



# A Sociology of Prayer

Edited by Giuseppe Giordan and Linda Woodhead

...coming to the possession of my God and my all, in y



Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Series

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Giuseppe Giordan and Linda Woodhead

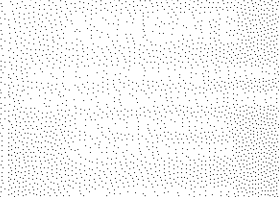


nothing to sadden me but sin. nothing to delight me but the

Cover image: 'Painted prayer, Catholic convent' from the series 'Under Gods, stories from Soho Road' 2010. ([www.lizhingley.com](http://www.lizhingley.com))

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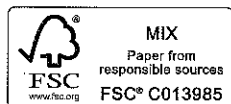
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A Sociology of Prayer

Edited by

GIUSEPPE GIORDAN  
*University of Padua, Italy*

and

LINDA WOODHEAD  
*University of Lancaster, UK*

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## Introduction

# You Never Know. Prayer as Enchantment

Giuseppe Giordan

Prayer, or something like it, seems to be at the core of every religion. Even more, it is the core of any relationship with the transcendent, however we wish to define it, within and outside the organized religious traditions. And, since even many who don't believe in a transcendent being pray, prayer seems to be deeply rooted in the human condition. Like the heart, it works even when the electroencephalogram is flat: even when dogmas are believed with much reservation, moral norms are ignored or considered obsolete, and rites are attended sporadically, it seems that prayer remains part of the lives of many people today.

I often hear students in my sociology course saying that, just before their exams, they go to Saint Anthony's basilica, just beside the department, to pray to the Saint to help them obtain positive results. When I ask them whether they really believe that saying a prayer, giving an offering or lighting a candle, is effective in passing the exam, their answer is almost always 'you never know'. Many of them, although they call themselves Catholic, have not attended Mass for years; some of them cannot even say whether they believe in God. But when it comes to prayer they remain open to the possibility that it may work.

In all probability the attitude of Pope Francis was quite different when, at the beginning of June 2014, he invited the Palestinian president Abu Mazen and the Israeli president Shimon Peres to the Vatican to pray for peace. But even in this case, were the participants in this meeting really persuaded that prayer was capable of solving the problems between the Israeli and Palestinian people, a conflict that has been dragging on for decades and that all the peace negotiations and the most diverse diplomatic initiatives have not been able to settle? Even in this case one might say pragmatically: you never know!

Even more complex is what happened in Ukraine in the middle of the crisis that has deepened in 2014: on the occasion of the Orthodox Easter the Kiev government allowed a truce in the military operations against the pro-Russian secessionists in the south-eastern area of the country. Kirill, Orthodox Patriarch

of Moscow and Filarete and head of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Kiev, prayed that God 'stop the plans of those who want to lacerate Holy Russia, either with political means or with armed forces, attempting to acquire military and political superiority'. The reply from the Kiev Patriarch, who also invited the people to pray for peace, does not leave space for doubts about the role that God should take: 'The Country that had granted territorial integrity to us has made an aggression against us. God cannot take the side of evil, for this reason the enemy of the Ukrainian people is condemned to failure.'

Will the prayers of my students in Padova help them to pass their exams? Will the prayers of the Israeli and Palestinian presidents with the Pope succeed where all the attempts at a diplomatic solution failed? Which prayers will God listen to in the Ukraine crisis: those of the pro-Russian separatists or those of the pro-Western nationalists? Why is prayer common to those who belong to different religious traditions and those who do not identify with them, and to those who believe in God and some of those who do not (or not completely)? The book you have in your hands will not settle these questions, but will illustrate how intriguing the subject of prayer is in a world in which a rationalistic mentality was meant to have removed the possibility of explaining reality in ways that do not refer to worldly cause-effect relationships, and in which people are meant to be either secular *or* religious.

Some of the questions asked about prayer are enduring ones: why do people pray? Why do they continue praying even if their requests are not fulfilled? Is prayer capable of changing reality? And, if we answer this last question affirmatively, how does it change reality? Is it capable of changing the world 'out there', or does it just change the way we see it, interpret it, experience it? Other questions relate to historical and social change, and ask whether prayer has changed over time, and if so what distinguishes contemporary forms of prayer?

The growing number of studies carried out in the last decades tell us that prayer is indeed capable of changing reality, but this often happens as a consequence of the change in the 'inner' world of the person who prays: a change that challenges the rules of logic, and that is capable of working even if 'seemingly' the requested results do not take place. Prayer may well have to do with the reality of life, but it surely has much more to do with the meaning that social actors ascribe to the large and small events of their lives.

It was Marcel Mauss, in his pioneering work of 1909 (1968[1909]) – referred to by many of the contributions which follow – who highlighted that prayer is an eminently social fact within which individuals as well as groups ritualize their beliefs. Prayer is linked to the social and cultural contexts in which it is expressed: what can we ask, how we have to ask for it, which posture of the body

is correct, who we have to address to have our invocations to, how we interpret the outcomes of the prayer itself. According to Mauss, even if prayer is a purely individual act, it is never the exclusive production of an individual because the meaning of the words that are uttered is socially determined, and each prayer is part of a ritual that, although it may appear to be private, is nevertheless codified according to socially established norms.

As demonstrated by David Nicholls (1993), the language used in traditional petitionary prayer within the Christian tradition derives from the political rhetoric: the believer addresses God as a subject addresses the king, asking God what is appropriate to ask a monarch. In monarchial societies God was addressed according to a court protocol – with reverence and sometimes with dread and fear. As the political context changed, the way in which we represent God changed, with the deity becoming less a king and judge and more and more a father, benefactor and, sometimes, therapist or lover. As a consequence, even the language used to address him and its modalities change: the language becomes less formal and more and more spontaneous, more linked to immediate feelings than precise formulae.

After Mauss's work, and until the 1980s, most studies of prayer took a psychological approach. Numerous empirical studies have investigated the relationship between prayer and health, and in particular the link between praying and 'coping'. The outcomes of this mass of scientific investigation have been summarized by James Nelson (2009): the practice of praying can support and promote a healthy lifestyle, discouraging destructive behaviours such as smoking or overindulging in alcoholic drinks; it can reinforce positive beliefs such as an optimistic approach to reality reducing the anxiety caused by the uncertainties of life; it can support positive emotions balancing and stabilizing the emotional life of people who are passing through particularly difficult experiences.

To Kenneth Pargament (1997), prayer is a continuous process capable of transforming the activities of everyday life and endowing them with meaning: it is not an accessory or a luxury, but a fundamental practice that requires hard preparatory work. While offering meaning to everyday activities, prayer is a powerful instrument to improve and increase well-being, not least in situations of suffering and grief – in other words, in precisely those situations in which it is hardest to find meaning in life.

Increasingly since the 1980s sociologists have also started to pay attention to prayer as a scientifically relevant theme. William Swatos Jr (1982) highlights well how the sociological approach to prayer should be capable of adding evidence about power and institutions which can extend our understanding of the meaning of the prayer. When subjects pray, they address transcendent power(s),

and this power is capable of 'empowering' the person who prays. Much research on prayer highlights the high percentage of those who believe that their prayers have a positive outcome, and one way to explain this is in that people feel that they have connected with some source of power beyond what is normal.

The many studies that appeared in recent decades have also developed new instruments to classify different forms of prayers and analyse their contents (e.g. Poloma and Gallup 1991 and several chapters in this volume), and have discovered how different socio-cultural variables help explain how prayer works for diverse categories of people (Baker 2008). Such work shows that as representations of worldly and religious power have changed, so modalities of praying have changed too. The shift from hierarchical authority to flatter structures has turned the all-powerful monarch or inaccessible and ineffable mystery into a friend at hand, with whom one can converse without fear, and the fellow-traveller to whom one can open one's heart without fear of being judged. The shift 'from the age of revelation to the age of information' (Turner 2008), where all can be said and debated within the democratic context, does not leave prayer untouched.

In order to build upon this work, Linda Woodhead and I proposed a panel session at the conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion that was held at Aix-en-Provence in 2011. More than forty scholars from all over the world participated in that panel, presenting the outcomes of their research on a theme that was ripe for discussion from a wide range of social science perspectives. The amount of interest in the topic persuaded us to issue a further call for those who could not attend the conference, and this has allowed us to widen still further the themes and perspectives of study. We have collected the contributions which exemplify the most interesting findings and directions of enquiry in two volumes: the first was published in 2013 (Giordan and Woodhead), and this one is its companion. Both illustrate, from an international perspective, the maturing of this field of study and the development of an increasingly developed body of work with clear advances in terms of methods, concepts and schemes of classification, research agendas – and emerging theoretical frameworks.

In the first chapter Carlo Genova proposes the possibility of interpreting some acts of prayer as practices, defining 'practice' as a social activity habitually carried out by an individual or a group. The fundamental element which characterizes a practice as distinct from a more general 'social action' is therefore reference to 'habit', to learned, recurrent patterns of behaviour enacted with minimal reliance on conscious resources. But as with every social action, prayer practices are also connected with a sense, a meaning: the 'full meaning' of prayer

can consequently emerge only from its semantic relations with other everyday life activities. The article develops this hypothesis, referring to concrete case studies and offering an analytical approach for this interpretative perspective.

In the following chapter Michael Mason developed Mauss's work by showing how all forms of prayer, even those which are apparently 'private', are profoundly social. Drawing on a recent survey of a large sample of English-speaking youth from many different countries, he finds that the purpose of prayer is rarely the securing of worldly benefits. Predominantly, prayer is understood as the cultivation of a loving personal relationship with God. Factors influential in shaping a person as one who prays frequently are found to be age (beyond school age), gender (female), socialization in a country with a strong traditional Catholic culture, mother's high enthusiasm for her religion, having friends who attend services regularly, and especially one's own previous religious experiences. An interesting finding is that those who pray more frequently are not 'other-worldly', but show higher civic engagement in volunteering and charitable giving.

Drawing from observations and interviews collected within the Assemblies of God of French Polynesia since 2000, Yannick Fer examines three distinct registers of Pentecostal prayer in order to specify the mechanisms of this articulation between individual, community and institution. Pentecostal believers get to 'communicate' with God in their personal prayer through a set of institutional and collective mediation apparatuses that enable them to 'stay online' and to be guided by the 'voice of the Holy Spirit' in their everyday life. In this religious paradigm of constant and transparent communication, prayer in tongues provides a second register of prayer, which facilitates the establishment of what the Palo Alto school has described as a 'metacommunication'. Finally, prayer as a 'spiritual warfare' contributes to the conversion of this enchanted individual relationship with God into collective forms of engagement, notably through rituals of intercession performed in the frame of evangelistic campaigns.

Martin Stringer begins his chapter with evidence about the way in which individuals engage with the non-empirical 'other' through intimate conversations. Whether this 'other' is God, a dead relative, or some other being, it is constructed as being immediate, concerned and engaged in the lives of the individual involved in the conversation. Given that such conversations constitute a substantial element of what might be called 'prayer' in contemporary British society, Martin looks at the way this conversational prayer engages with the public prayer of Christian and other forms of worship. It is still the case that much public prayer – and study of prayer – assumes a transcendent being, very different from the intimate immanent other of the conversational prayer. Drawing on a number of years of ethnographic engagement with both contexts,



and specifically with those who engage in both forms of prayer, this chapter addresses the relationship and conflicts that are inherent in the negotiation between the two kinds of others in individual's religious lives.

In the fifth chapter Emir Mahieddin observes that praying has changed in the Swedish Pentecostal churches since the 1980s: a contrast has developed between the Sunday service, which progressively 'de-charasmatised', and the cell groups, which now appear as the more emotive and expressive sphere of Pentecostal religious life. One does not pray the same way in public and in private – the former being more formal, the latter more intimate. This contrast did not exist in such a sharp way in the earlier years of the movement. Mahieddin proposes an interpretation which relates these changes to the religious and political history and culture of Sweden, and reflects on more general implications for understanding prayer.

The following chapter, by Julia Day Howell, concerns the emotional regimes cultivated through certain Islamic prayer practices – the repetitive litanies (*dzikir*) associated with Sufism, within the context of the contemporary global Islamic revival. Traditionally, *dzikir* litanies, potentially conducive to meditative and ecstatic states, have been added to the obligatory five daily prayers (*sholat wajib*) as acts of intensified devotion with the hope of gaining boons from the Almighty or to foster a sense of closeness to Him. Although these litanies are disapproved of by puritanical Islamic revival movements around the world, they have been reframed for modern sensibilities and have found new popularity with Muslim urbanites separated from a taken-for-granted communal religiosity. Julia shows how *dzikir* litanies are promoted by popular leaders and given very new uses and emotional registers on various kinds in the process.

The chapter by Andrea Borella is based on anthropological research in a community of the Old Order Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. His access to this community is exceptional. He argues that the different forms of prayer evident among the Old Order Amish – spoken, silent, sung, communitarian or personal – relate to a deep emotional trope of Amish religiosity which can be summed up by the concept of *Gelassenheit*. This is a Pennsylvania Dutch term which can be translated as humility, submission and abandonment to the will of God. The chapter suggests that, as well as shaping individual sensibilities and internal social hierarchies, this ethos – fostered centrally through public prayer – helps maintain Amish distinctiveness and underline the boundary with non-Amish society.

The research presented in chapter eight by Jayeel Serrano Cornelio was carried out with undergraduates involved in Catholic organizations in various universities in Metro Manila. It demonstrates how prayer is treated as a

conversation with God, and presents an additional angle by giving attention to the different ways prayers are perceived to be answered. For many informants, God answers through people, circumstances, and even mediating technologies such as the radio and the internet. Personal 'revelations' drawn from these are not just food for thought: they are taken as divine answers and help. By looking at the nuances of answered prayers and how God is perceived by informants to respond to their prayers, Cornelio argues that God 'does not speak in mysterious ways'. He is immanent though intervening in daily affairs as a personal friend, and through various everyday media including new technology.

Research investigating prayer in Charismatic Christianity has received minimal social scientific attention. In the next chapter Michael Wilkinson and Peter Althouse explore one type known as 'soaking prayer', which is a development from the Toronto Blessing – which has now become 'Catch the Fire Ministries'. Using the theme of embodiment, the authors focus on how Charismatic Christianity is experienced and expressed through bodies which become a vehicle for signifying the presence of the Spirit. In turn, embodiment allows the researcher a view of prayer that can be researched through observation as well as conversational investigation. Comparisons are made with other types of Pentecostal prayer such as Spirit Baptism, speaking in tongues, deliverance, healing, intercession and prophecy.

The last two chapters are based on the analysis of prayer requests posted on the prayer boards in churches and hospital chapels. As Tania ap Siôn underlines, there is an absence of a recognized analytic framework through which these data have been analysed: in her chapter, Tania presents first of all the ap Siôn Analytic Framework for Intercessory Prayer (apSAFIP), and then applies it to a sample of 1,627 prayer requests taken from over 10,000 prayer requests systematically harvested from Lichfield Cathedral in Great Britain.

The following chapter, by Peter Collins, is based on research carried out in two National Health Service acute hospitals situated in the north-east of England: he illustrates a classification and a preliminary analysis of over 3,000 prayer requests left by patients, visitors and staff in the chapels. This collection is significant because it indicates the importance of religion/spirituality even in the most rational and secular of environments – the acute hospital: it suggests that talk of secularization, even in the most hostile environments, needs to be tempered according to context.

In the conclusion Linda Woodhead draws out the framework for a sociology of prayer in the contemporary world, and discusses what this means for future studies of prayer, and where there is still need for more research. Linda highlights some dimension of variations: prayer may be classified along a spectrum from

the more private to the more social, always acknowledging that some element of each will be present; it varies by its relation to the body, bodily posture and ritual practice and, finally, it varies in relation to different material and spatial settings and symbolic objects.

This book is not the definitive sociology of prayer. It does not even claim to be the last word on prayer in contemporary societies. Its purpose is to take stock of the recent international flowering of work on prayer in many societies across the world, to identify main themes and new agendas. As such, it acts as a resource for those who want to see what the 'state of the art' is in order to continue the exciting and fast-developing work of constructing a richer sociological understanding of prayer.

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