



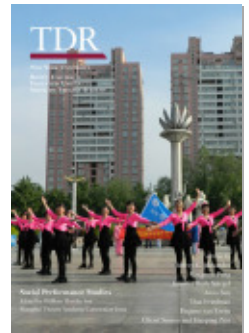
PROJECT MUSE®

A Sociological Consideration of Prayer and Agency

Anna Sun

TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 60, Number 4, Winter 2016 (T232), pp.
118-129 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/638830>

A Sociological Consideration of Prayer and Agency

Anna Sun

*If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.*

— T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” (1943:50–51)

Prayer as Social Action

What do we mean when we speak of prayer? Is it more than “an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying,” as T.S. Eliot suggests? In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James speaks of prayer as “active” and “spiritual work,” and he proposes a broad understanding of prayer:

But petitional prayer is only one department of prayer; and if we take the word in the wider sense as meaning every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine, we can easily see that scientific criticism leaves it untouched. Prayer in this wide sense is the very soul and essence of religion. ([1902] 1982:464)

James’s view is echoed in Marcel Mauss’s unfinished treatise *On Prayer*:

Of all religious phenomena, there are few which, even when considered merely from the outside, give such an immediate impression of life, richness and complexity as does the phenomenon of prayer. Prayer has a marvellous history. Coming from the depths, it has gradually raised itself to the heights of religious life. Infinitely supple, it has taken the most varied forms, by turns adoring and coercive, humble and threatening, dry and full of imagery, immutable and variable, mechanical and mental. It has filled the most varied roles: here it is a brusque demand, there an order, elsewhere a contract, an act of faith, a confession, a supplication, an act of praise, a hosanna. (Mauss 1909:21)

Anna Sun is Associate Professor of Sociology and Asian Studies at Kenyon College. Her research interests include social theory, sociology of religion, and sociology of knowledge. She is the author of Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities (Princeton University Press, 2013) and is currently working on a book entitled The Social Life of Prayer in Contemporary China. suna@kenyon.edu

In recent years, prayers have been studied by sociologists of religion as an indicator of religious participation (in most major surveys of religion), as a cultural object (Wuthnow 2008b), or as a part of one's religious habitus (Mellor and Shilling 2010). Scholars are beginning to go beyond mere descriptive statistics about how often people pray to more nuanced empirical studies about the different social and cultural contexts of prayers, such as prayers in congregations, hospitals, and advocacy groups, as well as on religious television and the internet, focusing on the cognitive and social functions of prayers (Giordon and Woodhead 2015; Wuthnow 2008a). However, we still have not yet followed James's footsteps to treat prayer as "the very soul and essence of religion" and explore its centrality in religious life, nor have we joined Mauss in approaching prayer as the most diverse, interactive, and dynamic form of religious action.

Could it be the case that prayer no longer plays an important role in contemporary life? It seems not. In an article in the *Washington Post*, "Americans Continue to Pray, Even as Religious Practices Wither, Survey Finds," there is the intriguing claim that "American religion is on the ropes, but it has a prayer" (Clement 2015). Scott Clement cites a 2014 United States General Social Survey study which found that "fully 57 percent of respondents said they pray at least once a day, little different from 54 percent in 1983, when the question was first asked on the survey. Three-quarters of respondents said they pray at least once a week" (Clement 2015; Hout and Smith 2015). More specifically, "many who have shed affiliations or seldom attend services continue to pray regularly, according to the survey. Roughly 1 in 4 Americans who report no religious preference say they pray at least once a day, as do about 3 in 10 of those who never attend religious services" (Clement 2015).

These numbers are similar to the findings of other major surveys about religious life in the United States, such as the Pew Research Center's report:

More than half (55%) of Americans said they pray every day, according to a 2013 Pew Research Center survey, while 23% said they pray weekly or monthly and 21% said they seldom or never pray. Even among those who are religiously unaffiliated, 21% said they pray daily. Women (65%) are more likely than men (46%) to pray every day. Older people (60%) are more likely than younger adults (45%) to say they pray daily. (Lipka 2016)

Steven Waldman, the editor in chief of Beliefnet.com, a popular religion website that has 65,000 online "prayer circles," told the *New York Times* in 2009 that "prayer in America is becoming detached from traditional denominations," and that "in a way, prayer has become its own religion in this society. [...] People pick and choose. They want to be their own spiritual contractors" (in Chafets 2009). The article reports:

This tendency toward do-it-yourself spirituality affects every denomination. According to Waldman, there is a widespread phenomenon of Protestants burying plastic St. Josephs to help them sell their homes. Some Orthodox Jewish rabbis recommend the Lord's Prayer as a pathway to spirituality. Jesuit retreats routinely incorporate Hindu and Buddhist techniques of meditation. And for those who can't find what they want among the traditional brands, there are personal trainers known as spiritual directors. (Chafets 2009)

In the case of China, as of 2007 at least 75 percent of the Chinese people conducted ritual activities that include prayer and prayerful action "in the past year," according to a *Horizon* survey on Chinese religious and spiritual life (see Sun 2013).¹

Extensive empirical research needs to be done in order to determine whether different forms of prayer—such as the three methods of prayer detailed in *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, or the various forms of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist meditation—can actually have an effect on an agent's ethical actions, whether such spiritual exercises can help

1. Horizon, a leading survey firm in China (<http://www.agmr.com/members/horizon.html>), conducted the "Spiritual Life of Chinese Residents Survey" in 2007, with a nationally representative sample of 7,000.

one develop and cultivate one's moral emotions and ethical habitus, and whether this is a process that can be found in all "major" religious traditions, from Christianity to Islam, from Confucianism and Daoism to Buddhism.

What do people actually *do* when they pray? In what ways is prayer *social*? If prayer is a social performance, following the dramaturgical framework developed from Erving Goffman (1959) to Jeffrey Alexander (2006), beyond the impact on the actors or agents, what exactly happens to the audience?

Expanding the Definition of Prayer

What is prayer? What constitutes prayer and prayerful action in contemporary life? This question refers not only to the wonderful diversity of forms of prayer in Christian life, but also asks what should be counted and studied as prayer in other religions traditions, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. By extension, what are the interconnections between different forms of prayers and prayerful action in our increasingly global human community? In an interview, Karl Stevens, the Episcopal Chaplain of Kenyon College, said that he didn't have "a strict prayer life":

For me, things like writing are prayer. Hiking is prayer. Listening to music is prayer. Doing the dishes is prayer. [...] It has little to do with the action that you're taking and much more to do with the intentionality of it. If you are being truly attentive to the world around you, then everything you do is prayer. (in Schneider 2009:5)

When Chaplain Stevens says "doing dishes is prayer," he clearly is referring to a "mindful" dishwashing practice, a type of practice used not only in Zen Buddhism, as discussed in Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness* ([1975] 1996), but also in psychological performance enhancement techniques such as the "MAC" (the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment) approach, which employs an exercise called "Washing a Dish Mindfulness" (Gardner and Moore 2007).

If we expand the definition of prayer to include meditation and other mindful actions, such as sacred reading (*lectio divina*)—an attentive contemplation of sacred texts that can be found in Christian as well as other religious traditions—it becomes even more apparent that prayers are very diverse actions (Casey 1996). I include mindful action in my broader consideration of "prayer as social action," which also includes meditation, sacred reading, and other mental and physical spiritual exercises (such as silent retreats, fasting, and dietary regimens).

There are many different types of prayers, which can be arranged into several categories: petitional or nonpetitional (purpose); private or public (space); personal or communal (participants); silent or audible (sound); prayers for oneself, for friends and family, for strangers, or for a group one cares about (who or what one is praying for); and liturgical or creative prayers (form). Rabbi Emeritus Marc Gellman of Temple Beth Torah in Melville, Long Island, NY, has a formulation of the most common types of prayers:

[W]hen you come right down to it, there are only four basic prayers. Gimme! Thanks! Oops! and Wow! [...] Wow! are prayers of praise and wonder at the creation. Oops! is asking for forgiveness. Gimme! is a request or a petition. Thanks! is expressing gratitude. That's the entire Judeo-Christian doxology. That's what we teach our kids in religious school. (in Chafets 2009)

The Sociality of Prayer

Different Levels of Dynamic Engagement

If prayer is indeed a social action, what exactly is the sociality of prayer? Consider the following scenarios of prayers from my fieldwork in Shanghai between 2010 and 2015:

Four hundred or so Catholics, mostly women and mostly from surrounding towns and villages, were attending the 8:00 a.m. service at the Sheshan Catholic Church. This is the parish church of Sheshan Mountain, a Catholic pilgrimage site an hour outside of Shanghai. The elderly woman seated next to me followed the liturgy in Chinese by memory. She was in her 80s and attended mass every week.

In the Shanghai Confucius Temple a woman who was probably in her 40s was offering prayers of thanks on behalf of her daughter, who had successfully entered the university of her choice through the national college entrance examination. She said her prayer in front of the statue of Confucius, and she also wrote down her prayers of thanks on a red prayer card, which she hung on a wooden shelf by the Great Hall of the temple.

At the Daoist Chenghuang Temple, the City God temple in downtown Shanghai, several hundred people of all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds were offering prayers and paper sacrifices (sacrificial money made of soft paper) to the Lord of the Year (*taisui*, 太岁) on the day of winter solstice. This is a traditional seasonal ritual to offer prayers to the Lord of the Year for the blessings of the New Year. Many people conducted these rituals as a family, often with their children. Those who were doing the rituals by themselves often offered prayers and ritual objects on behalf of their immediate family members.

At the historical Xiaotaoyuan Women's Mosque in downtown Shanghai, a group of Muslim women, who appeared to range in age from around their 40s to 60s, gathered for an hour on a Friday morning to study the Koran. They sat at a long table in the meeting room of this well-preserved and well-maintained two-story building, which also had a large prayer hall upstairs, furnished with thick carpet and large chandeliers. A young and energetic imam answered their questions about how to cultivate the right heart and action as a Muslim. Afterwards, the women met for a lunch provided by the mosque, during which animated conversations were exchanged between old and new friends. After lunch, they grew silent as they were getting ready for prayer. They went to the prayer hall upstairs individually rather than collectively. Once there, some sat on the carpet meditating; others started praying without delay.

At the Jing'an Buddhist Temple in downtown Shanghai, six monks were performing the rituals—chanting the sutra, kneeling, bowing—of a death anniversary rite. Such rites usually last for four hours (an entire morning or afternoon) and cost about US\$800.00. This particular rite was conducted for an engineer who passed away a year ago. His son, a college student who was attending university in Germany, returned to Shanghai to be part of the rite. Although he was the official principal mourner in the rituals, his mother and his two aunts were the main forces behind the event. They paid for the services as well as organized the extended family to attend. The approximately 20 people in attendance ranged from young cousins to grandparents, who followed the monks in rituals—kneeling and bowing—when directed.

In his apartment in Shanghai, a middle-aged man woke from a dream in which his deceased mother appeared to him, telling him that she was cold from the wintry weather. He went to a local shop specializing in ritual goods, and purchased a stack of sacrificial “paper money,” colorful pieces of paper larger than real currency in size, often printed with a fanciful portrait of the King of the Underworld (*mingwang*, 冥王) in a red formal robe and cap. The man placed the stack of paper money in his courtyard and lighted it. As the paper money was burning and turning into ashes, he offered a prayer to his mother, asking her not to worry about money and purchase as much clothing as she needed in the underworld, now that the fund was being transmitted by fire to her from her son.²

2. Richard Schechner's insight is enlightening here: “What is it that defined the human species? A nexus of circumstances: speech, bipedal locomotion, brain size and complexity, social organization. Let me add another quality to the list, performed dreams. [...] These virtual actualities, staged as rituals, shared the authority of recollection with the play of imagination. [...] The future of ritual is the continued encounter between imagination and memory translated into doable acts of the body” (1993:263).

Although at first glance these examples seem to have more differences than similarities, as actions they do share certain common features, including the attribute of sociality. I believe these acts of praying all indicate a pair of social relations at play, which is what makes prayers a particularly robust form of social action: (1) the relationship between the agent and the community of people with whom the agent prays; and (2) the relationship between the agent who prays and the divine/God/gods (hereafter referred to as “the divine”) that the agent addresses through the prayers.

There is a triangularity in this set of social relations: on the one hand there is the relation between the person praying and the divine; on the other hand there is the relation between the person praying and society. Yet prayer is made possible only through the triangular relationship among the self, society, and the divine, with society as the mediating force. The different levels of sociality implied by these relationships are: (1) the person praying interacts socially with others in communal sacred settings such as synagogues, churches, mosques, and temples; (2) the person learns to pray by praying with others, which in turn shapes one’s religious life; (3) the person praying is socialized into a particular social network and forms meaningful relationships within the network by praying with others. Prayer is social not only because an individual may interact with other people when they all pray together, but also because prayer implies an intersubjective relationship with others that is made possible only by the action of praying together. Sociologist Rodney Stark argues that these close social ties are in fact the driving force behind the religious conversion processes, from the beginning of Christianity to contemporary conversion to new religions (Stark 1997:3–29).

In an article on prayer in the *New York Times*, “The Right Way to Pray,” the Baptist minister Rev. Daniel Henderson detailed the characteristics of prayer and even delineated his technique:

“Prayer is like other activities [...] You learn from people who are already good at it [...] Prayer is a lot more than reciting words. It requires mastering both theory and technique [...] Some people think it is better and more meaningful to pray alone, but that’s false [...] You improve by praying with others who can mentor you, people who are more expert than you [...] Let God begin the conversation. Keep your prayers brief and clear. Repeat simple Scripture-based phrases. Pray standing up to fight torpor. And pray directly facing others, eye to eye, in a loud, clear voice.” (in Chafets 2009)

What happens when one prays in a community of practitioners who share similar practices? As we know, many prayers are private ones carried out by the agent alone in everyday settings, from the private space of home to the public domain of a commercial flight, rather than as part of a communal service taking place in a common sacred space, such as a church, mosque, or temple. But one could argue that the prototype of prayer is collective and communal in all three major monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), which consist of prayers taking place in synagogues, churches, and mosques. This explains the centrality of weekly or daily collective rituals of worship in these religious traditions.

When an individual prays with others, there is a sense that others are bearing witness to the establishment of the individual’s relationship with the divine, and they could hold this person accountable for actions not matching the content of the person’s words. Such a strong sociality inherent in the social relationship of a religious community creates a social tie that is both institutional (congregational membership and/or shared religious identity) and intersubjective (the individuals are constantly assessing their own actions through the eyes of others). This is best demonstrated by an example offered by Michel de Montaigne in his essay “On Prayer”:

It really does seem that we use prayer as a sort of jingle and like those who exploit God’s holy words in sorcery and practical magic. As for their effect, we apparently count on their structure, their sound and the succession of words, or on our outward appearance. (Montaigne [1580] 1993:118)

Montaigne refers to the prayers of the Pythagorians, quoting Persius and Horace, respectively:

Not many men would care to submit to view the secret prayers they make to God: *Haud cuius promptum est murmurque humilesque susurros / Tollere de templis, et aperto vivere voto.* [It is hardly everyone who could take his murmured prayers whispered within the temples and say them aloud outside.]

That is why the Pythagorians believed that prayer should be public and heard by all, so that God should not be begged for things unseemly or unjust—like the man in this poem: *clare cum dixit: Apollo! / Labra movet, metuens audiri: pulchra Laverna, / Da mihi fallere, da justum sanctumque videri. / Noctem peccatis et fraudibus objice nubem.* [he first exclaims, ‘Apollo!’ loud and clear; then he moves his lips, addressing the goddess of Theft and fearing to be overheard: ‘O fair Laverna: do not let me get found out; let me appear to be just and upright; cloak my sins with night and my lies with a cloud’]. (117–18)

In order to overcome the possibility of this duplicity and to stay true to the prayer offered, Montaigne explicitly demands prayers to be heard publicly, by the community of the person who prays. Montaigne emphasizes the importance of matching one’s words with deeds: “That is why I do not approve of those whom I see praying to God frequently and regularly if deeds consonant with their prayers do not bear me witness of some reformation and amendment” ([1580] 1993:355). The existence of a community in which one’s words and deeds are both observed and judged serves the purpose of purifying one’s relation with the divine, for this makes sure that prayers are offered by “pure souls”: “Our soul must be pure, at least for that instant when we make our prayer, free from the weight of vicious passion” (117).

The inherent sociality between the agent and the community is self-evident and noncontroversial. Is the relationship between the agent and the divine a social one as well?

I propose two reasons for recognizing the sociality of the relationship between the human actor and the divine. The first is that the relationship implied in prayer is one that is made possible only through complex historical and social processes. Robert Wuthnow advocates this view when he discusses the implications of a few recent empirical sociological studies on prayer:

Several of the studies examine how the social relationships implied in prayer are culturally constructed. Massengill’s study of moral metaphors in the right-to-life and faith-based labor movements shows how advocacy groups piece together scripts about preferred relationships between humans and the divine. Cadge and Daglian’s study of hospital prayer books provides information about how people address God and what they have in mind when they do this. Cerulo and Barra’s focus-groups and interviews project provides information on the ways in which petitioners define the supernatural object of their petitions and suggests how social norms and practices influence these definitions. Gibbon’s research on sermons in Turkish mosques shows how God is described in these contexts and suggests some reasons for what is and is not said about God. (Wuthnow 2008a:336)³

In other words, the relationship between the person praying and the divine constitutes a social relationship (how one addresses the divine, for instance, or what kind of relationship one should have with the divine), and it is a social relationship that can only be understood in religious, social, and political contexts.

The second reason has to do with the fact that the divine is never a private god or gods. Following Wittgenstein, who believes that one cannot have a private language that is only meaningful to oneself—a clear assertion that language is inherently social—a similar argument can be made for the position that the divine cannot merely exist for only one person as a private

3. These studies can be found in the special issue of *Poetics* on religion and culture edited by Robert Wuthnow (2008b).

god, not shared and recognized by any other human agents (Wittgenstein [1953] 2009:184–96). The normative authority of the divine comes from the fact that it is treated as the divine by many others, not just oneself.

To illustrate the point that one enters a social relation with the divine through prayer, it might be helpful to briefly examine the most influential prayer in Christianity (in one of its many variations), the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
And the power, and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen. (Matthew, 6:9–13; OUP [1993:7])

The Lord's Prayer has gone through many versions throughout history; and there are numerous occasions in which this prayer is uttered. Note the first phrase, "Our Father," which makes explicit a specific form of social relationship between the individual and the divine: a familial one between the male parent and a child. It is a prayer that assumes a temporal narrative of the present ("Our Father, who art in heaven") as well as the future ("thy kingdom come"); it is petitional ("give us this day our daily bread"), and it is penitent ("forgive us our trespasses"). Most importantly, it affirms the relationship the person praying has with the divine, who, as represented as "Our Father," is loving, forgiving, and moral ("lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"). The prayer is implicitly reciprocal as well, expressing devotion to the Father after seeking help and protection ("for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever").

The Lord's Prayer beautifully demonstrates the many facets of prayer described by Mauss: "It has filled the most varied roles: here it is a brusque demand, there an order, elsewhere a contract, an act of faith, a confession, a supplication, an act of praise, a hosanna" ([1909] 2003:21). Demand, order, contract, confession, supplication, and praise: these are indeed social actions taking place in an intense and interactive relationship, one that is maintained by both communal and private prayers, sustained by both habit and creativity.

What Does Prayer Do to Agency?

What is the relationship between prayer and agency? In recent years, psychologists such as Martin Seligman and Jonathan Haidt have established the new area of inquiry of "positive psychology" to investigate how "positive" human emotions—such as optimism, love, and joy—might lead to social and psychological well-being. For instance, Barbara Fredrickson et al. show that "people's daily experiences of positive emotions compound over time to build a variety of consequential personal resources" (2008:1045). They tested their hypothesis by asking half of the subjects in their experiment to "practice loving-kindness meditation." The results showed that "this meditation practice produced increases over time in daily experiences of positive emotions, which, in turn, produced increases in a wide range of personal resources (e.g., increased mindfulness, purpose in life, social support, decreased illness symptoms)" (1045).

Such "loving-kindness meditation" or "mindfulness training" is part of many religious traditions. Scholars have indeed been using psychology and neuroscience to examine the effects

of spiritual exercises. Numerous recent studies testify to the emergence of “contemplative neuroscience” (see Austin 1999; Jha, Krompinger, and Baime 2007). This research is applauded by Harold Roth, a scholar of Buddhist and Daoist meditation practices and an advocate of the interdisciplinary “contemplative studies” (Roth 2008).

However, although the research demonstrates various cognitive, neurological, and psychological effects of meditation, it does not tell us how meditation might affect one’s agency. In other words, these studies might describe the richness of the *experience* of prayer and prayerful action, but they do not tell us about prayer’s impact on our agenthood in the world.

One alternative approach is to treat prayer as part of one’s religious habitus, a set of external rules and practices internalized by an individual through long processes of conscious and unconscious socialization. In this approach, the agent is a product of an existing set of social structures where certain religious actions are considered to be meaningful social practice.

Another approach is to focus on the interactive, intersubjective, and creative qualities of prayer as action, and to treat the formation of agenthood as a constantly evolving process. Hans Joas’s formulation of action as a dialectic process of habits and creativity allows for a better account of the interactive relation of prayer and agency, especially the way prayer transforms the agency of the actor through intersubjective social relations (Joas 1996:1–7). This approach also takes into account the experience of transcendence made possible through prayer and prayerful action as well as through spiritual exercises such as meditation.

The creative action framework also takes seriously the intentionality of the agent. To be genuine, prayers cannot be offered deceptively: it is not prayer if one consciously prays in bad faith or without believing in the propositional content of the prayer. One does not need to subscribe to the belief system upon which the prayer is based, but one is not praying if one is consciously treating the prayer as, for instance, a private joke. As Mark Twain famously says in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, “You can’t pray a lie.”

This is true for conventional forms of prayers as well as for meditation. It is not praying if one is merely moving one’s lips and saying the words while not taking the action seriously. Similarly, thinking vile thoughts while pretending to meditate or otherwise faking meditating is not meditation. In other words, although one can perform prayers and prayerful actions without necessarily subscribing to a specific belief system, one cannot consciously *pretend* to pray or meditate and still call it a prayer or meditation.⁴ To pray is to pray sincerely, a sincerity confirmed by action, not merely by belief.⁵

One might argue that this performative aspect of prayer is actually what makes the dynamic making and remaking of the self possible: by doing something to oneself, one becomes—or evolves—into the kind of person who performs this particular action. In other words, the transformation of the agent is not a matter of belief, but a matter of action. This framework is not unlike the one offered by Blaise Pascal in his famous wager where he persuades an unbeliever not to pile up “proofs of God,” but to simply “act as if” he had already believed:

But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and yet you cannot believe. Endeavor then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. There are people

4. The same can be said about aesthetic taste. One may not have strong feelings about a certain work of art, and may pretend to like it as part of a presentation of the self in social settings, but one cannot fake a preference for a painting when basing this opinion on one’s own taste.

5. Naturally not all social actions require this sincerity of action; perhaps inherently reflexive actions such as aesthetic taste demand sincerity.

who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness. (Pascal [1670] 1958:68)

Charles Taylor speaks of the “radical evaluation” or “radical self-reflection” that is essential to a moral agent, something that can only be gained through “discipline and time”:

In fact this stance of openness is very difficult. It may take discipline and time. It is difficult because this form of evaluation is deep in a sense, and total in a sense, that other less than radical ones are not. If I am questioning whether smuggling a radio into the country is honest, or judging everything by the utilitarian criterion, then I have a yardstick, a definite yardstick. But if I go to radical questioning, then it is not exactly that I have no yardstick, in the sense that anything goes, but rather that what takes the place of the yardstick is my deepest unstructured sense of what is important, which is as yet inchoate and which I am trying to bring to definition. I am trying to see reality afresh and form more adequate categories to describe it. To do this I am trying to open myself, use all of my deepest, unstructured sense of things in order to come to a new clarity. (Taylor 1985:41–42)

For Hans Joas, an equally important task is the development of “empathic faculties” in our age of relentless choices and “increased contingency”:

Increased contingency calls for the development of empathic faculties. It constantly confronts individuals with situations in which they themselves have to find out what they wish to do, ought to do, and are able to do. And this they can do only by empathizing with the unique circumstances of their partners in action and action situations. An element of increased freedom thus enters into the attachment to people, values, and religious communities; attachment depends on the individual’s free consent, which must be periodically reconfirmed, to a greater degree than in the past. (2008:32)

For Joas, however, it is not enough to develop moral feelings such as empathy, for these could be “devoid of content unless they emerge from value generalization”:

Although some people undoubtedly have a greater capacity for empathy than others, we also know that the extent to which people are in fact willing to have moral feelings toward others, thus allowing their capacities to find expression, also depends on motivations fueled by substantial values, such as brotherly love. (32)

These concerns suggest that there are multiple aspects of the formation and transformation of a moral agency in our contemporary life, such as deep self-reflection, the development of moral emotions such as empathy and compassion, and the conscious affirmation and reflection of substantial values. Prayers might help us in different ways in each of these dimensions. For instance, contemplative prayer and meditation might be the ideal occasion for deep self-reflection, whereas sacred readings, together with an involvement in the community of practitioners of prayer, can facilitate the development of moral emotions and substantial values.

The content of the liturgy is often the most direct expressions of the substantial values in a given religious tradition. It is one of the main sources of moral education in our contemporary world. And the social relationships implied by a prayer life often go beyond the act of praying together. Once people belong to a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque, they are drawn into participating by the others around them as well as of their own volition in social practices that are expressive of the values of their belief systems, such as volunteer work or other forms of civic engagement.

Indeed, we recognize this process over and again in empirical studies of the religious life of different societies. There is a long tradition in the social sciences of examining the connection between religion and social engagement. In recent studies, we see how religious communi-

ties mobilize people to act towards social and political goals, ranging from faith-based charities in the Islamic world to volunteer work in Protestant churches in the United States; from the Buddhist environmental movement in Thailand to spirituality and social justice activism of US Chicanas and Latinas (Brown and Pierce 2014; Wuthnow 2002 and 2006; Darlington 2013; Facio and Lara 2014).

In his study of Buddhism as a social movement, *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan*, Richard Madsen shows that common Buddhist practices bring people into meaningful contact with one another and with the world, and they often change the person who goes through these prayerful experiences (2007:181–83). Such practices include *fabui*, “‘dharma sessions,’ usually involving a group of worshippers perambulating in a circle while chanting”; or *fangsheng*, “literally ‘liberating life,’ the releasing of animals (most often fish or turtles) meant for slaughter back into the wild.” In one of the most illuminating interviews Madsen shares, we see how these prayerful activities can indeed change the way a moral agent engages the world:

Mei Qi is a young secretary in a foreign company and says that she has been a Buddhist since high school. Although she does not claim to have experienced any miraculous results of the practice, her first experience at a *fangsheng* activity left a powerful impression on her:

MEI QI: When I went to a *fangsheng* activity, I must say I was not sure I could participate fully. To tell the truth, I was looking at the fish in the blue plastic bucket, and I thought, “These are just fish; what do they know of life and death? If we didn’t release them, they would just end up on a plate in a restaurant, and no one would care or know the difference.” But when I was there at the lake and the prayers and rituals were said, I felt something inside of me. I felt a deep connection to the fish, and for the first time I saw them as life, with a soul even. Oh, how strange; it was the first time I ever felt emotion and affection for a fish! I tell you, I actually cried! How could this be? I must say it does change your consciousness. Now I can’t go into a restaurant without being aware that these fish, and these animals are all living things. It’s hard to explain, but it was a powerful feeling for me. (in Madsen 2007:182)

Madsen proceeds to show how religious communities are formed through these activities, and how they have made significant contributions to the establishment of “a democratic civil religion” in Taiwan through social engagements and volunteer work.

Successful Buddhist groups such as “Buddha’s Light Mountain” are now formidable forces for social change in Taiwan, and they have been expanding to other parts of East Asia, including Hong Kong and mainland China. Recent studies of the revitalization of religion in mainland China suggest that religious practices today, from the ongoing Qigong movement (a holistic practice of postures and breathing aimed at aligning the energy in the body) to revived Buddhist activities, from rural “amateur ritual associations” to innovative local Catholic churches, allow for the emergence of new religious communities and networks that are already fostering social changes (see Fisher 2014; Chau 2011).

To conclude, in the case of prayer and prayerful action, the act of praying could be transformative, even though one might be praying or performing prayerful actions out of habit, or as part of a personal project of self-improvement, or as a way of fitting into a particular community. Prayer is a particularly robust form of social action, a performative. The act of praying implies and embodies a set of social relations, both institutional and noninstitutional, which can have potentially transformative effects on the agency of the person performing the prayers when there is a long-term commitment to continuing the practice.

When we examine the effect of prayer beyond the level of the individual agent, we see how it can aid the process of “fusion” between agents and audience in social performances. As Jeffrey Alexander puts it:

Ritual effectiveness energizes the participants and attaches them to each other, increases their identification with the symbolic objects of communication, and intensifies the connection of the participants and the symbolic objects with the observing audience, the relevant “community” at large. (2006:29–30)

Indeed, rituals such as prayers are especially central to our complex and “defused” modern society, where to “re-fuse,” as Alexander says, is a necessary step towards social and ethical coherence.

What makes this understanding of prayer based on action rather than belief particularly important is that the simple act of prayer can be initiated by an agent who may or may not share the belief system of the religious tradition to which the prayer belongs. Nevertheless, prayer can still *do things* to the agency of the person over time, due to prayer’s inherent sociality and the impact of ritual experiences. This is not unlike the experience foretold by the narrator in “Little Gidding”:

And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfillment. (T.S. Eliot 1943:50)

References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2006. “Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy.” In *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast, 29–90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Austin, James. 1999. *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Brown, Rajeswary, and Justin Pierce, eds. 2014. *Charities in the Non-Western World: The Development and Regulation of Indigenous and Islamic Charities*. London: Routledge.
- Casey, Michael. 1996. *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*. Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications.
- Chafets, Zev. 2009. “The Right Way to Pray?” *The New York Times*, 16 September. Accessed 4 June 2016. www.nytimes.com/2009/09/20/magazine/20Prayer-t.html?_r=0.
- Chau, Adam Yuet, ed. 2011. *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*. London: Routledge.
- Clement, Scott. 2015. “Americans Continue to Pray Even as Religious Practices Wither, Survey Finds.” *Washington Post*, 6 March. Accessed 4 June 2016. www.washingtonpost.com/local/americans-continue-to-pray-even-as-religious-practices-wither-survey-finds/2015/03/06/89cbb99a-c37f-11e4-9271-610273846239_story.html.
- Darlington, Susan. 2013. *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Eliot, T.S. 1943. “Little Gidding.” In *Four Quartets*, 49–59. New York: Harcourt, Inc.
- Facio, Elisa, and Irene Lara, eds. 2014. *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicano, Latina, and Indigenous Women’s Lives*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Fisher, Gareth. 2014. *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Fredrickson, B.L., et al. 2008. “Open Hearts Build Lives: Positive Emotions, Induced through Loving-kindness Meditation, Build Consequential Personal Resources.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, 5:1045–62.
- Gardner, Frank L., and Zella E. Moore. 2007. *The Psychology of Enhancing Human Performance: The Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) Approach*. New York: Springer.

- Giordan, Giuseppe, and Linda Woodhead, eds. 2015. *A Sociology of Prayer*. London: Routledge.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Press.
- Hout, Michael, and Tom W. Smith. 2015. "Fewer Americans Affiliate with Organized Religions, Belief and Practice Unchanged: Key Findings from the 2014 General Social Survey." Press Summary. National Opinion Research Center (NORC), 10 March. Accessed 4 June 2016. www.norc.org/PDFs/GSS%20Reports/GSS_Religion_2014.pdf.
- James, William. (1902) 1982. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Jha, A.P., J. Krompinger, and M.J. Baime. 2007. "Mindfulness Training Modifies Subsystems of Attention." *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavior Neuroscience* 7:109–19.
- Joas, Hans. 1996. *The Creativity of Action*. New York: Polity Press.
- Joas, Hans. 2008. *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Lipka, Michael. 2016. "5 Facts about Prayer." Factank, 4 May. Pew Research Center. Accessed 4 June 2016. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/06/5-facts-about-prayer/.
- Madsen, Richard. 2007. *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. (1909) 2003. *On Prayer*. New York: Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books.
- Mellor, Philip A., and Chris Schilling. 2010. "Body Pedagogics and the Religious Habitus: A New Direction for the Sociological Study of Religion." *Religion* 40, 1:27–38.
- Montaigne, Michel de. (1580) 1993. *The Essays: A Selection*. Edited, translated, and introduced by M.A. Screech. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. (1975) 1996. *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Translated by Mobi Ho. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Oxford University Press (OUP). 1993. *The 1928 Book of Common Prayer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pascal, Blaise. (1670) 1958. *Pascal's Pensées*. Translated by W.F. Trotter and introduction by T.S. Eliot. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Roth, Harold. 2008. "Against Cognitive Imperialism: A Call for a Non-Ethnocentric Approach to Cognitive Science and Religious Studies." *Religion East & West* 8 (October):1–26.
- Schechner, Richard. 1993. *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Schneider, Charlie. 2009. "College Chaplain Karl Stevens' Long, Spiritual Road." *The Kenyon Collegian*, 29 October:5.
- Stark, Rodney. 1997. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the World*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Sun, Anna. 2013. *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1985. "What Is Human Agency?" In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers, vol. 1*, 15–44. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1953) 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th ed. Edited by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2002. *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2006. *Saving America?: Faith-based Services and the Future of Civil Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2008a. "Prayer, Cognition, and Culture." *Poetics* 36, 5–6:333–37.
- Wuthnow, Robert, ed. 2008b. "Religion and Culture." *Poetics* 36, 5–6.