to deceive, and say, "If these are believers, then we are unbelievers." But Jesus worshiped God, too; is it not His example and faith that should be considered, rather than the example of a hypocrite?

There is something infinitely higher than intellect that rules us all, the skeptics included. Their skepticism and philosophy does not help them in the critical periods of their lives; face to face with a calamity, they find that there is little comfort and satisfaction in intellectual belief. The spiritual conception, which eludes the intellect, alone permits man to live to the fullest of his powers.

Because I believe in God, I believe in prayer. It is the surest means of consciousness of His presence; that is its meaning, its strength, and its reward.

Liberty

July 19, 1941

OldMagazineArticles.com