

PRAYER, understood as the human communication with divine and spiritual entities, has been present in most of the religions in human history. Viewed from most religious perspectives, prayer is a necessity of the human condition. When the human material world is accounted for in an act of creation resulting in a cleavage or separation from the divine or spiritual world, prayer is one means by which this gap of createdness is overcome, if but momentarily.

Abundant texts of such communications exist as well as extensive literatures about them. Still, the general study of prayer is undeveloped and naive. The question of the universality of prayer has yet to be seriously addressed to the relevant materials. A careful comparative and etymological study of just the terminology that designates acts of human-spiritual communication has yet to be done among even the widespread and best-known religious traditions. Studies of prayer in terms of modern communications theories and semiotics are limited and rare. The theories, as well as the intuitive understandings, of prayer have been heavily influenced by Western religious traditions.

A general schema will be used in the following consideration of the typologies, theories, and interpretive issues of prayer phenomena. First, prayer will be considered as *text*, that is, as a collection of words that cohere as a human communication directed toward a spiritual entity. Second, prayer will be considered as *act*, that is, as the human act of communicating with deities including not only or exclusively language but especially the elements of performance that constitute the act. Finally, prayer will be considered as *subject*, that is, as a dimension or aspect of religion, the articulation of whose nature constitutes a statement of belief, doctrine, instruction, philosophy, or theology.

Prayer as Text. Prayer is thought of most commonly as the specific words of the human-spiritual communication, that is, as the text of this communication, such as the Lord's Prayer (Christian), the Qaddish (Jewish), and the prayers of *ṣalāt* (Muslim). Scores of prayers appear in books of prayer, books of worship, descriptions of rituals and liturgies, ethnographies of exclusively oral peoples, and biographies of religious persons. [See Lord's Prayer; Siddur and Maḥzor; and *Ṣalāt*.]

A common basic typology of prayer has been formulated by discerning what distinguishes the character and intent expressed by the words of prayer texts. This kind of typology includes a number of classes, all easily

distinguished by their descriptive designations. It includes petition, invocation, thanksgiving (praise or adoration), dedication, supplication, intercession, confession, penitence, and benediction. Such types may constitute whole prayers or they may be strung together to form a structurally more complex prayer.

This kind of typology serves to demonstrate the extent of prayer phenomena. It may be used as a device for the comparative study of religion. It suggests that prayer is widespread and has a commonality as well as diversity. The most extensive use of this kind of typology was made in studies, done mostly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of the development of religion over time. Petitionary prayers were thought to be most widespread and thus the oldest form of prayer. The presence of ethical, moral, and spiritual concerns in petitionary prayers was believed to have come later as a development beyond purely personal and material needs. While these developmental aspects are no longer considered valid nor are they of much interest in the study of religion, this content typology has continued to provide the basic descriptive language of prayer.

In his classic early anthropological study *Primitive Culture* (1873), E. B. Tylor attributed a psychological and spiritual character to prayer. He called prayer "the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed" and "the address of personal spirit to personal spirit." In perhaps the most extensive comparative study of prayer, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion* (1932), Friedrich Heiler understood prayer in much the same terms, describing it, using Hebrew scriptural imagery, as a pouring out of the heart before God. Thus, in both of these classic descriptions, prayer is characterized as free and spontaneous, that is, heartfelt. Such characterization is still broadly held and is, for most, so obvious that critical discussion is unnecessary. However, when the understanding of prayer as a free and spontaneous "living communion of man with God" (Heiler) is conjoined with the general restriction of prayer to the text form, incongruity, confusion, and dilemma arise. Prayer texts, almost without exception and to a degree as part of their nature, are formulaic, repetitive, and static in character, much in contrast with the expected free and spontaneous character of prayer. In the case of Tylor, whose study of culture and religion was directed to the documentation of the evolution of culture, this was particularly confounding. His theory called for religion to follow magic and thus for prayer to follow magical spells and formulas. Yet the abundance of liturgical and meditational prayer forms in the cultures he considered the most fully developed confounded his thesis. Tylor could resolve this dilemma only by holding that prayer "from being at first utterances as free and

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flexible as requests to a living patriarch or chief, stiffened into traditional formulas whose repetition required verbal accuracy, and whose nature practically assimilated more or less to that of charms" (Tylor, vol. 2, p. 371). Thus, the structural characteristics of prayer that contradicted the expectations of prayer were held to be a product of civilization and evolution.

Heiler was also confounded by this incongruity. He held that prayer texts were, in fact, not true prayers, but were rather artificially composed for the purpose of edifying, instructing, and influencing people in the matters of dogma, belief, and tradition. Heiler's study of prayer, therefore, was a failed effort from the outset in the respect that he denigrated his primary source of data for his study of prayer, leaving him wistfully awaiting the rare occasion to eavesdrop on one pouring out his or her heart to God. Heiler's predisposition for the psychological nature of prayer, conjoined with his failure to make any clear or useful distinction between prayer as text and prayer as act, placed his consideration of prayer in a nonproductive position, one that has generally discouraged the academic study of prayer, especially beyond particular prayer traditions.

Due to the nature of the materials available, prayers must often be considered primarily, if not solely, as texts, whose study is limited to the semantic, informational, and literary aspects of the language that constitutes them. Despite such limitations, the texts of prayers reflect theological, doctrinal, cultural, historical, aesthetic, and creedal dimensions of a religious culture.

Prayer as Act. Intuitively prayer is an act of communication. In its most common performance, prayer is an act of speech. [See also Language.] Prayer has been considered as act, including not only the words uttered but some of the performance elements of the speech act, in order to classify and describe prayers in terms of the identities of those praying, the occasions of prayer, the motivations for praying, and such physically descriptive matters as body and hand attitudes. These classifications have been primarily descriptive with institutional and psychological aspects in the foreground.

The distinction between personal and ritual prayer has often been made when viewing prayer as act. Personal prayer, regarded as the act of persons pouring forth their hearts to God, has been considered by many as the truest form, even the only true form, of prayer. Yet, the data available for the study of personal prayer are scant. Still, the record of personal prayers found in letters, biographies, and diaries suggests a strong correlation and interdependence of personal prayer with ritual and liturgical prayer in language, form, style, and physical attitude. A person praying privately is invari-

ably a person who is part of a religious and cultural tradition in which ritual or public prayer is practiced.

Ritual prayer, by not conforming to the naive notions of the spontaneity and free form of prayer, has often been set aside. It was not incorrect of Heiler to understand ritual prayer as being composed for the purpose of edifying, instructing, and influencing people in the matters of dogma, belief, and tradition, although this is but a partial understanding. But Heiler radically truncated his, and consequently many others', understanding of prayer by denigrating these important functions. Such aspects of prayer must be recognized as important and often essential to the continuity and communication of tradition and culture. In its capacity of performing these important functions, the formulaic, repetitive, and standardized characteristics of prayer are effective pedagogically and to enculturate.

Furthermore, and importantly, it can be shown that prayer when formulaic, repetitive, and redundant in message can be a true act of communication, even heartfelt. In recent years a range of studies has developed showing the performative power of language and speech acts. Simply put, these studies show that language and other forms of human action not only say things, that is, impart information, they also do things. Ordinary language acts may persuade, name, commit, promise, declare, affirm, and so on; and these functions are often more primary than that of transmitting information.

The study of prayer has yet to be extensively influenced by this understanding of the performative power of language, but it is clearly relevant. From this perspective, the many dimensions of the act of prayer apart from the heartfelt communication with God can be appreciated more fully. For example, a prayer of invocation, through its form as well as its content, when uttered in the appropriate ritual context, serves to transform the mood of the worshipers. It sets the tone and attitude of worship. It effects the presence of the spiritual in the minds of worshipers. Likewise, a prayer of benediction releases worshipers from a ritual domain. It serves to extend the reorientation achieved in ritual to the world beyond while releasing people from the restrictions imposed by ritual. Prayers of praise direct the attention of those praying to positive divine attributes, they effect and reflect a doctrine of God, while prayers of confession and penitence direct the attention of those praying to negative human elements, they effect and reflect a doctrine of sin and humankind. Even when formulaic and without a motivation arising directly from individual felt needs, the emotive experience and affective qualities of these prayers differs

markedly according to their type. Prayers of praise or thanksgiving are joyous, uplifting, and outgoing, while prayers of confession and penitence are introspective and somber. The formulaic character of liturgical prayers invites participation by establishing a frame of expectation, a pattern that becomes familiar.

Studies of the performative power of language suggest that such enactment capabilities of speech are conventionalized, formalized, and ordinarily involve physical action as well as the utterance of words in order to be felicitous. In other words, a prayer act, to have effect, to be true and empowered includes not only the utterance of words, but the active engagement of elements of the historical, cultural, and personal setting in which it is offered. It may include certain body postures and orientations, ritual actions and objects, designated architectural structures or physical environments, particular times of the day or calendar dates, specified moods, attitudes, or intentions. For example, a Muslim does not enact *ṣalāt* (daily ritual prayer) by simply uttering the words "Allāhu akbar." Rather, *ṣalāt* is a performance that requires proper timing, dress, directional orientation, a sequence of bodily actions that includes standing, prostration, proper attitudes—all of these, as well as the proper recitation of a sequence of words.

When prayer is considered as act, the unresponsive and noncreative dimensions that seem inseparable from the rigidity of words tend to dissolve, for a prayer act always involves one praying in a historical, cultural, social, and psychological setting. These ever-changing contextual elements are necessarily a part of the act. In some prayer traditions, the Navajo of North America for example, it has been shown that highly formulaic constituents of prayer are ordered in patterns and conjoined with familiar ritual elements in combinations that express very specifically the heartfelt needs and motivations of a single person for whom the prayer is uttered. Analogous to ordinary language where familiar words can be ordered according to a single set of grammatical principles in infinite ways to be creative and expressive, prayer passages may be ordered in conjunction with ritual elements to achieve the same communicative capabilities.

The importance of the performative power of prayer acts is attested within many religious traditions by the expressed view that the most important prayers are those spoken in a special language, those mumbled, or those uttered silently, even those that are accomplished without words. Other nonspeech forms are also commonly recognized as essentially prayer, such as song, dance, sacrifice, and food offerings. These nonspeech forms may be understood as heartfelt and spontaneous

human acts directed toward the spiritual world, but they may also be understood as religious forms whose enactment strengthens emotion, sustains courage, and excites hope.

When prayer is considered as act, a whole range of powerful characteristics and religious functions may be discerned. Here the issue is not primarily to show that prayer is communication with the spiritual or divine, or even necessarily to discern what is communicated, but rather to direct attention to the comprehension and appreciation of the power and effectiveness of communication acts that are human-divine communications. Likewise, when seen as act, the distinction between prayer and other religious speech acts—chant, spell, and formula—is less significant than it often is when distinguished and evaluated within particular religious traditions or theories of religion.

Various traditions of Buddhism present a test case in the consideration of prayer as they do many categories and dimensions of religion. For those traditions that are not theistic, like Theravāda Buddhism, prayer understood as human-divine communication is not possible. [See Meditation.] However, a number of kinds of Buddhist speech acts, such as meditational recitations, scriptural recitations, *mantras*, and *bodhisattva* vows, have certain resemblances to prayer, especially in terms of many of its functions. [See especially Mantra.] Commonly the distinction between prayer and these Buddhist speech forms has simply been ignored and they are considered as forms of Buddhist prayer. It would be more valuable to comprehend specifically the similarities and differences of the various forms and functions of these Buddhist speech acts compared with prayer acts of theistic traditions. In their similarities lies the nature of religion, in their differences lies the distinctiveness of Buddhism among religious traditions.

Prayer as Subject. In religious traditions, prayer is not only words recited, prayer is not only an action enacted, prayer is also a subject that is much written and talked about. It is the subject of theory, of theology, of sermons, of doctrine, of devotional guides, of prescribed ways of worship and ways of life, and of descriptions of methods of prayer. In the style and interest of a number of academic fields that consider human communication processes and the language forms that take these communications as their subject, we propose to term this dimension of prayer "metaprayer," signifying thereby the communications in religious traditions about prayer. The extent of literature in religious traditions about prayer is massive and ranges from personal meditations on the "way of prayer" to formal theologies and philosophies of prayer. In these writings, prayer be-

comes the subject by which to articulate the principles and character of a religious tradition or a strain within a tradition.

There are countless memorable and distinctive metaphors. The following examples illustrate the range and character of these statements. In Plato's *Timaeus* (27b-c), Socrates and Timaeus discuss the necessity of prayer:

Socrates: And now, Timaeus, you, I suppose, should speak next, after duly calling upon the gods.

Timaeus: All men, Socrates, who have any degree of right feeling, at the beginning of every enterprise, whether small or great, always call upon God. And we, too, who are going to discourse of the nature of the universe, how created or how existing without creation, if we be not altogether out of our wits, must invoke the aid of gods and goddesses and pray that our words may be above all acceptable to them and in consequence to ourselves.

On the Lord's Prayer, Immanuel Kant in 1793 wrote in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* that "one finds in it nothing but the resolution to good life—conduct which, taken with the consciousness of our frailty, carries with it the persistent desire to be a worthy member in the kingdom of God. Hence it contains no actual request for something which God in His wisdom might well refuse us" (trans. Greene and Hudson, New York, 1960, p. 183).

Friederich Schleiermacher, in a sermon entitled "The Power of Prayer" (*Selected Sermons*, London, 1890, p. 38), describes prayer in familiar, sweeping terms: "To be a religious man and to pray are really one and the same thing."

Powerful and provocative are the many statements on prayer of Abraham Joshua Heschel. In *Man's Quest for God* (New York, 1954) he wrote, "The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God" (p. 87). In an essay entitled "On Prayer" he wrote, "We pray in order to pray. . . . I pray because I am unable to pray. . . . We utter the words of the *Kaddish: Magnified and sanctified by His great name in the world which He has created according to His will. Our hope is to enact, to make real the sanctification of this name here and now*" (*Conservative Judaism*, Fall 1970, pp. 3-4). And finally, in *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York, 1966) Heschel wrote, "Different are the languages of prayer, but the tears are the same. We have a vision in common of Him in whose compassion all men's prayers meet" (p. 180).

In Western religious traditions, prayer has raised classic issues, the resolution of which corresponds to interpretive traditions. One notable issue is whether or not prayer, particularly petitionary prayer, is necessary or useful, since God is understood as all-knowing and

all-caring. The explanation of this issue is an articulation of a theology and an anthropology, and it constitutes a statement of faith. Another classic issue has been whether prayer is monologue, dialogue, or neither. If one holds that prayer is monologue, one must explain how prayer is prayer at all rather than meditation or personal reflection. If one holds that prayer is dialogue, one must describe how God participates in the communication act. Theologies and philosophies of Western traditions no longer give much attention to prayer, but it has nonetheless been a significant topic in many of the classic theological and philosophical systems.

In *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1902), William James, upon considering a number of statements about prayer, concluded that "the fundamental religious point is that in prayer, spiritual energy, which otherwise would slumber, does become active, and spiritual work of some kind is effected really."

In *Young India*, on 24 September 1925, Mohandas K. Gandhi wrote:

Prayers are a confession of our unworthiness, or our weakness. God has a thousand, which means countless, names, or say rather that He has no name. We may sing hymns to Him or pray to Him, using any name we prefer. Some know Him by the name Rama, some know Him as Krishna, others call Him Rahim, and yet others call Him God. All these worship the same spiritual being. However, just as everyone does not like the same food so all these names do not find acceptance with everyone. . . . This is to say that one can pray, sing devotional songs not with the lips but with the heart. That is why even the dumb, the stammerer and the brainless can pray.

And on 10 June 1926, he wrote in *Young India*: "It seems to me that it [prayer] is a yearning of the heart to be one with the Maker, an invocation for his blessing. It is in this case the attitude that matters, not words uttered or muttered."

A final example taken from American fiction not only illustrates that metaphrayer appears in a variety of forms of literature, but that metaphrayer may even be used to disavow the use and efficacy of prayer. In the following passage from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck distinguishes his own religiousness from that of old Miss Watson:

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.

Conclusion. In the general study of prayer, the term *prayer* has been used loosely to designate a variety of human acts, principally speech acts associated with the practice of religion, especially those that are communications with a divine or spiritual entity. There can be no precise definition given the word when used in this way, for it serves as but a general focusing device for more precise comparative and historical study. The term gains definitional precision when seen as any of dozens of terms used in specific religious traditions as articulated in practice or in doctrine.

What can be articulated to facilitate the general study of prayer is the significance of the tripartite distinctions of prayer as text, as act, and as subject.

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Prayer as a general religious phenomenon has received scant attention by students of religion. There are no recent global or extensive studies. The discussions of prayer that continue to be the standard, while obviously inadequate, are E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols., 4th ed. (London, 1903), and Friedrich Heiler's *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, edited and translated by Samuel McComb (Oxford, 1932). Most of the general studies of prayer are strongly psychological in character. Prayer was a topic of extensive consideration by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; New York, 1961), pp. 359-371. Prayer and related religious speech acts are of interest in phenomenologies of religion; see, for example, Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 2 vols., translated by J. E. Turner (London, 1938), pp. 403-446.

Statements of a comparative nature are found scattered throughout the literature, especially comparing specific prayers among Western religious traditions. However, broader and detailed comparative studies of prayer do not exist. Extensive studies of prayer that have attempted to see prayer in more general and universal terms may still be of interest, even though they have a dominantly Christian perspective. Such studies include Alexander J. Hodge's *Prayer and its Psychology* (New York, 1931) and R. H. Coats's *The Realm of Prayer* (London, 1920).

An exemplary study of prayer that makes a clear distinction between prayer as a text, act, and subject is Tzvee Zahavy's "A New Approach to Early Jewish Prayer," in *History of Judaism: The Next Ten Years*, edited by Baruch M. Bokser (Chico, Calif., 1980), pp. 45-60.

Sources for prayer within specific religious traditions can be found under the heading "Prayer" in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1918), which includes a number of articles, some now outdated, on various religious traditions. See also *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, edited by George Appleton and others (New York, 1985).

There are numerous studies that demonstrate the impor-

ance of considering prayer as act. Harold A. Carter's *The Prayer Tradition of Black People* (Valley Forge, Pa., 1976) is a fine study of the American black prayer tradition; it traces the African heritage, describes the theological influences, discerns the major functions, and demonstrates the remarkable power of this prayer tradition in the context of black movements in American history. Gary Goosen's "Language as a Ritual Substance," in *Language in Religious Practice*, edited by William J. Samarin (Rowley, Mass., 1976), pp. 40-62, considers Chamul prayers as encoding messages interpreted in terms of Victor Turner's method of considering symbols.

On the performative power of Navajo prayer, see my "Prayer as Person: The Performative Force in Navajo Prayer Acts," *History of Religions* 17 (November 1979): 143-157. On the centrality of prayer to the whole system of Navajo religion, see my *Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer* (Westport, Conn., 1981). A notable study of prayer as a tradition of creative acts of oratory, focusing on the inhabitants of sea islands along the Atlantic Coast of the southern United States, is Patricia Jones-Jackson's "Oral Traditions in Gullah," *Journal of Religious Thought* 39 (Spring-Summer 1982): 21-33.

An exemplary study of nonspeech acts considered as communication acts similar to prayer is Gabriella Eichinger Ferroluzzi's "Ritual as Language: The Case of South Indian Food Offerings," *Current Anthropology* 18 (September 1977): 507-514.

The performative power of speech acts, relevant to the study of prayer as act, has been shown in many essays. See, for example, Benjamin C. Ray's "'Performative Utterances' in African Rituals," *History of Religions* 13 (August 1973): 16-35; Stanley J. Tambiah's "The Magical Power of Words," *Man*, n.s. 3 (June 1968): 175-208; and Tambiah's *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge, 1970).

While folklore studies have become interested in the performance of many speech forms, especially among exclusively oral peoples, prayer is a form that has received little attention despite its abundant resources and importance within the traditions studied.

On the consideration of second-order language acts (metalinguages), see Alan Dundes's "Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism," *The Monist* 50 (October 1966): 505-516, and Barbara A. Babcock's "The Story in the Story: Metanarration in Folk Narrative," in her and Richard Bauman's *Verbal Art as Performance* (Rowley, Mass., 1977). Sources for prayer as subject are coincident with the second-order interpretative and critical literary traditions of all religions. In the contemporary religions and popular literature of the Western traditions, prayer is a constant topic. It has also been a consideration of major theologies and philosophies, as shown for modern Western thought in a summary treatment by Perry Le Fevre, *Understandings of Prayer* (Philadelphia, 1981). In *Prayer: An Analysis of Theological Terminology* (Helsinki, 1973), Antti Alhonsaari considers the theological issue of whether prayer is monologue or dialogue, discerning systematically the forms of prayer that correspond to the combinations of the variable on which this metaprayer discussion turns. While the rubric "Prayer" is not so dominant among non-Western religious traditions, there are nonetheless abundant comparable statements about prayer and prayerlike phenomena found among the writings of the interpreters and believers in these many traditions.

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