

Prayer

Despite the importance of religion and ritual in anthropology, prayer, a key component of religious practices and institutions, has received very little empirical attention. In its broadest sense, prayer is a discursive act that bridges human limitation and the spiritual realm. To pray is to be conscious of mortal existence. Perhaps there is no other single speech event that engages people at the critical points of the life cycle than prayer. In Western traditions, people celebrate transitions in social life with prayer, bury the dead with both eulogy and prayer, and remember the dead in moments of silent prayer. This celebratory essence of prayer has been shared across time and cultural groups. Indeed, archaeological work has confirmed this link. Symbols and objects related to prayer have been uncovered as silent testimonials of ancient traditions and communities with a profound preoccupation with life and death in the construction and explanation of the social world. Prayer, in this way, is an intrinsic human meaning-making activity that relates the known and the unknown. Prayer grounds humans to earth, yet orients them to a higher spiritual point.

The genre and practice of prayer is richly varied across cultural groups. Prayers can be specially sanctioned by religious institutions, as in the case of The Lord's Prayer in Christian tradition. Such prayers are scripted, following a prescribed pattern in both text and delivery. Prayers can also be situational, arising from moment-to-moment experience. Prayers may be sung or said by an intercessor, co-constructed by a congregation, or recited privately by the individual. And while the act of praying is understood more as an intentional act, at times, it can be involuntary, as in the case of mediums in trance, the exhilarated state of mystics, or of individuals "possessed by the Spirit." Prayers are inherently transcendent in that they are always directed to a superior spiritual being with whom humans seek to align. While prayers can give praise to and acknowledge the bounties of the superior being, prayers can also acknowledge human frailty and, in times of need, petition assistance. In all these situations, worshippers

discursively position themselves asymmetrically to a transcendent being, and on occasion, praying may involve an offering or the promise of a vow. Prayer thus discursively extends the domain of the self in anticipation of future life events. People learn particular ideologies about prayer from their early socialization experiences. A 1997 national poll reports that a little over half of American adults pray as part of their daily routine. But the consciousness that leads to prayer is not only limited to believers or practicing individuals. This consciousness can become manifest at any moment in life. Reminiscent of Labovian narratives, everyday stories of conversion describe the non-believer praying while in heightened awareness, most particularly, during near-death experiences.

Prayer has a liminal structural quality, which leads to its description in anthropological work as part of a range of genres that often includes song, dance, divination, and even poetry. Prayers are characteristically parallel in structure. However, metaphorical and syntactic parallelism often extend beyond the confines of text to practice. In fact, in Muslim tradition, repetition is not only inherent to the internal structure of prayer, but also to the act of praying itself. Believers must learn a particular body demeanor and must orient the body to a sacred point in order to pray at regularly prescribed times of the day. Among indigenous groups of the Americas, spatial recognition and the discursive orientation of the praying individual in relation to other beings and spiritual forces is invoked and performed in prayer. It is also not uncommon to find that body demeanor in prayer is accompanied by special diet and other rituals that cleanse the body in preparation for communicating with the transcendent. In this way, prayer consciously unites body and spirit.

A common characteristic of prayer is its narrative quality—its potential as a sense-making discursive act. Prayer can be a powerful means to piece together life experience. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps have studied the overlapping nature of prayer and personal narrative, and in their study of family dinnertime grace and of a Los Angeles Sunday School kindergarten class at an Episcopalian church, prayers are the means to retell past and present conflict. In other contexts, prayers can be about absent others and may involve a larger collectivity. In my study of Spanish-taught Catholic religious education classes for Mexican children at a parish in Los Angeles, classroom prayers extend to include the community. When children pray for the health of an absent teacher, they pray for their families, the sick in hospitals, the incarcerated, and the elderly in nursing homes, in this way, linking their present experience to the experiences of other members of the community.

Prayer, however, is no longer situated solely within the domain of religious institutions, particularly in Christian tradition. It is increasingly becoming a commodity and a link to a capitalist economy. Prayers can be requested, exchanged, and even bought. An example of prayers that are commissioned includes those as part of religious ceremonies in remembrance of the dead. Prayers are also being marketed for consumers, as in, for example, the popular dial-a-prayer telephonic services increasingly advertised through mass media. Prayers can also be accessed through on-line

prayer links on the Internet. Lanita Jacobs-Huey reports on a group of affluent African-American Christian cosmetologists who heal both spirit and hair. In their monthly meetings, these Christian cosmetologists talk about their unique spiritual mission, but also about the business of hair care. Prayer has also made its way into popular culture. American singer Madonna's 1989 album *Like a Prayer* catapulted the sexual emancipation begun in the social movement of the 1960s (as well as collected million of dollars in record sales for the singer). The lyrics of the feature song juxtaposed two irreconcilable domains of the Christian worldview as the song equated prayer with sex.

The preoccupation to understand the mystery of life and death, and the role prayer plays in it, is becoming more ecumenical and pragmatic, no longer limited to philosophers or theologians. Research on the healing power of prayer is currently being conducted by a Georgetown University School of Medicine study, where rheumatoid arthritis patients receive treatment through the practice of laying on of hands. The initial results report on the improved health of the patients. This pragmatic reconceptualization of prayer has the potential to deploy prayer's synergistic power to effect palpable, controllable change. Wherever these efforts might take us in the future, prayer remains a primordial discursive means through which many people interpret and come to terms with the purpose of their lives.

(See also *body, healing, performativity, prophecy, theater, truth, voice*)

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