

## FOREWORD

From their earliest moments, the three monotheistic faiths of Abraham—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have all shared certain common assumptions about, and disciplines of, religious and spiritual formation. All three appoint one day each week as sacred unto God. All three require tithing. Each encourages spiritual pilgrimage. All three govern themselves according to the rhythms of a liturgical year; and each teaches the uses of fasting at appointed seasons in either the cycles of physical time or of a believer's individual courses. Most significantly for our purposes here, however, all three have, from their very inception, assumed the practice of fixed-hour prayer as part and parcel of the observant life.

It was understood, that is, that at set hours of each day the faithful would interrupt the business of vocational life in order to praise and worship the Almighty One, thereby not only offering an appropriate sacrifice of time and deliberate intention, but also assuring that the thoughts and actions of each worshiper had been returned to the Source from which he or she had come and to which he or she would ultimately be accountable. In general, the appointed prayers were usually offered in the physical presence of other worshipers, whether family or co-workers or simply co-religionists; but one did not have to be in the physical

company of other believers to do so. Because the hours of prayer were fixed or set, one could stop wherever one was, be it alone or in company, and offer the appointed words of praise and thanksgiving, knowing thereby that one was part of the whole company of believers worshiping together across geography and circumstance before the throne of God.

This is a potent image and a potent practice that hones the soul as surely as it hones and shapes the communion of which the soul is a member. It is still assumed today in both Judaism and Islam; in those faiths, the faithful stop and the faithful pray. It was also assumed in apostolic Christianity: Peter received the vision of the descending sheet while on the rooftop in Joppa for noon prayers. The flames of Pentecost descended on the early believers while they were gathered together in an upper room for nine o'clock prayers. Peter and John exercised the first healing after Christ's resurrection by ministering to the cripple whom they found on the Temple steps as they made their way to three o'clock prayers. . . .

Fixed-hour prayer was assumed as part of Christian devotion for several centuries, in fact, until Rome fell. After that, the decimation of Roman civilization drove the dangerous and literate business of fixed-hour prayer into the safekeeping primarily of monasteries and, to some extent, of royal households. Because of those long, dark centuries when only the clergy and the privileged had both prayer books and the literacy with which to use them, fixed-hour prayer (or the keeping of the offices, to use

another familiar name for the discipline as it is followed in Christianity) came to be associated in the minds of the humble faithful as particular not to the Christian tradition itself, but to chanting monks and/or times of sequestered individual devotion. Nothing could have been, or could be, farther from the truth. And little could have been more detrimental, more enervating, to the whole body of Christ on earth than the loss of those diurnal rhythms of praise and thanksgiving by all believers. As a result and as a part of its own emergence and re-configuration, what post-modern, post-denominational, post-Reformation Christianity now calls us to is the reclamation by all Christians of fixed-hour prayer and of the spiritual richness that comes from this most ancient and holy practice.

You will read here about several manuals or books for keeping the hours as twenty-first-century Christians. Among them you will discover a chapter about *The Divine Hours*, a manual or breviary that I had the great joy of compiling. But this book is not about any particular prayer book or prayer tool. Rather it is about the fact that now, because primarily of the work of a rising generation of young Christians who want more of the authentic in their Christian practice, there are manifold such books and tools. Scot McKnight, in fact, lovingly introduces some half dozen or so of them. These pages celebrate something else as well, though. They celebrate the fact that in this newfound multiplicity of resources, the individual Christian can experience the freedom of growing from the simpler manuals to the more intricate and sometimes richer

ones. This book celebrates, in other words, the near-miracle that one is able now to grow in this discipline in concord with one's own increasing spiritual perception of the place that is prayer.

But this book is more even than all that. This book is the tool that those of us who have worked these fields for many years have not, up until now, had. This book has the power of succinct statement. In one phrase, Scot McKnight has captured the essence of what fixed-hour prayer is: It is praying *with* the Church. What a simple insight, yet brilliant in its perfect accuracy. McKnight has also, pastorally and with great skill, separated the discipline of fixed-hour prayer from the exercise of other forms of prayer, showing us with the deft insights of one who is himself a practitioner, the need for all of them and the place of each way in approaching God.

If a generation of new Christians has opened the doors to fixed-hour prayer, then just as surely Scot McKnight has swept clean the room and prepared a place for all of us to be Church here, undivided and indivisible. I welcome that with quiet joy, and I strongly suspect you will too.

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