A Content Analysis of the Praying Practices of Dutch Youth*

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There has been very little empirical research about prayer. No convincing psychological theory exists, nor does agreement about definitions or basic concepts. In our research, open-ended questions were used to determine the meaning of prayer for modern youth. A computerized procedure (TexTable) was used to analyze the answers. The results showed that the common prayer of youth can be summarized in one sentence, composed of seven structural elements: “Because of some reason (1. need) I address myself (2. action) to someone or something (3. direction) at a particular moment (4. time), at a particular place (5. place), in a particular way (6. method) to achieve something (7. effect).” These seven structural elements and their individual contents (totalling 45 categories) were analyzed for praying frequency and denomination. The correlations among the structural elements pointed to rather weak connections of needs, actions, and effects. This finding could be clarified by applying Clifford Geertz’s (1966) constructionist definition of religion to a definition of prayer. Praying was described by the respondents as a coping strategy, mostly used to make things acceptable as they are (e.g., death and suffering), but sometimes also as a motivational device or an anticipatory action to change things according to one’s wishes.

INTRODUCTION

The lack of psychological research on prayer has been often criticized (Pratt 1910; Finney and Malony 1985; Gill 1987). While empirical studies about prayer have been undertaken, they are few in number and have provoked a lot of confusing argument (cf. Finney and Malony 1985 for a review). Hardly any research has been done on praying practices as such. There is also no clear-cut theory of prayer; in fact, there is no agreement about the definitions and basic concepts of prayer. Gill (1987:493) concluded that no precise definition

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for "prayer" exists; the word serves only as "a general focusing device."

Our research did not start from a preliminary concept. We simply asked our subjects to describe how they defined prayer. Consequently, the main data were spontaneous, written, self-formulated answers to questions about the definitions, motivations, and methods of prayer.

In putting these questions to our subjects, we focused on the following core topics found in the literature about praying:

1. **Why do people pray?** Finney and Malony (1985), when reviewing several studies, stressed the importance of a motivation or need as the impetus to prayer. In the classical studies of Tylor ([1871] 1958) and James ([1902] 1982), needs were already a central topic. Friedrich Heiler's (1921) work on prayer also gave special attention to needs. At any rate, it seems essential to ask for something when praying. In fact, Capps (1982) called petitionary prayer "the heart of prayer."

2. **How do people pray?** Gill (1987:490) interpreted prayer primarily as an "act of communication" and "an act of speech." In most research, this view has been explicitly or implicitly supported. Since prayer is essentially an act, we prefer to use the verbal form, "praying."

3. **To whom do people pray?** The direction of prayer is mentioned by Tylor ([1871] 1958): There has to be a "Thou," as he called it. However, Gill (1987:491) and Heiler (1961:306) also referred to nontheistic, meditational forms of prayer.

4. **What effects do prayers have?** The effects of prayer have been a major point of discussion. Pratt (1910) provided a list of subjective benefits of prayer by quoting individuals whom he interviewed. Johnson (1945) proposed a similar list of effects (and motivations) of prayer. However, Finney and Malony (1985:107) added that "Johnson's speculations have not yet been empirically investigated."

We will test the lists of Pratt and Johnson empirically by studying the effects our respondents mentioned, but our main concern in this research is the study of two central topics. First, *what are the structure and content of prayer?* The structural aspects can be summarized as: why (need), how (method), to whom (direction) and with what effects people pray. The content of prayer consists of the different kinds of needs, methods, directions, and effects. We have also studied whether there were differences among our subjects in the completeness of their praying structures and in the contents of their prayers according to denomination and praying experience. Second, we asked *what is the relation between needs and effects?* If prayer is mostly petitionary and instigated by need, it seems logical that needs and effects are homologous. Nevertheless, James Pratt (1910) argued that such a homology is not necessary or even likely. Furthermore, can one maintain that prayer is always based on a communication to a (personal) God? Capps (1982), among others, argued that it is, but Gill (1987:491) and Heiler (1961:306) claimed that non-communicational forms of prayer also exist.

**SAMPLE AND METHOD**

In 1983, a national survey was conducted among 5,000 Dutch high school pupils (mean age 16.8 years), who were asked closed questions about political and religious matters (de Hart, 1990). In 1985, 192 of these same pupils were asked to answer an extensive
questionnaire, which consisted partly of open-ended questions. This sample was stratified according to religious affiliation to ensure that each major denomination would be substantially represented. The sample consisted of 61 non-affiliated, 60 Catholic, and 71 Protestant pupils (34 Dutch Reformed and 37 Calvinist). Three of the open-ended questions concerned praying: 1) “What is praying to you?”; 2) “At what moments do you feel the need to pray?”; and 3) “How do you pray?” Our results were based on a content-analysis of the answers to these three open-ended questions and to two closed questions regarding religious affiliation and praying frequency. A computerized technique for content-analysis (TexTable) was used to analyze the open-ended answers (Janssen et al. 1987).

MAJOR FINDINGS

The Formal Structure of Prayer

We can summarize the ideal structure of prayer in one sentence: “Because of some reason, I address myself to someone in a particular way, at a particular place, at a particular time to achieve something” (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

THE FOCUSING DEVICE OF PRAYING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Need (conditional adjunct)</th>
<th>2. Action (predicate)</th>
<th>7. Effect (direct object)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Direction (indirect object)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Time (adverbial adjunct 1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Place (adverbial adjunct 2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Method (adverbial adjunct 3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each subject was given a score on each structural aspect, using a scale ranging from 0, no elements mentioned, to 7, all elements mentioned. The mean score totaled 3.5, with non-prayers scoring a mean of 2.1, and prayers scoring 3.7 (No Affiliation = 3.3; Roman Catholics = 3.6; Dutch Reformed = 3.6; Calvinists = 4.4). An interpretation of the denominational differences will be given below.

We further established a correlation of .45 (Pearson r, p < .001) between the number of structural elements mentioned and praying frequency. The scores ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (daily). Competence and experience indeed had an influence on the self-formulated answers: If people prayed, and if they prayed more regularly, their description of prayer was more complete and more extensive.

The Content of Prayer

Until now, we have discussed the formal structure of prayers, but what do people really do when they pray? What is the content of this formal structure? We distinguished 45 categories (see Table 1):
### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Category</th>
<th>Content References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1. Need**         | personal problems (60)  
|                     | sickness (23)  
|                     | happiness (20)  
| (85%)               | death (16)   
|                     | examinations (10)  
|                     | war/disaster (6)  
|                     | problems of others (6)  
|                     | change (6)  
|                     | habit (4)  
|                     | sin (3)  
|                     | ask/wish (33)  
| **2. Action**       | tell/monologue (38)  
|                     | meditate (22)  
| (83%)               | talk/dialogue (36)  
|                     | thank/praise (14)  
| **3. Direction**    | God/Lord (80)  
|                     | Spirit/Power (13)  
| (60%)               | Someone (11)  
|                     | Mary/Jesus (2)  
| **4. Time**         | evening/night (90)  
| (20%)               | at day (8)  
|                     | anytime (5)  
| **5. Place**        | bed (86)  
| (34%)               | home (11)  
|                     | outside (9)  
|                     | church (11)  
| **6. Method**       | posture: hands joined (36)  
| (55%)               | eyes closed (26)  
|                     | kneeling down (4)  
|                     | alone (39)  
|                     | prayer-formula (17)  
|                     | aloud (4)  
|                     | low voice (19)  
| **7. Effect**       | help/support (38)  
| (37%)               | favor (34)  
|                     | remission (13)  
|                     | trust (9)  
|                     | blessing (4)  
|                     | low voice (19)  
|                     | protection (6)  
|                     | strength/power (6)  
|                     | understanding (1)  
|                     | advice (1)  

*Note:* The percentages of the structural aspects are calculated in reference to the whole group (n = 192). The percentages for the content categories are calculated in reference to the number of subjects that mentioned the structural aspect (n = 55% of 192; 83% of 192; 60% of 192; etc.). Because each subject could mention several aspects, the total number may exceed 100% (e.g., needs = 154%).

1. **Needs.** Praying was generally motivated by problems: i.e., personal problems; sickness; death (of others, mostly relatives); war/disaster; examinations; problems of others; and sin. These totalled 81% of all the needs mentioned (124/154). Only 13% (20/154) of the needs were related to happiness; other needs (10/154) totalled 6%.

2. **Actions.** Surprisingly, only 33% of the praying actions consisted of asking or wishing for something. Given the vast number of problems people pray for, one would expect a larger number of petitioning actions. However, our data indicated that there is no direct relation between needs and actions. A classical issue has been whether "prayer is a monologue, dialogue or neither" (Gill 1987:492). Scholars do not agree, and neither did our subjects: The latter mostly defined prayer as a monologue (especially when meditation was included in that category), but there was only slightly less talk of prayer as a dialogue. Thanksgiving and praise, well-known traditional types of prayer, were mentioned by only 14%.

3. **Directions.** The direction of prayer has been a related, regular topic in the literature. Our research indicated that most prayers (60%) have God as their direction.

4. **Times and Places.** When our subjects mentioned time and place, they were almost unanimous: Young people pray at night in bed. Surprisingly few (11%) mentioned the church.
(6) Methods. The methods of praying included some traditional procedures (hands joined, eyes closed, using prayer formulas), but others preferred to pray in silence and alone.

(7) Effects. The results showed that "help/support" and "favor" were considered the most important effects of prayer. Most striking, as we see it, was the rather abstract, psychological terminology which people used to describe prayers' effects, especially in relation to the more concrete definition of needs. Earlier we mentioned a rather weak connection between needs and actions; there was also a weak relation between needs and effects.

We have shown that there were differences in the completeness of the open-ended answers related to experience and competence. We also expected differences among the denominations. Table 2 contains all significant content differences.

**TABLE 2**

SIGNIFICANT CONTENT DIFFERENCES (CHI-SQUARE, p < .05) IN PRAYING-PRACTICE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN PERCENTAGES FOR EACH STRUCTURAL CATEGORY (n = 182)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Elements</th>
<th>Non-Prayers (n = 27)</th>
<th>No Affiliation (n = 34)</th>
<th>Roman Catholic (n = 60)</th>
<th>Dutch Reformed (n = 34)</th>
<th>Calvinist (n = 37)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Need</td>
<td>happiness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Action</td>
<td>dialogue</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>meditate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Direction</td>
<td>God</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Method</td>
<td>hands joined</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>eyes closed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prayer-formula</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>aloud</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Effect</td>
<td>help/support</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>favor</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>remission</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In this context, "prayers" refers to the persons who are praying, not to what they do.

These results were not easy to interpret. It seems that non-prayers tended to define praying in a rather traditional way: They often mentioned the categories "dialogue," "God," and "help/support." Closer analysis revealed that they were referring to the prayers of others or to their former praying practices while living at home. The answers of the non-prayers were rather incomplete, as we have already shown. The differences between the praying groups can be partly understood as influenced by the traditions of each denomination and its specific culture. Earlier research in the Netherlands has revealed that traditional opinions about religion decrease in the following order: no affiliation → Roman Catholic → Dutch Reformed → Calvinist (Schreuder and Peters 1987). Without too much speculation, one could maintain that some of the traditional (spiritually and theologically inspired) differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant practices could
be related to these results: Roman Catholics use prayer formulas more often, while Protestants pray aloud more often, with eyes closed, hands joined, and directing themselves personally (not by formula) to God. It could be argued further that their theological convictions (e.g., a belief in predestination) prevent Protestants from being too specific about prayer's effects in general.

Finally, we returned to the original answers of our respondents. By specifying the characteristics for each group mentioned in Table 2, we found the ideal-typical praying practice for each group. For instance, we let the computer search the texts of Roman Catholics who meditate, refer to God, use prayer formulas, and ask for favors. After specifying similar “if statements,” we found the literal answers optimally fitting the characteristics of each group. Table 3 gives the results.

TABLE 3

TEXTABLE FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO OPTIMALLY FIT THE CHARACTERISTICS IN TABLE 2 CONTAINING LITERAL ANSWERS TO THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS: 1) “WHAT IS PRAYING FOR YOU?” 2) “AT WHAT MOMENTS DID YOU FEEL THE NEED TO PRAY?” AND 3) “HOW DO YOU PRAY?”

Non-Prayers
1. Talk to God in thoughts to get something or to give thanks.
2. Earlier in life when I was scared, for example when my parents had a quarrel.
3. I don’t pray anymore; earlier in life I told a complete story to ask for help.

Prayers: No Affiliation
1. A kind of meditation: to let the strength in head and hands go together: a real pleasure.
2. With fears of examinations, but especially with relational problems.
3. Press one hand in the other; raise the pressure in your head.

Prayers: Roman Catholic
1. Try to arrange your thoughts, mostly to ask a favor for other people.
2. When my brother had to undergo an operation and was in the hospital for a long time.
3. Tell in thought why and for what you pray and thereafter an “Our Father” and a “Hail Mary.”

Prayers: Dutch Reformed
1. Ask for remission of sins and support for me and others.
2. When I have done something terrible or something happens.
3. Eyes closed, hands joined and thinking, and mumbling a prayer.

Prayers: Calvinist
1. To share your cares with God, eventually asking Him for help for yourself and for others.
2. When I felt guilty because I behaved badly after good intentions.
3. Alone, sitting, lying and talking, eyes closed and hands joined.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Of course, an empirical study based on a specified sample of Dutch youth averaging 17 years old had its limitations. The richness of possible praying practices, as described for instance by Heiler (1921), cannot be expected to appear. Nevertheless, our results do allow for some tentative conclusions. If we compare the above reflections on petitionary
prayer with the data we presented, there seems at first to be a major fit. Our respondents prayed when they were in trouble, when their trouble was incurable, and for the health of others; some even prayed when the weather was bad or when a dog was ill. There was no need common or childish enough to be excluded. Thus, the endless array of supplications stands as before. The observation made by Dorothee Sölle (1965), that “prayer in the case of ultimate need is vanishing in a secularizing society,” was not corroborated, and her perception “that this can be positive, because prayer does not belong to borderline situations but to the centre of life” seems premature. Our subjects prayed almost exclusively in the case of need. It seems that nothing has changed since the days of Tylor.

However, there was an important difference between the classical petitionary prayer and the petitionary prayers of our subjects. Tylor and James observed that people pray for health and for fine weather, i.e., the effects they seek are directly derived from their needs. We found that our subjects prayed in a different way, because, as we observed, their needs consisted of concrete moments and feelings of unhappiness, while the effects were formulated abstractly and in general terms (i.e., as help/support, favor, rest, trust, remission, blessing, etc.). For example, when our subjects were ill they did not pray for immediate cure; they prayed instead for help, trust, and blessing. So, praying seems primarily to be a way of coping with inevitable, incurable unhappiness. Pratt (1910) concluded that there is “a simple human impulse to pray, to cry out for the help we need, for the good we want.” According to Heiler (1961:307), the elementary form of prayer is a cry, as shown in old praying formulas like the Hallelujah and the Kyrie eleison. Thus, there is ample evidence to stress the importance of petitionary prayer as an involuntary cry to help, not mitigated by the availability of real help. It could be argued that people adapt the intended effects to the experienced effects, accepting a principal discrepancy between needs and effects.

Our main conclusion can be summarized by applying Clifford Geertz’s (1966) definition of religion to a definition of prayer. Geertz interpreted religion as a semiotic device: Religion is the technique people use to accord the picture they have of the world “in sheer actuality” (the worldview) with the picture of the world as they think it should be (the ethos). Similarly, prayer is also the act of attuning worldview and ethos. This process can take two directions: assimilation (making things acceptable as they are) or accommodation (changing things according to our wishes). Because praying, according to the definition of our subjects, is very often stimulated by incurable and insoluble problems, it mostly functions as a coping mechanism. Empirically speaking, this function of prayer is by far the most important, although praying as a concentrated motivation to change should not be forgotten. Our subjects referred to this motivation when they were praying about their examinations. The sociobiologist Wilson (1978) emphasized the function of rituals as “anticipatory action.” Thus, praying can be understood as a concentrated preparation to change or rearrange elements of everyday life.

Prayer can also be seen as a way of constructing reality, a way of making sense in a multi-interpretable world. This idea, which originated from symbolic interactionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and influenced Geertz’s definition of religion, is also held by modern psychologists (Gergen 1985). People constantly have to shape and reshape the world they live in, and praying practices function as a psychological mechanism for doing so. Fowler (1974), in presenting a developmental perspective on faith, defined faith
“as a verb” or “an active mode of being”: “Faith is a way of construing or interpreting one’s experience.” We also defined praying as a verb, as an activity: Praying is a mechanism to construct and interpret one’s experience.

The general structure of praying (which contains seven elements and points in two directions) can be applied to different theological or metaphysical contexts, as shown in the differences among our subjects’ denominations. Effects are more abstract or more concrete according to the philosophy one supports but are formulated and experienced nevertheless. One who believes in a personal God will define prayer as a dialogue, while one who believes in an undefinable power will prefer definitions of meditation. Both define an act. As mentioned earlier, Capps (1982) considered petitionary prayer to be “the heart of prayer.” Our data supported his contention by showing that petitionary prayer is empirically prominent. Capps’s interpretation of petitionary prayer, however, in terms of transaction and communication (which function psychologically by co-orientation and role-taking) is interesting but seems to be a specific characteristic only of those who pray to a personal God. The structural layer we discovered seems to be situated at a deeper, more general level. Augustine already stressed the constructivist perspective: One has to pray, he said, “ut ipsa (mens) construat, non ut Deus instruat,” that is “to construct the soul, not to instruct God” (Augustinus 1872). Although there are important contextual and theological differences between Augustine’s conceptions and the conceptions of our subjects, there is a related psychology of praying. It seems that in the psychology of prayer, including petitionary prayer, the construction aspect is more general and more important than the communication aspect.

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