

As Prayer Goes So Goes Religion

Sam Gill

Prayer shares distinctive markers with religion: highly repetitious often formulaic acts involving words, gestures, and material objects that engage some “radical other.” A nexus of gesture, posture, and prosthesis is used to develop an innovative account of prayer focused on these markers and exemplified by Navajo prayer. Prayer is understood as a skillful gestural action shaped by cultural, historical, and personal factors with agency to create and affect identity of individual, culture, and world. In its prosthetic reach prayer, as religion, twines the banal with the radical other (the limits of imagination), not primarily to consolidate or reconcile or center or balance or for good, but to engage in the endless interplay that inspires creativity, engages novelty, and fuels vitality. Rather than to seek their meaning, prayer and religion are understood in terms of the skillful strategies and styles of engaging the twining of possible and impossible.

A blast of cold air from the grey snowy winter afternoon enters with the group of *diyin dine'e*¹ as they push past the blanket covering the east-facing door of the hogan. The heat quickly wins back the close space. Artisans have worked much of the day on ritual preparations especially the process of strewing colored sand layer by layer making a large sandpainting (*iikaah*). Filling much of the packed dirt floor it features depictions of the same *diyin dine'e* as those entering. Sitting in the middle of this complex design with her legs and bare feet stretched to the east is a middle-aged woman. Her greying hair hangs about her shoulders rather than being tied up in the typical chignon. She wears only the tiered skirt of traditional dress. The “singer” or medicine man (*hata'ii*) has just stood up from his position sitting facing the woman; together they have finished reciting a long prayer. The frequent performances of prayer rituals are essential to this Navajo Holyway (*diyink'ehji*) healing ceremony² that lasts nine nights and the intervening eight days. The sandpainting rites including prayers are major rituals performed on each of the last

¹ *Diyin dine'e* is a term commonly translated to English as “Holy People.” Since there are many named figures of story and ritual this term serves as a generic for them. They are addressed in prayer and are characters in stories. I am not convinced that it is appropriate to simply identify these figures with such English terms as “spirits” or “gods” or “deities.” Such terms might have the effect of wrongfully skewing far from the way such figures are understood by Navajos. In the Holyway ceremony Nightway the *diyin dine'e* are a specific grouping known as *ye'ii* or *yeibichaii* referring to the grandfather *ye'ii*.

² For fuller analysis of Nightway sandpainting rituals, see Gill, “Whirling Logs and Coloured Sands.” In *Native Religious Traditions*. Edited by Earle Waugh and R. Prithipaul. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1979, pp. 151-163. Revised in Gill, *Native American Traditions*, pp. 71-77.

four days. The *diyin dine'e* walk on the sandpainting where the one-sung-over or patient (*bik'i nahagha*) sits and in a ritualized sequence of body parts—feet, legs, body (torso), mind (head), voice (mouth)—they touch the figures of themselves appearing in the painting and transfer the sand adhering to their hands moistened with a medicine concoction to her corresponding body parts. Once this identification accomplished both in prayer and the ritual touching of the one-sung-over with the *diyin dine'e* is complete she is assisted off of the sandpainting and the sands of the now much-blurred painting are scrapped together and transferred to a blanket to be, finally, taken out of the hogan and ritually deposited in an appropriate place.³

Navajo prayers (*sodizin*) are typically composed of modular patterns of familiar constituents with extensive and systematic repetition within the phrases making up each constituent,⁴ whole sections or constituents, as well as entire prayers. Repetitions are marked by key word changes, each repetition corresponding with an item in a traditional sequence. For example common sequences recite such lists as the proper order and divisions within the human body (as above), the distinctive features of Navajo country, and formulaic sequences that pervade Navajo tradition and story. Most Navajo prayers are recited in the context of complex healing rituals, yet almost every need and concern recognized by Navajos is traced in some way to issues of health. Health is fundamentally a matter of proper relationship among people and between people and elements in the environment and the *diyin dine'e*.

Prayer recitations are formal with the singer repeating a prayer phrase by phrase with but a brief gap following each phrase. The one-sung-over repeats each phrase with the same timing. Since there is not quite adequate time in the singer's gap for the completion of the phrase by the one-sung-over the resulting sound of Navajo prayer is flowing and resonating. Praying requires vast memory by the singer and intense concentration by the one-sung-over necessary to hear and repeat a phrase while listening to the next one and so on and on often for extensive periods of time. Navajo prayer is almost always recited in the context of larger ritual processes and the structural composition of the prayer—the selection and organization of the various constituents (groupings of related and often repeating phrases)—corresponds not only with the patterns of ritual processes being performed but also with the vast body of Navajo mythology, song, and the causal factors attributed to the illness being treated.⁵ Studies of the parallels among these various ritual

³ See Gill, "Whirling Logs" for both sandpainting and for Nightway.

⁴ In an examination of over 20,000 prayer segments or lines (though this wrongfully suggests that Navajo prayer is written) I was able to identify only 20 distinct constituents for the many hundreds of Navajo prayers that occur in the context of many different healing rituals and other rites. See Gill, *Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).

⁵ Gill, *Sacred Words*. Based on the analysis of over 20,000 lines/phrases of recorded prayers in Navajo ethnography. See also Gill, "Prayer as Person: The Navajo Conception of Prayer Acts" *History of Religions* 17:2 (1977): 143-157 and "Prayer

constituents demonstrate that the repetition is not confined to the words of the prayer but is also replicated to resounding effect in song, mechanical ritual processes, and ritual materials, all invoking, but usually without repeating them, specific stories in the vast bodies of mythology commonly known to Navajos.

While it is rather evident that Navajo prayer is essential as a speech act to all Navajo ritual and that the rhythms and complex patternings of Navajo prayer correlate with the order of ritual, song, story, land, history, and origination, we non-Navajo academics nonetheless seem to want more in terms of a comprehension of Navajo prayer as we do also of other prayer traditions. Perhaps this is a desire born of the history of the study of religion that has so often simply ignored prayer despite its rather powerful and unavoidable identity with religion. For one thing, it seems we academics don't quite know what to do with repetition, with actions like applying sands to sick peoples' bodies, with rhythms of repetition in song and story and prayer, with manipulating material stuff⁶ like sandpaintings, prayersticks, and the endless physical bits of ritual processes or even land. We sometimes satisfy our felt obligation to do something with prayer acts by simply describing these things. Sometimes we see aspects of prayer/religion in terms of symbols where we try to correlate them with "meaning;" a favored approach. Most usually we confine ourselves to the word aspects of these complexes because we best know how to approach the interpretation and explanation of words; and if we include the repetitions of words we likely invoke poetry to provide understanding. Even repetition, we reason, becomes comprehensible only when rendered into an explanation of doctrine, belief, theology or at least poetry.⁷

While one can comprehend secular ritual, see it even as commonplace;⁸ one can scarcely comprehend *secular prayer*. Prayer marks religion distinctively. Thus to comprehend something of prayer is to comprehend something of the elusive⁹

as Performance: A Navajo Contribution to the Study of Prayer" in *Native American Religious Action* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 89-112.

⁶ See Manuel Vasquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ As its very title suggests, my *Sacred Words*, was an example of such an approach. However taking something of a structuralist approach vogue at the time I attempted to demonstrate correlations among vast structures distinctive to Navajo culture as well as to at least intimate that the performance of all this was the most important.

⁸ For example, *Secular Ritual* by Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Uitgeverij Van Gorcum, 1977).

⁹ I think it slightly odd that students of religion tend to find such things so persistently elusive. I can understand contentious and subject to alternative theories, yet it seems we often just stand (rather sit) about and shake our heads in consternation.

distinctiveness of religion¹⁰. The promise and potential for our pursuit of the study of prayer must be: *as prayer goes so goes religion*. We can scarcely understand prayer without also revealing some important insights about religion. It is rather odd that within many of the literate based religious traditions that include prayer, the literature on prayer (what elsewhere I've called "metaprayer")¹¹ is typically extensive. These writings offer guides to praying, collections of prayers, occasions for praying, and discussions of outcomes. Yet, the academic study of religion has few efforts at a rich comparative study of prayer.¹² At best the study of religion usually remains satisfied with the descriptive account of a single tradition. Perhaps the reticence to the comparative study of prayer and the development of theories¹³ of prayer is rooted in the early history of our study where distinctions were made in the stages of the evolution of religion; that is, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when academic accounts were defended in terms of the old battles over magic and high gods.¹⁴ The very repetitive and formulaic character of prayer was one of the primary markers of magic making prayer seem, uncomfortably to align with magic, rather than religion. Prayer has, until quite recently everywhere been the recitation of repeating formulas and it even continues to be so more than we might think; the number of repetitions is often high and the

¹⁰ I commonly make the distinction between religion (singular) by which I indicate the scholar's invention of the human category (the notion is also present among folk in modern cultures) and religions (plural) by which I mean the practices, doings, and stuff found in cultures under various names yet somehow familiar to us as religious. I do not see these terms as but separate or unrelated or a duality, but rather an interacting relationality I tend to discuss in terms of copresence or play. If we use one term, we are always already implying the other. The same distinction should be made of prayer/prayers or better prayer/prayings.

¹¹ Gill, "Prayer" *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1987)

¹² One of the few is the old Frederick Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932, orig. 1928),

¹³ I increasingly prefer alternative terms like "accounts of religion" to suggest their openness to development and transformation, whereas "theory" suggests a hypothetic inference that is subject to testing and verification; a retrograde movement.

¹⁴ E. B. Tylor's ten-page discussion of prayer in *Primitive Religion* (London, 1873) offers a fascinating example of the confusion that surrounds this cultural evolutionary expectation of the development of religion as it implicates prayer. Tylor felt that "primitive prayer" was heartfelt and that only with the rise of formal religions broadly practiced did prayer become formulaic and repetitive, losing its spontaneity and directness of connection between person and deity. This of course is the opposite of what prayer should have been in terms of magic, comprised of highly repetitive formulae. Gladys Reichard's 1932 study of Navajo prayer was titled *Prayer: The Compulsive Word* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1944) indicating her understanding of the "magical" power of Navajo prayer acts.

formulaic content is mostly invariable. Such speech acts seem, god forbid, much more the marker of magic than religion and furthermore, given these structural and performative characteristics, how on earth does one “interpret” the “texts” of prayers? The very repetitive formulaic character distinctive of prayer, like the “bar bar bar” stammering childspeak of barbarians and primitives, seems to defy the very idea of “meaning” because of its predictability and redundancy, yet meaning¹⁵ is the goal commonly sought by our retrograde backfilling external academic techniques. Indeed, to anticipate my discussion of gesture, I believe it is clear that we academics do not study religion in any sense wherein our interests are even open to the full range of human religious experience and actions. Rather we recognize as religious and thus of interest to our study primarily those things that most closely correspond with our own gestural/postural composition.¹⁶

There are a couple other expectations that seem to thwart our approach to comprehending and appreciating prayer. One of these is the character of the “to” component that seems distinctive to prayer. Prayers seem necessarily spoken or addressed or directed to some “other,” that is, some one or thing beyond the praying “self.” Yet, the other is no ordinary existent in the banal environment. Prayers are addressed to gods, deities, spirits, the cosmos, the figures in stories, to animals, to mythic beings, even to abstract ideas—all characterizable as of an order apart from the ordinary plane of human reality or at least inaccessible through quotidian channels of human communication (i.e., email or texting). Prayer seems to be addressed to someone or something and the identity of the “to” is often identified right there in the words spoken. Yet, the “to” is invariably *theós* or *numina*, that is, a being of another world or dimension or even an abstraction. I identify/label this “to” using the generic word “impossible” on the grounds that there are no banal means of contact or communication. It is, I suggest, the very impossibility of commonplace connection or communication that marks prayer. Perhaps, surely, this is why prayer is such a strong marker for religion. This is why the notion of secular prayer is so difficult to imagine.¹⁷ I’m invoking the hopefully provocative term “impossibles” to avoid any obvious specifically identifiable theological projections onto prayer although this effort itself seems almost impossible for

¹⁵ In an account of “coherence” in my forthcoming *Movement: A Philosophical Neurobiology of Vitality* I argue that coherence is a much more satisfying concern than is meaning.

¹⁶ Put more plainly, we are most comfortable studying white guys that read and write.

¹⁷ I certainly anticipate considerable challenge to this distinction, with efforts made to come up with exceptions. Whatever. Certainly there can be little that is contentious about this claim for every prayer tradition in every religious tradition I’ve ever encountered; so some posited exception seems significant only on the grounds of attempting to determine how such an example could still be clearly identified as prayer.

academics to avoid.¹⁸ Perhaps a slightly more sophisticated way of presenting this attribute as an important marker of prayer/religion is that prayer makes the unapologetic proclamation of what, in an attempt to avoid theological predisposition, I call “possible impossibles.” Using words and actions, praying makes present (or possible) what is distinguished, in part, as of a reality or order inaccessible (or impossible) through banal communication.

Since prayer appears to be directed to or at some radical other, a whole range of academic issues is bound to arise. Who or what is this other? Why do repetition and formulae appeal to it? Why are these prayer attributes somehow distinctively appropriate to this impossible other? What about the implication of the commonly expected “return” aspect of the prayer action; that is, is there anything like an answer or evidence of justification for the speech act? Is anybody or anything listening and responding? In general terms what I’m attempting to describe is what some traditions often refer to as the effectiveness of prayer captured in phrases like “Prayer really works.” Minimally “why pray?” Prayer results were the concern of Huck Finn,

Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn’t so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn’t any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn’t make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn’t make it out no way.¹⁹

And one would think that this results or effect aspect of prayer is nearly essential to include in the account of prayer, despite the risk of being a fool. We’re often in Huck’s place wondering about the effect. Usually we try, perhaps in our efforts to demonstrate the sophistication of our understanding of religion, to separate ourselves from admitting the importance of the effect as a significant aspect of the prayer (seems embarrassingly crass and materialistic);²⁰ we do this even though we

¹⁸ I’m now fondly calling this near impossibility by the term “the Humpty Principle” which I introduced in *Dancing Culture Religion* (Lexington Books, 2012). It refers to the near impossibility of avoiding something we set out to avoid. Should we not wish to prejudice a study of religion with the history of our own beliefs (religious or worldview) we just can’t do it. The very statement of the issue already invokes the issue we wish to avoid. I derive the name of this in my discussions of how impossible are such tasks as solving the “mind/body problem.” The point here is that in setting it forth as a split that needs to be healed we are attempting the same task attempted by all the king’s horses and all the king’s men. And we know how that came out.

¹⁹ Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

²⁰ We often reject this pragmatic question of prayer because to do so places us firmly in the uncomfortable understanding of the “impossibles.” How can a god give us fishhooks because we pray for them? Such issues force together aspects of

all know that among the greatest motivators for extemporaneous prayer is the urgent beseeching that one not be visited by some impending doom. Again, since such repetition of formulas with an expectation of something to this-worldly and banal to happen seems more in the realm of magic, at least in the way the study of religion has come to terms with such things, so it seems that the academic study has come to pretty much the same conclusion as did Huck, “at last I reckoned I wouldn’t worry about it any more, but just let it go.” Yet here we are back at it, hoping that Miss Watson or our own academic wits might help us to “make it out.”

In a lecture “Now you see it, now you won’t: The Future of the Academic Study of Religion over the Next 40 Years” delivered at the University of Colorado in 2010 Jonathan Z. Smith listed gesture studies as one of five areas he believes will be central to the upcoming generation of religion scholarship. Smith’s statement related to gesture shocked me largely because it seems so unexpected in not being based exclusively on text materials and it excited me because it connects so closely to the long history and current interests of my own work in ritual and dance and performance. In my 2012 book *Dancing Culture Religion* I suggest the inadequacy of our most common understanding of gesture as “visual action as utterance” based on a communication model.²¹ Clearly this “poor” understanding of gesture will not work for broader culture studies. In that book on dancing I developed an expanded or “rich” understanding of gesture that gave me opportunity to explore the potential of such a view for the application to and analysis of religious and cultural actions; I find the results to be happily exciting. Since beginning to explore the implications of gesture, richly conceived, I have found that the power and insights gained through the consideration of gesture are deeply enhanced when seen as copresent with posture and prosthesis, when both of these are also richly conceived. The three together form a theoretical complex and heuristic nexus and in the present context of the study of prayer I want to use it to offer a hopefully novel and insightful perspective on prayer (and as prayer goes so goes religion); I’ll refer to Navajo prayer to illustrate.

This nexus of gesture posture and prosthesis deserves an extended account that engages the many nuances of not only each term but also the copresent implications of the three pairs. While this extended account is another project, here I want to at least sketch a few core ideas.

practicality that we carefully keep separate. Yet, I would suggest that the very distinction of prayer is to address the impossibles as possible and to do so unapologetically. We have such trouble studying religion because we don’t acknowledge that the impossibles are there purposefully to create chiasm, to establish copresent implication, to distinguish the uncrossable/crossable gap that forever energizes vitality, movement, tradition. I anticipate the outcome of the proposition: as prayer goes so goes religion.

²¹ Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visual Action as Utterance* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Both the plasticity and stability of all animate organisms is an affair of self-movement.²² Through evolution self-movement is copresent with the emergence of the distinctive morphology and motility of the animate species. Repetition and seeming redundancy are essential to the skillful acts of perception and knowing, that is, the transcending power of the organism to interconnect with its enviroing world. Self-movement, corresponding with the living force, is not acquired; it is inseparable from life itself engaging the whole organism, not simply some of its parts (body or mind).²³ It is the very nature of, as it is essential to, this organic living movement to be distinctively routinized and patterned and resounding and skillful and seemingly, through endless repetition, experienced as natural, though of course it is not. Organisms are distinctive (both species and individuals) in terms of the characteristic patterns of self-movement; in the broadest terms think quadrapedal and bipedal. As perceiving knowing living beings inseparable from their connections with their environment (the essential other in their midst) animate organisms²⁴ are distinguished by gestures, acquired skillful distinctive patterns of self-movement. Gesture is posturally based both in the sense of the neurobiological core that enables the distinctive patterned self-movement (upright posture corresponds with bipedal motility) as well as in terms of the more abstract value attributes (concepts, beliefs, images, memories). Gesture, as all self-movement, can occur only in relation to some other (not simply an ether) that enables moving; the relational aspect of movement is described by Renaud Barbaras in the terms of “desire and distance.”²⁵ That is, self-movement must always be in the process of self-transcendence in that it is inseparable from becoming some other or a there. Moving is never in any place, but is always an entwining of or the copresence of here and there. It is in the transcendent power of gesture/posture that it is at the core of perception and knowing, both sensible only as the copresence of self and other, here and there.

Carrie Noland’s 2009 book *Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gesture/Producing Culture* offers insight and inspiration as she articulates “gesture” as key to understanding agency. Noland’s observation that Maurice Merleau-Ponty and André Leroi-Gourhan both “viewed the body as a sensorium extending itself prosthetically through gesture into the world”²⁶ is important to understanding the architecture of human connections with and actions on the community and environment. These two scholars among others considered the living moving body as a sensorium, that is, as the hierarchical composite of sensory capacities. They consider the body as

²² See my forthcoming *Living Movement and Vitality: Cultural & Philosophical Implications of Self-Movement*.

²³ See Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *Primacy of Movement* (John Benjamins Publishing Company; 2 edition, 2011) and Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception* (Stanford University Press, 2005).

²⁴ Husserl’s term and a good one.

²⁵ Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*.

²⁶ Carrie Noland, *Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gesture/Producing Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

existing always in the process of encountering the world through gesture, that is, skilled processes that require the extension or prosthesis of the body beyond its physical perimeters. The term prosthetic suggests a means of supplementing and extending the biological body beyond its mere physical limits. This extension suggests that we are able to use aspects of the body, themselves, as tools in some sense to extend ourselves into the world, to know it and ourselves, and to have an impact on the world. Prosthetic here suggests an extension beyond self, a transcendence beyond biological limits, beyond the recognized boundary marked by our skin, by the “self” that we feel as movement.²⁷ Yet, of course, we know that we are through and through biological. The prosthetics of the animate body, its capacity to use itself or parts of itself as a tool, are highly interesting in that prosthesis must exist if we are to avoid total containment, isolation, separation, immobility; in psychological (perhaps also philosophical) terms aloneness.²⁸ Yet, this insight related to prosthesis is but a restatement of the radical view of self-moving; that self-moving essentially requires a moving in the context of “other,” that environment is copresent with self. Moving implicates a “there” that twines as moving with “here”; a virtual distance of separation that is connection; a horizon always beckoning yet always receding.

Gesture is the sort of movement, as Marcel Mauss so effectively showed, that is invariably stamped by the distinctive markers of culture, environment, history, psychology²⁹ that enables us to not only take in the world but also to act on the world, which we’ll see is to understand sensation/perception/knowing as agentive, as a force acting on and in the world. Mauss, referring to gesture as “techniques of body,” held that there is no natural or perfect gesture; the contextual skilled practicing of living always shapes it. Thus the sensorium is connected with culture, history, and psychology by means of gesture, the sort of movement that interactively engages the sensorium prosthetically with the environment, both a discovery and a worlding.³⁰ Gesture (inseparable from the sensorium) is the prosthetic (the extension beyond the organic confines of the body, that is, beyond the skin) that extends the body beyond itself in an interaction with the world. Gesture is the

²⁷ Of course in common reference prosthesis is very closely associated with amputation and loss. This immediate connection surely dates from the American Civil War when tens of thousands of amputees survived the war and the development of prosthetic limbs gained greater attention. In the more philosophical sense, there is often a sense of loss that is connected with the notion of prosthesis, yet it is my intention to avoid this implication at least here.

²⁸ Not loneliness because that implies a longing for a missed other. By aloneness I want to try to imagine a world with no other.

²⁹ Marcel Mauss’ classic 1934 essay “Techniques of Body” lays the groundwork for demonstrating that “gesture,” that is, techniques of body, are never either “natural” or “perfect,” but always formed in the influential context of culture, history, and psychology.

³⁰ Worlding is Erin Manning’s term, see her *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (MIT Press, 2012).

looping reversible circulating chiasmatic interconnection among people (and animate organisms generally) and between people and the environment; it is by means of the movement of gesture that we are imprinted with, constantly absorbing, the influences of culture, history, environment, experience; it is by means of the self-movement of gesture that we have agency, power, affect on the world we live in. We create and discover ourselves and the other in the gestural/postural/prosthetic actions of self-moving always shaped by and, in turn, shaping culture, history, psychology.

I know this introduction to gesture/posture/prosthesis is far too dense and I have yet to consider prayer in these terms, yet to help prepare for that I'll iterate, repeat, in variant terms. An academic gesture or a practice of magic? Gesture enables the body or parts of the body to become prosthetic or mechanical extensions to the body thus expanding the body into the space beyond the body's sensate limitations. This prosthetic capacity of the body is the opening towards the construction of tools of every sort from spear points to tablet computers. All tools, some of which are body parts (Leroi-Gourhan believed the hand to be the first tool; I believe it the finger, more fun) extend the body prosthetically into the world for purposes of connecting with, palpating if you will, the world about us. Gesture then can be characterized as groping. Noland discusses Leroi-Gourhan's use of the French term *tâtonnement*, which means trial and error, but also refers to the groping movement of the hand/finger or other body part as prosthesis.³¹ But this groping is not simply random. Sensorimotor programs, synaptic criteria demanded by coordination dynamics, and developing proprioceptive-muscular acuities, direct it. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone suggests that we come into the world moving, groping, as the means of discovering the world and ourselves.³² This process continues on throughout life in all gestural actions in that they are skillful sensorimotor/muscular movements. Even more importantly, gesture is self-adjusting, self-correcting, progressively refined, based on experience. Repetition has a central and crucial value to accumulating experience.³³ Gesturing does something to effect the world; it has agency. It explores the world in the same way a physician palpates a patient's body. Not only does gesture do simple things like get attention or offend others, but also, as Leroi-Gourhan believes, the development of gestural patterns leads to the invention of tools; this was a central contribution to his work in paleoethnography.³⁴ Movement, he argues and it seems obvious, necessarily precedes the development of tools. It is the movement of the body and the use of the body or its parts as tools that is then extended beyond the body with the invention of tools. The body's movement is projected prosthetically beyond the body in the creation of tools. Where the fist can serve as a ram or a hammer, the invention and construction of material tools, wooden rams and steel hammers, has

³¹ Noland, *Agency & Embodiment*, 105

³² Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, 139.

³³ Experience is accumulated as synaptic criteria and forms neuronal groups based on reentrant neurobiological coordination dynamics.

³⁴ See Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (The MIT Press, 1993).

the effect of amplifying and multiplying the gestural effect, multiplying gestural agency.

The invention of speech and writing and print are examples of tools. One aspect common to all gesture is the agentive concern of interrogation or exploration. As in palpating, we reach out with hand or tool or voice to learn about our environment. We can understand the interrogative aspect of gesture (tool use) in terms of proprioception or kinesthetics. As we move and encounter the environment, our proprioceptors register the effect of performing the gesture both as “feel” and as musculoskeletal feedback that impacts our biology to the extent of changing our tissues (I mean this completely literally). As the ram encounters the wall, as the hammer encounters the nail, as the speech act is uttered in a cultural context (the encounter is perhaps dialog) we learn many things (actually everything)—the consistency and composition of the wall, the reaction of the ram to hitting the wall, the specific parameters of identification with our speaking community, and so forth, all as feelings and motor-responses sensed and recorded by our proprioceptive system. Even our brains, Leroi-Gourhan argued and Noland found it supported, developed in evolutionary terms in response to the advancements in motility, thus gestural acumen, rather than the other way around.³⁵ Gesture is always encounter; always complex loopings and twinings. Encounter is always felt proprioceptively. Proprioceptive experience provides modifications via adjustments to synaptic criteria, sensorimotor programs, memory, and concepts; stated alternately, modifications to proprioceptive-muscular acumen. Gestures are skillsets and the repeating performance of the action increases the level of skill. Gestures are not only what we do, how we move; gestures are also who we are in that they are inscribed in our biology involving muscle, proprioceptor, neuronal grouping, and coordination dynamics—all aspects of moving.

Clearly no skillful palpation is possible with a single iteration. There is an implication in the nature of palpation itself, the exploratory repetitive aspect of groping. Yet, perhaps the reason that medicine is referred to as “art” and as “practice” is because it depends on methods that always continue to improve with repetition and experience (present and accumulated). Repetition functions to improve the skills of palpation in at least two ways. As the physician, in this case, knows from textbooks and anatomy classes what her palpating is “seeing” in some touching sense, subsequent surgery allows the confirmation or adjustment of what is actually there. Secondly, like a ballerina at the *barre* repeating designated movements thousands of times under the direction of a ballet mistress, the act of palpating a patient under the critical direction of an experienced physician, leads to building skill residing as accumulated experience in sensorimotor programs, neuronal groupings, and perceptual/knowing acuity. Repetition is essential;

³⁵ I much prefer to understand these as co-developing. I can’t actually imagine that either could, in the long view of evolution, develop prior to and thus give causal rise to the other.

repetition is nuanced and sophisticated.³⁶ What we typically do not understand is the magnitude of repetition necessary; indeed, it is often high, very high. Repetition is also linked with plasticity. We are constructed so that our experience clearly has an impact on our biology, yet fortunately, we are plastic/changeable usually only as the result of high repetition. Otherwise, incidental experiences might have too profound an effect on our skills and they wouldn't endure.³⁷ Gesture is movement that allows us to be at once prosthetic (tool, technique) and sensate feeling beings and, more importantly, to be both at once; the copresent implications of animate organism. Merleau-Ponty referred to this copresence also as "double sensation."³⁸

Now many, if not all, animate organisms have this gesture/posture/prosthetic capability yet surely it is distinctive of humans to have an awareness of ourselves *at once* as techniques, tools, prosthetics and also simply being (existing as) sensing feeling knowing organisms. There is no clear boundary between the two, between being and having awareness of being, although it is commonly assumed that such a strict boundary exists. There is no clear boundary among animate organisms (species) separating those who are aware from those who are not; yet, there is no arguable point at all that humans are remarkable because of the extent of our awareness and our gestural acumen to express and interrogate this distinction. Gesture is movement that is synesthetic in that it crosses among the senses and combines them. The movement of gesture creates knowledge, images, feelings that can be specific to any sensory channel or to cross among and combine them; however gesture always connects with the world as world, not as streams of sensory isolated material bits that then need somehow to be combined.

Tools, prosthetics, are gesturally based, argues Leroi-Gourhan, and thus it is in the probing groping motions of the body that we not only construct the world about us but we also experience it, that is, sense and feel its reality. Musical instruments are prosthetics that extend—through the use of body motions in gestures we refer to as "playing"—ourselves into the world and we hear the world that we make; the making is comprised of the gestural patternings/skills of making the instrument, the skill in playing the instrument, and the resounding worlding of the music flowing into, manifesting in, the environment. We can also think of the actively driven use of our individual senses in the same terms as we think of palpation. For example,

³⁶ The common description of higher education as "training" used to offend me somewhat. However, the more I appreciate the remarkable and essential importance of gesture, and that gesture is inseparable from skill acquisition and use, the more I am willing to embrace this old terminology. Indeed, I think there are many distinct advantages of understanding the training of religion scholars (or those of any discipline) on the medical school model where book learning is seen as essential and demanding, but that it is incomplete without laboratory and clinical experience (or the equivalent) carefully monitored by an experienced mentor.

³⁷ This is an overgeneralized statement; I'm well aware that the actual mechanics of plasticity are remarkably complex.

³⁸ Cited by Carrie Noland, *Agency & Embodiment*, 110.

when we say “I looked carefully at that painting,” are we not using our eyes in the same way that a physician uses her palpating fingers? When we say, “I listened intently to that music,” are we not using our ears in the same way that a physician uses her palpating fingers? Are we not transforming our eyes and ears into tools, techniques, that actively prosthetically extend our senses into the world to explore and penetrate it, by means of gesture, for we move our eyes to see a painting and we turn our heads to listen intently to music? Yet, even when we concentrate on a single sense—looking or listening—we do not explore the world sense by sense and then add them together in some secondary constructive or synthesizing operation. We sense the world as the world as it is present to us, as we have access to it; not attributes separated by sensory channels. Perception is iconic in Peircian terms; whole and already together, for that is how we encounter the world as the world even as we are also constructing it, making it present, by perceiving it. Yet, we know that this ability to prostheticize our bodies, part by part, function by function, or in its entirety (think dancing), is always paired with the intimate proprioceptively trained feeling kind of knowing that is both recognition and evaluation. Indeed, I think a good case can be made for perception and knowing being as much recognition as discovery. Perception always engages the full experience of our perceiving lives compacted into what I term “experiential neuronal ensemblings”³⁹ and these are always an aspect of every perceiving. These looping functions that feed forward and backward are complementary and essential to one another. We listen to music, as the skilled physician palpates a patient, recognizing so many things—rhythm, melody, color, our favorite artists, even the events and emotions associated with a particular song, and so on—which demands that we already know in some sense what we are hearing; recognition. But despite recognition and foreknowledge, it is also always experience and experience is always new in some respects, if only in its being present (or in its presence), in its potential for novelty (nonlinearity); a comparative listening responding to the variations of what we hear with our expectations, our foreknowledge; evaluation.

A major contribution of Leroi-Gourhan was to recognize that as it developed in humans gesture led to the distinction of humans in the capacity to develop external memory. First, it should be noted that language (speech first) is to be understood as a tool. Clearly to speak is a gestural extension of our bodies, in an act of agency and expression. Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler both extensively developed this idea based on Leroi-Gourhan.⁴⁰ A key notion however is simply that to use a tool to mark on a wall, a gesture distinctive to hominins, establishes an external counterpart to memory.⁴¹ Amazing. Leroi-Gourhan found the existence of external

³⁹ See *Living Movement & Vitality ...*

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) and Bernard Steigler, *Techniques and Time*, 3 vols. (Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁴¹ I think it not accidental that prominent among the images of the most ancient art in France and now in Indonesia are imprints of the human hand with splayed fingers. Art is a quintessential act of prosthesis and to represent the hand with splayed fingers is doubly profound in presenting the human body part (the distinct

memory distinctive of being human and as being essential to human development linked with the advancement of tools that are associated with external memory—pens, printing press, typewriter, audio-recorder, video-recorder, computer, 3-D printer. All these, Leroi-Gourhan holds, are based in gesture.

Returning to prayer what now might be said? What does this discourse on self-movement, gesture, posture, prosthesis have to do with prayer? It is my hope that it provides a context for more fully comprehending repetitive formulaic speech acts that will provide an enriched way of approaching prayer as theory and practice; and religion as well. Let me start with the Navajo prayer acts I described at the outset. Navajo prayer is gesture in numerous respects. As the ritual act of prayer it involves not only well-known phrasing in the language of the prayer, the method of recitation also follows a prescribed style creating familiar sounds and sights. Singers (medicine persons) spend extensive periods of time in apprenticeship learning the huge body of improvisational skills—knowledge and gestural actions—that comprise the performances of healing rituals including the many complex prayer acts. A practicing singer constructs healing ceremonies both before and during its performance out of an amazingly rich body of components in order to treat specific individual and cultural needs. Extensive repetition and practice are essential to the acquisition of these skills. The act of prayer is set in a ritual context where there are numerous correspondences between the words spoken, the manner of recitation, the actions of the rites performed (sandpaintings, appearance of masked *diyin dine'e*, and dozens of other constituents), the physical environment (the hogan corresponds with the cosmic structure of Navajoland; it is microcosmic), the motivating circumstances (the specific causes, community and cosmic, indicated as cause for the illness being treated), the songs that are sung, and the broadly known stories summarized in the songs. The singer is not the only one for whom high repetition is essential. Every Navajo participates in ritual actions, frequent among them prayers that create the very skills that are essential to being a Navajo person. Navajo identity is acquired and transmitted through the high gestural postural prosthetic repetition of distinctive phrases, sequences, orientations, sounds, correspondences of language to action that occur in prayers occur also in song, rite, story, and landscape. Such acts are so commonplace as to feel natural to Navajo people.⁴²

fingers) that implicates prosthesis and the coincidence of the digital age with the rise of fingered *Homo sapiens*.

⁴² In his “Techniques of Body,” Mauss’ observation that there are no “natural” techniques of body (gestures) is exceedingly important and necessary that we appreciate that we not consider some (usually our own) gestures as “natural” and others (not ours) as somehow concocted and of lesser value. Yet, clearly repetition of techniques of body create for those performing/practicing these gestures a feeling that they are “natural” in the sense of simply given, compatible with reality as given, not consciously constructed.

Navajo prayer as gestural act expresses, heals, teaches, and enculturates. In its references to life and relationship and Navajoland and cosmos, it creates by designating, ordering, and organizing. It also creates identity that is specifically Navajo by constituting techniques of body that mark Navajo identity. The repeated performance of these gestures/techniques amounts to an etching of this identity into human tissue, from synaptic criteria to the organization of muscle fibers.

The foundational principles (or structural characteristics) that underlie all of these specified gestural actions can be considered as posture—the vital position, physical and ideological, that is Navajo identity. These postural characteristics are what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone referred to as “corporeal concepts” and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson called “image schemas” and “basic level categories.”⁴³ The performance of these gestures constructs the bodies at their cores, their posture, of those involved in the patterns identified as Navajo; that is, the repetitions etch these corporeal concepts into the very tissue of Navajo people. Prayers do far more than establish belief they construct moving Navajo living bodies.

The prayer acts are prosthetic in that every aspect of these gestural acts reaches out beyond the physical bodies of the ritualists to connect with the immediate environment as well as in their broadest reach to the very acts of world creation and the fullest extent of Navajo imagination. In the farthest prosthetic reach these prayer acts invoke and engage—the “to” mentioned in the prayers—the *diyin dine’e*. This is the prosthetic distinction of prayer; it has the capacity to transcend the banal world to the farthest reaches of the imagination. The *diyin dine’e* reside as life-giving inner forms of the world, as beings on the “other side.” These “to” figures named and invoked by being named in prayers are also made present through the gestural acts of sandpaintings and masked appearances. Prayers, in their utterance as well as in their structure, make present the radical other; make “possible” and accessible these “impossibles.” These acts are distinctive of prayer (and as prayer so also religion) by their prosthetic power to invoke the copresence of the “here” of human existence and the “there” of the beings of the “other side,” the *diyin dine’e*. Perhaps this power of prayer to cross among realities is why Navajos sometimes refer to prayer itself as person.⁴⁴ For the Navajo, the reach is to the world of origination and to the space and condition of beauty from which Navajo life proceeds. The Navajo gestural/postural/prosthesis nexus invokes the copresence of the various distinctions/realms of reality; a copresence on which vitality depends. At the full reach of prayer, the mark distinguishing prayer, the prosthesis is the

⁴³ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *Primacy of Movement*, 438-9 George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) 282-3 and Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), various.

⁴⁴ See Gill, “Prayer as Person”

copresence of the impossible and the possible; the world of the radically other beyond the banal is copresent with the ordinary.⁴⁵

What is essential to recognize in these Navajo healing rites including prayer—and I believe is also relevant to prayer (and religion) wherever it is found—is that in its prosthetic powers prayer achieves what should not be possible. The very distinction of the *diyin dine'e* is that they are other, apart, of the other side, of a different order of reality than humans, than ordinary reality. Navajos are not *diyin dine'e* and *diyin dine'e* are not human.⁴⁶ Yet the impossible is achieved in prayer and certainly other gestural acts. The *diyin dine'e* are here in the spoken word, in their sandpainted presentation, and as masked beings. Yet all of these acts construct a particular kind of presence or better copresence. In these gestural acts, there is a momentary copresence of the impossible and the possible. The inner forms, the beings of the other side, are here, yet they are also inner forms and beings of the other side. The interrogative powers of these prayer gestures show Navajos that health, life, and beauty in the ordinary world are twined (copresent) with the existence of and relation to these “others.” In prayer acts Navajos experience the vitalizing effect of this copresence, that is, of the necessary distinction and discontinuity (impossibility) of the ordinary world and the world beyond (the other side) but also their essential twining. Prayer and ritual are tools (prostheses) that allow this experience of impossibles/possibles. Unity or reconciliation is not what is accomplished. Rather what is accomplished is the copresence, a structurality whose oscillatory effect is vitalizing.⁴⁷

Navajo people, as well as many other Native Americans, often use the English word “harmony” to indicate something of central importance to their religious practice. Navajos have a more specific way of articulating results, effects, and that is *hozho* or beauty often depicted as a male-female pair of *diyin dine'e* named Long Life and Happiness (*sa'ah naaghaii bik'eh hozho*).⁴⁸ Many Navajo prayers conclude with the standard passage, “In beauty may I walk,”⁴⁹ often repeated four times. Importantly beauty is understood in the context of self-moving, walking. This is consistent with

⁴⁵ It is notable that “masking” may also accomplish this prosthetic function gesturally. The masked *diyin dine'e* bring the “impossible” presence of these radical other beings into the realm of physical ritual reality where it is “possible” to physically interact with Navajo people.

⁴⁶ Risking slight overkill here I suggest that this condition is foundational to prayer wherever it is found. In Christianity for example the possible/impossible is even stronger; god is not human, yet god is man. There is a copresent implication at the core of Christology. If the first half of this statement of theological copresence did not pertain then there would be no prayer or the possibility of prayer.

⁴⁷ I am aware that this is not adequately argued here, but it can be and I do so in other writings.

⁴⁸ See Gill, *Sacred Words*, p. 54 for discussion of this term.

⁴⁹ See Gill, *Sacred Words*, p. 31 for discussion of the constituent associated with this distinctive phrase.

the verbal character of Navajo language where everything is understood in terms of its movement, its action, its behavior. In Navajo language it is difficult to refer to a fixed non-moving object. Beauty then is self-movement, or I might suggest gesture characterized by certain conditions, techniques of body. Those conditions are for the Navajo the vitalizing relationship between opposing interacting pairs of all sorts, compounded at many levels: east/west, north/south, below the surface/on the surface, outer form/inner form, this human side/the other *diyin dine'e* side, male/female, Long Life/Happiness and so on often compounding by repeatedly pairing other pairings. Beauty is not stasis or unity or fixedness or stability or being centered or balanced; it is the resounding qualities, harmonic resonances of twinings; a twoness wherein each part demands the other both for its distinction as well as its realization, a oneness.

The Navajo sense of beauty is not so distant from Friedrich Schiller's understanding as developed in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) as the rise of an interplay or play drive (*Speiltrieb*) when two opposing "drives," *Formtrieb* and *Sinnestrieb* for example, interact in concert.⁵⁰ Schiller identified this play with beauty; in play there is beauty. Indeed he wrote, "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays." In Navajo terms the importance of retaining the distinctions at play is ritually marked as well. At sunrise on the last morning of these multiple-day healing rites the one-sung-over is conducted out of the hogan some distance to the east to greet the rising sun. Here the final prayers of the ceremonial complex are prayed. They mark the return to the banal (non-ritual) world but also the copresence of the two—the ritual world and the world of daily Navajo life. This moment is the paragon of walking in beauty where there is felt connection between the world of order or beauty—posturally established in creation and re-established in prayer acts and other rites of healing—and the world of daily life invariably characterized by the nonlinearity of novelty; Navajos articulate novelty in terms of illness.⁵¹

Understood in terms of the gestural/postural/prosthesis nexus, Navajo religious life, including prayer, can be appreciated as the artful skilled performance of self-movement marked as distinctively Navajo. Health and life are constantly negotiated by these skilled actions in the perpetual presence of illness and death. That copresence established through the gestural skills of prayer acts, among other techniques of body, is the heart of Navajo vitality.

The repetition of Navajo prayers and the associated ritual acts of the healing rites is an essential aspect of the gestural postural character of these acts. Repeatedly experiencing these gestures all stamped firmly with those orientations and patterns of movement that extend from the most personal to the most cosmic is the cultural

⁵⁰ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795).

⁵¹ Navajos have other ways of indicating this relationship. Commonly they avoid closed circles in weaving patterns and basket designs and even in sandpaintings. This openness or gap is an explicit way of emphasizing the vitalizing effect of chiasm.

method of gaining and honing the gestural skill to be Navajo and to feel one's identity to be Navajo. Through the constant repetition of these gestural acts Navajos become shaped to reflect the distinctive values of their history, their tradition, and their culturally marked environment. Such repetition is fundamental both to being enculturated as Navajo as well as having the distinctively Navajo skills to act with agency in the world and to respond to novelty.⁵² Agency and identity are dependent on gestural acumen gained through repetition.

For Navajos as prayer goes so goes religion. Navajo prayer is a nested constituent of the larger performance and practice and experience of Navajo religion.⁵³ The repetitive and formulaic character of Navajo prayer is consistent with the balance of Navajo ritual and practice. For example, as a ritual speech act Navajo prayer participates in the formulaic gestural orientational sequence "feet legs body mind voice;" the voice reciting the prayers and singing the songs that are gestural/postural skilled acts of being Navajo. These speech acts engage the prosthetic actions of interrelating and entwining the individual and even the religious culture with the full history and physical environment that are distinctly Navajo. This Navajo gestural postural prosthesis nexus of prayer and religion, connecting through prayer with the impossibles does not accomplish some ending stability; they do not represent health. Rather what is accomplished is a vitalizing relationality that occurs with the presence affected through prayer and ritual acts of those whose presence among humans is impossible in the ontological sense that they are of the other side or they are inner forms or the *diyin dine'e*. The fishhook sought by Navajos in prayer is not full recovery from a specific illness. Indeed, Navajo healing ceremonies are performed both for those who are known to be terminally ill and incurable as well as those who have gained health (from the perspective of symptoms) through other means such as in western medical clinics. Rather it seems that Navajos seek life lived in the vitalizing ongoing relationship of the presence of what apart from the skillful practice of religion cannot be present; the copresence of the there and the here, the possible and the impossible, that is at the heart of self-movement, of walking in beauty.

I imagine the first prosthetic human act to be the pointing of a finger⁵⁴ stretched at arms length. Gesturally this act directs the eye to the finger "there" but extends the eye to effect a connection of the pointing finger with some thing beyond the finger,

⁵² A fascinating example of responding to novelty is found in how Navajo Enemyway was developed from its roots in the encounter of the dead enemies from warring tribes to a rite often performed for Navajo men who served in combat for the US military. But then, of course, constant change occurs with the performance of every religious act.

⁵³ The twining of various levels of ritual and cultural structuralities was the fundamental argument of my *Sacred Words*.

⁵⁴ A slight irony here in the context of the study of Navajos is that they never point with a finger, but rather with their lips, yet even this offers potential for understanding the distinctions of Navajos in terms of the gestural prosthesis nexus.

to some thing “over there.” The gesture of the pointing finger engages a transcending of the physical body while it creates a connection between the body and something other, a thing that is over there yet in perceiving it, in recognizing it, is also here. Thing there becomes distinguished and stands out in the environment in this prosthetic gesturing. Thing becomes identified with the pointing finger whose very gesture creates it in some sense. The interplay of this gestural prosthetics characterizes both the digital and the theological. The digital is the correspondence between the finger (digit) and the thing pointed out/created. The prosthetic correlation of finger with thing is the dawning of the digital age. The theological is the correspondence between the pointing finger and the fullest extent of the prosthetic imaginable, what Charles Sanders Peirce described in his “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God.”⁵⁵ It is not incidental that this essay is Peirce’s finest discussion of play and his lifelong interest in hypothetic inference (abduction). Such pointing gives rise to the notion of transcendence both to “there” and upon a “half hour of idle musement” to “There.” Of course, these ideas are my own fanciful exercise in attempting to describe a generic gestural postural prosthesis nexus that might apply to the distinctions of religion and prayer, academically constructed through fits and halts.

Here are finally, to me, the most important issues in the discussion of prayer as a comparative religious form of action. The formulaic and repetitive character of prayer must be understood as the acquisition of the skill, not unlike that involved with playing music or sport. Formula and repetition must be valued positively as contribution to the accumulation of experience that builds acumen, agency, identity, and beauty. In this respect gestural acts are inseparable from posture/position. These gestural acts of prayer have a prosthetic function. It is to transcend the performer of the act, as does any speech act. It has the agentive power to create relationship and in turn identity. The prosthetic distinction of prayer is its “reach;” it dares unapologetically to invoke (make present) by naming that/those whose nature is the impossible—the unknowable, the unfathomable, that which has no name, that which is its own self, that which is beyond, that which is identified with origin or unity or totality, those of the other side or the inner form, those of a mythic era or a storied place. Prayer affects the copresence of the possible and impossible, not for reconciliation or resolution, but for the vitalizing movement, a sounding and resounding, that such a copresence engenders. And finally, that, as Marcel Mauss showed, all such gestural/postural/prosthetic actions are distinctly shaped by culture, history, and psychology. He showed that there is no perfect or natural gesture; gesture can exist only as a bearer of the distinctive markers (posture/position) of culture, history, and experience. Prayer as a comparative religious category is, I suggest, distinctive in terms of at least these criteria. Yet as prayer is distinctive to specific cultural and historical settings then the narrower postural distinctions of specific prayer traditions correlate with the specific religions in which they occur.

⁵⁵ *Hibbert’s Journal* (1908). Interestingly, since I’ve previously referred to Schiller with regard to play, as a youth Peirce intensely studied Schiller’s Letters.

There is a double sense in which we might hold that as prayer goes so goes religion. One is in the broad theoretical sense of academic comparative studies; as we come to develop our theoretical understanding of prayer in this gestural/postural/prosthesis nexus, we cannot help but also enrich our understanding and appreciation of religion. The other sense is in terms of the narrower study of a particular religion or religious community or religious person; as we use this account of prayer to help us articulate what distinguishes culturally and historically specific prayer acts and practices, we cannot help but also improve our understanding of what specifically distinguishes this particular religion or religious tradition or religious practice.