

Why Pray? Theological and Empirical Perspectives on a Universal Human Practice

Benjamin Cha

Bergen Catholic High School, Oradell, NJ, USA

ABSTRACT: Prayer carries a unique epistemological and anthropological space at the center of theology, philosophy, and diverse social sciences. Throughout civilizations and traditions—from Abrahamic faiths to Dharmic systems—prayer has remained a universal mode of vital human expression, highlighting a consistent impulse toward transcendence. This paper examines the phenomenon of prayer as an expression that extends beyond devotional practice. Prayer can be seen as an intricate cultural artifact with theological, historical, psychological, and even biomedical impact. With references to a range of scriptures, such as the Lord's Prayer in Christianity, the Shema in Judaism, and the Salah in Islam, with additional references to cross-cultural analogues in Quaker, Hindu, and other cultures and religions, this paper aims to examine prayer's structural commonalities and divergences in functionality. The research includes insights from theologians, such as C.S. Lewis, Martin Buber, and Timothy Keller, paired with empirical studies in order to highlight both subjective and discrete results of prayer. By examining Bertrand Russell's scientistic dismissal of prayer, this paper argues that prayer's significance cannot be minimized to empirical efficacy; instead, it resides in its core ability to cultivate relationality, humility, and existential orientation toward transcendence. From a larger perspective, the paper argues that prayer's relevance across temporal, cultural, and ideological boundaries illustrates a universal human need for connection with the transcendent—a necessity that contradicts the reduction to materialist frameworks.

KEYWORDS: prayer, theological perspectives, relationality, spiritual practices

Introduction

The question, "Why pray?" defies the simple classification within a single stream of thought. Considering the act of prayer from a wider lens reveals that it is a custom that cuts across different cultures, societies, and religions, which raises the question of why people pray. Moreover, in many religions and cultures, prayer takes different forms, such as the *Lord's Prayer*, which is a liturgical prayer in Christianity, the *rak'āt*, which is part of the *Salah* performed in Islam, the chanting of the *Shema* in Judaism, the meditative silence in Quaker worship, and the

ritualistic offerings in Hinduism. Beneath these differences, however, there exists a fundamental sameness—that is, all these acts seek to orient the self toward a reality understood to be absolute, ultimate, or sacred.

For centuries, prayer has been a key element of individual devotion and collective identity. In the Bible, we find Abraham interceding for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Psalms are laced with exquisite melodies asking for deliverance, and Jesus calling his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. Prophet Muhammad's practices, which form the backbone of the Islamic tradition, integrate prayer within daily life, while Jewish liturgy situates prayer within the context of the covenantal memory of Israel. Besides explicitly religious situations, prayers can be found in public life too, such as in the bids of the Senate Chaplain's invocation on Capitol Hill, the pre-game huddle of a college basketball team, or in the whispered petitions tucked under hospital pillows. A contemporary paradox lies in the fact that prayer exists in public for all to see, but in an increasingly secular and pluralistic society.

Philosophically, prayer's significance transcends outcomes and results. C. S. Lewis is one of the scholars who believed in the power of prayer and described it as an encounter that, rather than trying to change God's plans, impacts the individual who is praying. The concept of prayer is redefined by Martin Buber's *I–Thou* framework as a dialogical relation. Timothy Keller brings to light meditative prayers and refocusing practices to grasp divine truth. There has been longstanding criticism by Bertrand Russell, who challenges religion by advocating for the dominance of science and thus questioning the results of prayer. These opposing views of theological affirmation and empirical skepticism collide, creating a paradox that needs a profound analysis and offers no resolution.

More recent psychological and medical studies consider the reductionist perspective on prayer as overly simplistic. Byrd's (1988) double-blind study on cardiac patients and intercessory prayer is one of the empirical studies that support the potential psychosomatic benefits of prayer, whether those benefits come from genuine divine intervention, a placebo effect, or the complex interplay of faith, mental processes, and bodily systems. From a sociological standpoint, the existence of inherited prayer, passed down through the ages, underscores prayer's significance in preserving and transmitting cultural memory, as well as in transforming and shaping communal identity.

Theological dogmas and empirical explanations alike cannot sufficiently capture the concept of prayer. Its meaning resides in the unique blend of spiritual awe, cultural tradition, and the changing relationship of one's self. This paper argues that the act of prayer, which has been present throughout human existence, serves to connect the tangible and intangible, the society and the individual, the present and the past, and, crucially, the contemporary and the timeless.

History

This paper explores the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu faiths as examples, as they represent the largest religions in the world. However, Christian prayer emphasizes a relationship, while the Quaker faith, being a denomination within Christianity, emphasizes meditative prayer. Muslim and Jewish prayers reflect tradition, while Hindu prayers emphasize actions and symbolism. All faith systems highlight and target all essential aspects of prayer that should be noted.

Throughout history, each religion has provided reasons to pray. Many of these historical prayers are acts of communication, someone asking for something, or acts of worship. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, the first recorded prayers are attributed to Abraham, who beseeched God to have mercy on Sodom and Gomorrah as he sought to spare the righteous people. In Genesis 4:26, prayer is first mentioned when Seth, the third son of Adam, had his son Enosh. Many of Christianity's earliest recorded prayers were for guidance and direction. In Luke's Gospel, part of the New Testament, Jesus prays on the cross, "Forgive them Father for they do not know what they are doing", and "Father, into your hands I cast my spirit." In Christianity, Jesus is God incarnate, but many theologians and scholars explain that, because Jesus was both of Heaven and of Earth, prayer is a crucial factor, as it enables us to connect with Heaven, regardless of our circumstances. It is a part of being human; we pray because we require a relationship with our Creator. Jesus prayed to model human dependence on God despite his divine nature.

Priests used the first Jewish prayers for blessings and worship. Such as the *Shema*, which is a prayer for worship, prayed twice a day, in the morning and at night. It is composed of multiple verses from the books of Deuteronomy and Numbers. Another key example is the *Priestly Blessing*, which also comes from a verse in *Numbers* and is performed in the Temple, mainly during the holiday *Musaf* service.

Muslims pray five mandatory prayers a day for worship and have personal prayers to ask for forgiveness or seek help, as well as other prayers to emulate the habits of their Prophet. Each time they pray, they pray a different number of *rak'āt*. They believe these prayers will bring them rewards and help them gain entry into heaven. However, before they begin praying, they make an intention to pray, and then the prayer starts when they bring their hands to their ears and recite, "God is the greatest." One of the recommended things to do after this is to say a *dua*, a supplication to praise God, and acknowledge his perfection. This illustrates how tradition is embodied in prayer, making it almost a personal liturgy.

In addition, one of the motions in prayer is to look at the place where they will prostrate themselves when their head is bowed while standing. However, this is done to mimic the habits of the Prophet Muhammad. There are many sayings during a unit of prayer, such as asking for spiritual protection, many phrases to

praise God, and for the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, every two units of prayer require the person praying to proclaim faith, as well as offer praise to the Prophet Muhammad and God.

Quakers pray in silence and through meditation, where they find the Holy Spirit, light, or whatever the individual wishes to recognize (Friends Meeting at Cambridge, 2018). In Quaker liturgy, it is an individual experience, although it is often done as a group. Hindus pray through rituals such as lighting candles or burning incense (Gettysburg College, n.d.). One Hindu ritual is lighting a lamp while praying the Puja twice a day, in the early morning and at night. It is a gesture of respect for one of the five primary elements and a symbol of faith.

Theology and Philosophy

Moreover, many theologians from diverse faith backgrounds have proposed that prayer primarily concerns the relationship between the individual and their God. C. S. Lewis, the well-known Christian apologist and fiction writer, wrote that prayer is not something to say. He wrote, "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, whether I am awake or asleep. It doesn't change God. It changes me." This points to the human need for God, and positions prayer as a bridge between Heaven and Earth.

Similarly, Father Mike Schmitz, a popular priest, author, and speaker on prayer, emphasizes that prayer is essential to cultivating dependence on God and deepening faith. Echoing Lewis and Schmitz's ideas, Muslim speaker Mufti Menk explained on Facebook that worship in the form of prayer promotes peace for the believer and establishes trust between the individual and God. Indeed, Jewish theologian Martin Buber asserts that worship, as a form of dialogue, serves as its own means of reconciliation with the individual and with God.

In addition to fostering a relationship with God, prayer can serve as a form of meditation and spiritual practice. Dr. Timothy Keller, a well-known New York City church planter and apologist, states in his book *Prayer* that prayer can also be considered a form of meditation (Keller, 2016). He explains that meditation helps believers understand and process scripture more effectively and is more powerful than just reading words. He also explains that it may be a way for us to get to know God better. One example of meditative prayer is when a group of Quaker Christians gathers silently to meditate and feel the holy presence of God. Meditative prayer encourages reflection on something related to faith, such as scripture.

Non-religious Research

Although many doubt the effects of prayer, there is evidence of a positive impact, even if such effects can be attributed to the placebo effect. Many people might see prayer as a feeling. There are studies where theology is almost separated from

prayer, and it is examined under a psychological or social perspective, with a religious impact not being considered. For example, the *New York Times* columnist David French (2024) explained that it was an experience. He published an op-ed story about how he was miraculously healed after his friend prayed for him. French noted that while he does not believe every claim of miracles, he affirms that prayer works in healing, even if it is only a placebo effect. Similarly, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports an increasing prevalence of prayer in healthcare.

Additionally, NBC News reported on the practice of prayer in hospitals, highlighting a study conducted by San Francisco cardiologist Randolph Byrd, who conducted an experiment asking born-again Christians to pray for 192 people hospitalized for heart problems. He compared them with 201 patients who were not targeted for prayer. The ones prayed for were reported to have required fewer medications and less assistance with breathing (Stein, 2006). The continued attention to these studies by leading institutions—including *The New York Times*, the NIH, and NBC News—demonstrates that prayer is analyzed not only as a religious or spiritual practice but as a credible topic within medical and scientific research (Narayanasamy & Narayanasamy, 2008).

Prayer in Scripture and Faith

Some people may struggle to find the right words in prayer, but in the Christian faith, Jesus provided a model with the *Lord's Prayer*, offering the necessary reasons and words for worship. It begins with praise to God and an acknowledgment of His glory: "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." It then goes on with requests that promote humility: "Give us this day, our daily bread." Then they confess their sins and ask for forgiveness: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Finally, believers ask for guidance in their faith and spiritual protection: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The prayer encompasses praise and humility, as well as seeking forgiveness and guidance. It is an act that expresses dependence on God and the pursuit of a relationship with Him.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." In addition to worship and prayer to ask God for something, confession of sins is another reason for followers to pray. In Jesus' parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15:11-32, the prodigal son represents a believer who sins and rejects God, and the father represents God. The believer sins, walking away from God, but when he understands his mistake, he returns to God. As explained, all of the contents of the Lord's Prayer provide the reasons to pray: worship, thanksgiving, repentance, and beseeching.

Prayers in other faiths are similar. Muslim prayer, practiced in units called *rak'āt*, encompasses worship and gratitude; a specific number of *rak'āt* are recited

at five designated times during the day. Worshipers first make an intention to pray, then stand and face the *Kaaba*, and recite the phrase "God is the greatest." They then recite the opening chapter of the *Quran*, bow to glorify God, stand again to offer words of worship, and finally bow down on their face. Jews have many different kinds of prayer that can be compared to Christian or Islamic prayer. Similar to Orthodox Christians and Muslims, Jewish prayer typically incorporates specific body movements and other postures. Prayers are commonly chanted rather than read aloud. One central Jewish prayer is the *Shema*, which includes passages from various books of the *Torah*. It begins simply: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One. Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever and ever." Then it shifts from worship to scripture and vows, stating that the worshipers will uphold the words of God wherever they go and will teach them thoroughly to their children.

These different models of prayer in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are clearly connected to broader theological beliefs, but they all say similar things. "Hallowed be Thy name," "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One," and "God is the Greatest" are the beginnings of each prayer, respectively. Another Jewish prayer model, the *Amidah*, is mainly based on asking God for something (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.). After Muslims finish their *rak'āt* of prayer, many often make *dua*, a prayer of asking (Islam Question & Answer, n.d.). Each of these models of prayer contains an acknowledgment of God and personal faith. They all proclaim the glory of the creator; ask for guidance, spiritual strength, or protection; and include repentance of sins (Greenberg, 2021).

The various models, regardless of the faith to which they are tied, demonstrate that people have a strong need that can only be fulfilled through prayer. However, prayer is not merely a ritualistic thing, but it is a constant presence on a cultural level. These people all ask for something and praise God in their prayers. Many of these prayers have been passed down through tradition and culture. Despite differences in how each faith group prays, prayer remains a consistent and meaningful practice.

However, some thinkers have challenged the validity of prayer. For example, the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1952) argued in his book *"The Impact of Science on Society"* that the power of science is far greater than the power of prayer. Russell wrote, "It is not by prayer and humility that you cause things to go as you wish, but by acquiring a knowledge of natural laws." While Russell questioned the effectiveness of prayer, his view overlooks its deeper purpose. Prayer is more than just achieving measurable outcomes. It is about spiritual connection with God, humility, and hope that go beyond scientific results.

Conclusion

Although some philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell, argue that prayer lacks measurable outcomes, this perspective misses the more spiritual purpose of prayer. Throughout history, people have always longed for a deeper connection to God, drawn to God's presence and power. Prayer is the way to fulfill that need, but the primary reason we pray is that it deepens our faith and humility, promoting a relationship with God.

Prayer is an act of worship, submission, meditation, or communication done to promote trust, peace, and ultimately humility for the believer towards God. However, prayer encompasses more than this. Looking back, regardless of how far and advanced people have become over time and the faith they practice, the various models of prayer speak for themselves. People have been praying these exact models for thousands of years, and these prayers are similar across different cultures and faiths. Every single group of people in history had a gap, regardless of faith or cultural background, that had to be filled with prayer, whether it was giving praise to God or simply speaking to Him.

Why pray? Although composed of only two words, the question conveys a profound understanding that psychology, religion, cultural tradition, and even medicine must be involved to comprehend some aspect of it well. Ultimately, prayer is about building a relationship with God. Human beings have always had an instinct that there is a higher power, and a way to connect with it—through prayer. Prayer is effective because its real power lies in its relational nature. It does not necessarily alter natural law for someone who might not believe in God or prayer. However, it alters the way people are, which is why it extends even further beyond the realm of religion. It extends into psychology, history, culture, and even medical studies. The obvious answer is that people pray because they believe in God, or in a god. Yet people do not pray just because it “works.” Prayer is also an expression of human nature and need. It also represents a human tradition that reaches back to ancient history.

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