Praying as a universalising variable

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Ever since the emergence of modern empirical psychology, now more than a hundred years ago, prayer has been an important issue on the agenda (James, 1902; Strong, 1909; Pratt 1920; Heiler, 1932; Hodge, 1931; Finney & Malony, 1985; Wulff, 1991; Brown, 1994; Francis & Evans, 1996). Founding fathers like William James and Wilhelm Wundt were among the first psychologists who theorised and did preliminary research on the subject. Two main conclusions have recurred time and again.

First. Prayer is the essential topic in the psychology of religion. Prayer is “the very soul and essence of religion” (James, 1902/1985, p. 365); it is “the most spontaneous and the most personal expression of religion” (Heiler, 1932/1958, p. 353); “the most characteristic expression of religious life” (Brede Kristensen, 1971, p. 417); “a universal religious phenomenon”, “an essential element in all religion” (Selbie, 1924, p. 207, p. 218); “prayer is wide as the world and older than history”, “prayer is an instinct of the human heart” (D’Arcy, 1918, p. 171); “a history and psychology of prayer would almost be equivalent to a history and psychology of religion” (Coe, 1916, p. 302). It would not be difficult to extend this list. The conclusion would be the same as the one Hodge drew: “prayer is the centre and soul of all religion” (quoted in Francis & Evans, 1995).

Second. There is no conclusive research on the psychology of prayer. In 1912 James Bisset Pratt concluded: “so little attempt [is being] made to study empirically what is perhaps the most important and most vital fact of religion” (p. 48). In 1985 Finney and Malony repeated this complaint: “Nowhere is the long-standing breach between psychology and religion more evident than in the lack of research on prayer” (p. 104). Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger & Gorsuch (1996) concluded that there is still little known about the phenomenology of prayer, and Francis and Evans noted: “it is clear, however, from the major text books in the psychology of religion that the empirical study of prayer is an underdeveloped field of research” (1995, p. 372). The list of quotes could be easily extended, and once again the conclusion would be the same as the one Gill (1987) draws in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*: “the general study of prayer is undeveloped and naive” (p. 489).

So while prayer is an essential topic in the psychology of religion, it has not received the attention it deserves. Neither does it get the right attention, as we hope to show. Too much effort has been put into the study of the objective effects of prayer; too little research has been done on the process of prayer as such. Following a brief history of the psychology of prayer, we will introduce our own research. It focuses on the question of what prayer is, in search of a phenomenology of prayer, and on the subjective meaning of prayer. In the conclusion, we will return
to the promising but forgotten psychological studies on prayer by Anna Louise Strong (1909) and George Albert Coe (1916). Their approach deserves our attention again, because it corresponds with modern developments in psychology, in particular the theory of the dialogical self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

A brief history of prayer research

From the beginning of psychology until our days, people and psychologists have been asking whether prayer actually achieves anything. Will we get cured, will it rain if we pray? Sir Francis Galton, who introduced statistics into psychology, did the first empirical studies in 1873. His conclusions were negative. The British royal family, a family that people prayed for daily, turned out to be rather unhealthy. Neither people who pray a great deal, nor people for whom others pray, live spectacularly longer. The average lifespan of the clergy was found to be slightly longer than that of people in other professions (lawyers, doctors), but that could be explained by the easy country life they live. Galton, who was called ‘a flippant freethinker’ even though he used to pray each time before he wrote a new scientific article, was widely criticised, on both methodological and theological grounds (Wulff 1991). Karl Pearson (1924) for instance, who still lives on as the name-giver of the most-used correlation coefficient on earth, pointed out several methodological flaws in Galton’s research design. After nearly a century, in the nineteen-sixties, Galton’s approach was taken up again. This time based on a solid, well-designed experimental approach, in a double-blind clinical trial. The results, presented by Joyce and Welldon (1965), were as negative as those of Galton, to whom they dedicated their endeavours. No objective efficacy of prayer was found. But then, in 1988, Randolph C. Byrd found positive therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer in a Coronary Care Unit population. As in the case of Joyce and Welldon, the approach was based on a double-blind experiment. As in Galton’s time, his research met with a great deal of criticism, but this time there were also positive and even enthusiastic reactions. Several spectacular, large-scale research projects followed in the wake of his success (for instance Harris et al., 1999) and more are on their way.

In today’s Western medical journals the efficacy of prayer is a hot item. On the whole, we would say that the results are as yet pretty much inconclusive. We share the conclusions of Sloan and colleagues in The Lancet of February 1999, that “even in the best studies, the evidence of an association between religion, spirituality and health is weak and inconsistent”. However, the critique goes beyond methodology. It is based primarily on psychological and theological arguments. In our opinion, one can no longer speak of a psychological approach when the consciousness of the individual under study is methodologically ruled out. A vague or suppressed consciousness is food for psychologists, but zero consciousness is psychologically unmanageable. In the double-blind approach to distant or remote prayer the subjects who are prayed for do not know that they are being
prayed for and some approaches are even triple-blind, with no informed consent being asked at all. The elimination of consciousness is seen as essential, which even leads to the proposition that it would be preferable to study the effect of intercessory prayer on microbes and plants (Dossey, 1997; Astin et al., 2000). Such research is beyond psychology and Thouless (1971) has tellingly called it “experimental theology”. But the Byrd-approach seems untenable from a theological point of view as well. Can God be put on trial? Can God be controlled as an intervening variable? Most theologians will say no. Byrd really goes too far. In his acknowledgements he thanks the organisation he works for and Mrs. Janet Greene for her dedication to his study, and he concludes: “I thank God for responding to the many prayers made on behalf of the patients” (p. 829). We do not think God is waiting for us to ask Him to carry out our wishes. Vergote (2001) had similar scientific practice in mind when he spoke of “the pragmatic perverting of religion”.

So the study of the objective effects of prayer leads to a dead end, both in psychology and theology. William James (1902/1985), on the other hand, stressed the possible importance of subjective effects. Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) did the same and pointed to the source of the misunderstanding: “L’efficacité morale du rite, qui est réelle, a fait croire à son efficacité physique, qui est imaginaire” (“The power of the rite over minds, which is real, made them believe in its power over things, which is imaginary”. p. 364). Gilbert, Brown, Pinel and Wilson (2000) came to essentially the same conclusion on the basis of social psychological experiments. People underestimate psychological processes and “confuse their own optimisation of subjective reality with an external agent’s optimisation of objective reality” (p. 698). Already Sir Francis Galton (1873) noted: “a confident sense of communion with God must necessarily rejoice and strengthen the heart, and divert it from petty cares (...) it is found to give serenity during the trials of life and in the shadow of approaching death” (1872, p. 135). It is an old piece of wisdom that prayer is not meant to change God but to change the individual who is praying. As the famous Roman emperor and stoic Marcus Aurelius wrote in his personal notes in the second century: “One person prays: help me to get that woman. You should pray not to want her. Another person prays: help me to get rid of that man. You should pray not to get rid of him. In short: change your prayers and see what happens” (Book IX, 40). Saint Augustine, the famous Christian Church Father around the year 400, said that one should pray “ut ipsa (mens) construat, non ut Deus instruat”, that is, you should pray to construct your soul, not to instruct God (Epistola CXL, caput XXIX, 69). God knows everything, including your personal needs. You have to change yourself to become religiously devoted. The famous philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1847/1961) came to the same conclusion on the subject of confession, a specific type of prayer: “The person making the confession is not like a servant that gives account to his lord. (...) The all-knowing was present at each instant for which reckoning shall be made. (...) The account is made for the servant’s sake, who must even render account of how he used the very moment of rendering account. (...) The prayer does not
change God, but it changes the one who offers it. (...) Not God, but you, the maker of the confession, get to know something by your act of confession” (p. 44-45).

**Empirical prayer studies**

If prayer is a purely subjective affair, why would people pray to God? What is prayer anyway, and how do people pray in practice? Most psychological research on prayer does not ask these questions. The prayer process is handled as a black box. Only input and output count, and what happens in between is taken for granted. In our research (Janssen, de Hart, & den Draak, 1990; Janssen, Prins, van der Lans, & Baerveldt, 2000) we have tried to develop a full phenomenological description of prayer as a psychological process. We did so by studying the literature on prayer and subsequently by analysing empirical data derived from open-ended questions (Janssen, 1990). The research leads to the following conclusions.

The *first* thing that became clear from the theoretical study is that prayer can be described as an act. We therefore from now on use the term ‘praying’.

*Second.* The act of praying typically has a tripartite structure, as all acts do. There is a beginning, a middle part and an end. This structure can be found in all kinds of rituals. In a lecture, the scientist of religion Frits Staal (1978) described it as entering, abiding in and subsequently leaving a sanctuary (Figure 1).

![Fig. 1: A minimal model for a ritual, according to Frits Staal (1978).](image)

A→B→C→B→A

In various studies the tripartite structure, as described by Staal, can be distinguished. We mention here Henri Huberts and Marcel Mauss (1899) and Emile Durkheim’s (1912) definition of the sacrifice; William James’ (1902/1985) study on the varieties of religious experience; Arnold van Gennep’s (1909) ‘rite de passage’; Marcel Mauss’ (1925) description of the gift; Huizinga’s (1938) definition of play and Berggren’s (1975) approach of confession (Figure 2).

Turner (1994) stresses the tripartite structure of Hindu rituals and Buddhist praying, and Wegman (2000) points at several places to the tripartite structure of Christian rituals. A recent study on the praying of Muslims and Christians revealed the same tripartite structure: “The narratives begin with a problem or need. (...) The problem or need motivates the informant to pray to God; the solution consists of God’s answer to the prayer. (...) The structure of the narratives is compli-

Third. The act of praying is performed in a three-dimensional space that consists of time and place and a third, vertical dimension which we called the direction of praying (mostly named ‘God’ by our subjects). This act can be represented as a speech act: a performing utterance, which uses words to do things, and it is expressed in a bodily posture (Figure 3). To summarise: praying is the bodily and/or linguistic expression of a tripartite act in a three-dimensional space.

Fig. 3: A model for praying practices of modern young people (Janssen et al., 1990)

Fourth. This abstract structure can take several forms, according to the specific needs, the specific method, and time etc., either chosen by the person or prescribed by tradition. We studied the praying of young people living in a secularised society (on the religious situation in the Netherlands: Janssen, 1998; Janssen & Prins, 2000). The prototypical praying of Dutch youths goes as follows: faced
with negative problems, like sickness and death affecting others, mostly friends and relatives, these young people ask, hope or meditate, directing their praying to God, looking for their own emotional relief, at night, with their eyes closed and hands joined, lying in bed (Table 1). So, praying is an important individualized ritual for the young ones. It is no coincidence that the United Colours of Bennetton recently launched an international advertising campaign by editing a book, published in the main languages, on the prayer of youth (Prayer, 1999). Praying is hot; it offers a post-modern, individualized way of being religious.

Table 1: Categories used to score the descriptions of praying behavior. Frequencies are mentioned in brackets. (N = 687)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>need</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>negative (346), others (207), concrete (142), positive (105), neutral (85), regularly (29).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>action</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>to ask/hope (201), to meditate (197), dialogue (183), to thank (82), to propound (73).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>direction</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>God (207), someone (69), power (50), myself (42).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>emotional (286), cognitive (129), religious (74), real (73).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>place</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>in bed (215), anywhere (101), at home (91), church (69), room (30), countryside (36), elsewhere (26).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>at night (223), anytime (128), at dinner (55), in the morning (26), fixed (23).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>method</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>eyes closed (119), hands joined (104), think (91), talk (59), lying down (45), to myself (43), quiet (39), formula (40), sit down (37).</td>
</tr>
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The praying of youth is spontaneous; it is a form of reflection at the end of the day, when body and mind take a rest. So, while previous research (Deikman, 1966; Benson, 1975) showed that praying has the bodily effect of tuning consciousness between active thought and deep sleep, it seems that the reverse is true in a secularized context where no specific moments and places are allocated for praying. Here, the profound human need for praying emerges, when the paramount reality of every day life is interrupted and a mode of passive receptivity has set in. The next finding is that most praying is based on negative events. This is almost classical: hardships teach people to pray, as we say in Dutch. However, while the praying of young people mostly starts with the problems of others (relatives and friends), it is not an intercessory praying (Bänziger, 2001). Youth prays for its own sake: to gain the strength and the courage to endure the sadness they feel for other people’s sake. Praying aims at gaining secondary control by bringing oneself in line with environmental forces (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). It does not aim at directly changing the situation, but at a psychological change in the person who prays, eventually enabling that person to change the situation (for instance in praying before examinations). Praying is essentially a
coping mechanism in which people actively cope with negative events, described by Pargament and colleagues as a self-directing style of problem-solving (Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman, & Jones, 1988). An interesting finding is the direction of praying. We did not mention it in our questions: we asked the young people what praying in their opinion was, and when, where, how and why they did it. They spontaneously formulated a direction, mostly called God. This is remarkable, especially for those, the majority, who say they are not church members. God is vague for them and youth can hardly find the language to express His existence. He is mostly called simply “something or someone” (Janssen et al., 1994). But it seems essential that He is there. That someone is watching. That you are not alone. God is not known, He is used, as Leuba (1900/1901) once said. People indeed seem to have a strong tendency to presume the presence or the efficacy of what Gilbert, Brown, Pinel and Wilson (2000) call ‘external agency’.

Fifth. Our structural definition was also used to distinguish varieties of praying, depending on the stress that is put on the main structural elements: need, action, effect and direction (Figure 4). Using some of Heiler’s (1932/1958) definitions of prayers, we predicted four varieties of praying; petitionary praying, religious praying, meditative praying and psychological praying.

![Table of praying varieties]

**Fig. 4:** Prediction for four varieties of praying: a combination of some definitions of praying by Heiler (1932) and the praying model of modern youth (Janssen et al., 1990). Shaded cells reflect the main component of each praying variant.

In religious praying, the main emphasis is on the direction of praying: the other elements are derived from it. God is central. The action takes the form of a dialogue or thanksgiving, the effect we would expect is faith or a deeper communion with God. The need is also a derived element: is can be positive (to praise God) or negative, based on sin or guilt that we ask forgiveness for.
In **petitionary praying**, the direction can be the same as in religious praying but the constitutive element here is the effect. Moreover, the effect has to be real. The action can be defined as asking and the need of the person as the reverse of the effect. Some believe this kind of praying, perhaps in combination with religious praying, to be the oldest one (Capps, 1982).

In **meditative praying**, the action is the center of attention. Need and effect seem to be rather abstract, continuous and cognitive.

The fourth variety is called **psychological praying**: it is based on the need, without claiming a fitting effect. Heiler (1932/1958) already described it, by stating that the native language of all people is a cry. There is a universal impulse to pray, “to cry out for the help we need, for the good we want” (Pratt, 1910/11, p. 50). The action and the effects are rather vague, not typically religiously inspired.

Regarding method, time and place we only made the general prediction that meditative and psychological praying are more individually oriented, and that religious and petitionary praying are more often carried out in public.

The four dimensions we predicted could indeed be discerned in a factor analysis, but the most surprising result was the importance of time, place and method for each dimension. Religious prayer is mainly said in church, quietly, at fixed moments, and petitionary prayer mostly in one’s room, in the morning, using praying formulas. Meditative prayer can be said anytime and anywhere: it could be defined as portable praying and it is typically done cognitively, by thinking. Psychological prayer is said at night, lying in bed, hands joined, and eyes closed (for details: Janssen et al., 2000).

The factor analysis in way points to an ideal-typical solution. Although we successfully distinguished the four factors we expected, it turned out that there is a substantial correlation in our population between petitionary and religious praying. On empirical grounds we have to conclude that young people combine religious and petitionary praying elements. So, while it is possible to distinguish several aspects in praying, actual praying always combines several elements. In fact, each actual praying is an unique, culturally and experientially based combination of petitionary, religious, meditative and psychological aspects.

**Summary and discussion**

The preceding empirical research shows that praying can be described as a tripartite structure in a three-dimensional space. In other words, praying is the bodily and/or linguistic expression of need, action and effect, in a three-dimensional space of time, place and direction. The second main conclusion is the distinction of four varieties of praying. These varieties were primarily based on the structural elements: need, action effect and direction, but also correspond with the structural elements: time, space and method. They can be seen as different types of prayer, but preferably as different aspects of praying, whereby each actual praying is an unique combination of these aspects.
Let us conclude by considering some new and, in our opinion, promising approaches to the psychology of praying. First, we will discuss the relation between the four varieties of praying we found and Pargament's styles of problem-solving. Second, we will point to an old dialogical tradition in the psychology of praying that deserves reconsideration. And finally, we will mention the promising integration of new insights from modern neuropsychology into the psychology of praying.

**First:** Pargament and colleagues distinguish three styles or modes of problem-solving, which correspond to three of our types of praying. In the deferring mode of problem-solving, God is active but the person is passive. This mode matches petitionary praying. In the collaborative mode, both God and the person are active, which matches the religious praying. The self-directing mode matches what we call psychological praying: the person is active but God is passive. Following the logic of this classification, a fourth style of problem solving is conceivable, in which both God and the individual are passive. Pargament and colleagues do not define this mode, but it fits in perfectly with our meditative praying. Meditative praying is what we would call a receptive mode, in which responsibility for problem-solving is located neither in the individual, nor in God. Acceptance characterizes the attitude of the person who meditates (Figure 5).

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 5:** Three styles of problem-solving found by Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman & Jones (1988) (bold items), compared with the prediction for four varieties of praying (italicized items). (The receptive mode is not distinguished by Pargament et al.)

**Second:** Modern psychology is seeing a rediscovery of the cultural, contextual and narrative aspects of human behaviour. Man is a social being, realising himself in culture and history. Hermans and Kempens’ study on the dialogical self (1993) is a fascinating example. They describe man as a continual dialogue, following Giambattista Vico’s philosophy of corporeal imagination, based upon the propositions that human knowledge is embodied and knowing is relating to other people. As psychologists, they resume the symbolic interactionist’s views of Charles Cooley and George Herbert Mead in a new way. Their approach seems promising for the study of praying. It has set us on the track of an old and, since behaviourism, forgotten tradition in the psychology of praying, also based on the ideas of
Cooley and Mead. In 1909, in a small book entitled *The psychology of prayer*, rightly
called “a most excellent little book” by James Bisset Pratt (1910/1911), Anna Loui-
se Strong defined prayer as the “direct interaction of two selves arising simultane-
ously in consciousness, as result of a need, a lack, a disturbance which demands
the presence of a completer and more adequate self before it can be overcome”
(p. 24); “Prayer is, then, a social relation which has as aim the attainment of a
wider, less partial self – a more confident self, a self more strong to endure, a self
of larger sympathies, a more truly ethical, more completely social self” (p. 30).
“The end sought is rest, that rest which comes to the self of immediate desire
through appreciative sharing in a self which symbolises the movements of infinite
ages of time, – the self of the widest aesthetic contemplation” (p. 82).

George Albert Coe (1916), “a noted psychologist of religion” as Hood et al.
(1996, p. 4) call him, comes to similar conclusions in a small chapter in his book
on the psychology of religion: “Prayer is a process in which faith is generated”.
Even negative experience can be integrated: “the prayer life may be said to be
the organisation into the self of the very things that threaten to disorganise it”
(p. 316n). By praying, mankind puts its needs on a higher level, subordinating
them to God’s plans. In Christianity, where love is a central motif, this leads to
social universalism: “the function of prayer (...) is then to produce (...) personal life,
which is also social life, as something of ultimate worth” (p. 320).

These interesting considerations eloquently clarify our findings although our
results don’t mesh with their predictions. While Strong and Coe emphasise that in
prayer personal problems (ego) are put on a higher, social level (alter), it seems that
our youth is doing the reverse by personalising social problems (Bänziger, 2001).
Social scientists may suppose lofty motives and high objectives of meaning giving
in the praying of people, but many people just pray for help, real help; for success,
real success, for health, real health. The recent popularity in the USA of Jabez’
prayer (“Lord, enlarge my territory!”) speaks volumes (Wilkinson, 2000). More
recently, and not only in the USA, we see a praying that reminds us of Mark Twain’s
‘war prayer’, a prayer that explicitly or implicitly asks for the extinction of others
(our ‘enemies’). Psychologists of religion of course have to deal with the basic
needs and natural motives of mankind. However, they cannot ignore the fact that
religions are not just the passive receptors of needs and motives. They also shape
them. Religions shape the lives of people, structuring space and time, making
sense, giving meaning. An impressive illustration of these processes is Leon Wies-
seltier’s book *Kaddish*. As a non-practising Jew, he nevertheless completed the
Kaddish for his deceased father: a prayer said in *schul* three times a day, a whole
year long. This practice did not change God, who is praised and justified in the
Kaddish prayer, it did not produce miracles, it did not destroy enemies, but it re-
freshed Wieseltier’s life with language: “three times a day Hebrew music” (p. 82);
the Kaddish ritual structured the mourning process; the hurried pace of Wiesel-
tier’s modern existence was slowed down. In the end it changed his life completely.

Third: Let us not forget that praying is not just an intellectual, cognitive affair,
that it is not just a matter of language. In terms of language it can be defined pri-
arily as a speech-act, and, as an act, it refers to bodily movements. Turner (1994), in a short experiential study on Christian, Aboriginal, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic prayer, concluded that “perhaps on the level of music and musical form – and on this level only – there is any real correspondence in the diverse religious traditions” (p. 82). However there is more that unites mankind. Not only vibrations, but also bodily movements as expressed in praying. St Augustine in his famous Confessions called movement the innate vocabulary of all peoples. Recently, Lindgren (2001) stressed the importance of the bodily movements in the praying process. The bodily movement serves two functions; on the one hand, as an externalization of inner feelings, thoughts, and attitudes, and, on the other, as a means of influencing oneself experientially. Harry Kempen (in press) stressed the importance of the human body as the unifying carrier of human life: “as the body is universal and self interpretations are spatio-temporal variations on bodily data and thus universal self-variables, psychology can contribute to the universalising of loyalties; then she is – as the APA pretends – a means of promoting human welfare” (see also Kempen, 1996).

Today neuropsychology is on its way to unfolding the basic processes of language, perception, emotion and consciousness (Hagoort, 2000). Meanwhile there are several studies on the neurological basis of religious behaviour, especially meditation (Austin 1998; Journal of Consciousness Studies, 11-12, vol 7, 2000). Neuropsychology can, despite the criticism of reductionism and the misinterpretation of spiritual experiences with religion, create new and interesting approaches to the psychology of religion, and the psychology of praying. Perhaps now there is a beginning of an explanation for the striking similarity of religious and mystical experiences in several religions. Neuropsychology can never determine whether God exists, but it can offer basic knowledge of the praying process. If praying and religious experiences in general have universal bodily aspects, the brain is the unifying centre wherein the process starts. Of course, praying is variable, as is religious tradition as such. There is a Hindu prayer, a Jewish prayer, a Catholic prayer, a Russian Orthodox prayer, a Protestant prayer, an Islamic prayer, a Buddhist prayer, as well as many more. But religions share ritual structures, bodily postures and neurological processes. Praying can be defined as a universalising variable. That is why praying is the centre and soul of all religion.

References


