



# How does God answer back?

Courtney Bender\*

*Department of Religion, Columbia University, 80 Claremont Avenue, Room 103,  
New York, NY 10027, United States*

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## Abstract

A central question in the study of prayer is how people determine God's response. Much of the literature in cognition and religion answers this question by using a particular understanding of the divine agent (God), as superhuman, agentic, transcendent, and anthropomorphic. But not all religious traditions articulate the divine in this way, and religious people do not pray to abstractions or general ideas. This paper takes seriously the consideration that people pray to divine interlocutors whom they understand and experience as having specific capacities and interests, which are shaped both in practice and in theological traditions. Different types of divinities demand different kinds of listening on the part of those who pray, and religious traditions are active producers of different religious schema that shape cognitive possibilities for hearing the divine. This essay explores how some modern Americans are taught to listen for and hear the response of an immanent, non-anthropomorphic God. It explores the practices and techniques through which individuals learn to hear God, and considers the implications for cognitive studies of religion. It argues that scholars concerned about religion and cognitions should pay more attention to the specific practices that emanate from and reproduce dissimilar theological understandings of God.

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## 1. Introduction

“*My dear Dad—In this book I have put some of the things which it has been hardest for me to learn about the Christian life...*” begins the hand-written inscription in Union Theological Seminary's copy of William A. Brown's 1927 book, *The Life of Prayer in a World of Science*. This intimate admission by the author (a well known liberal Protestant theologian) that prayer was difficult may come as a surprise to contemporary ears. Yet in Brown's liberal Protestant theological milieu prayer had become something of a problem. Many ministers and laypeople alike were embracing what they viewed as a progressive understanding of religion that conformed to the rules of modern science. God, the creator of the world, acted through the laws of

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\* Tel.: +1 212 851 4134; fax: +1 212 851 4126.

E-mail address: [cb337@columbia.edu](mailto:cb337@columbia.edu).

nature, and was immanent within them. In its more liberal articulations, God was decidedly not anthropomorphic in character, and could not be expected to “hear” or “answer” individuals’ petitions with individual agency. This God’s love was expressed not through miraculous events that defied nature’s laws but rather within the laws themselves. This understanding posed difficulties for Christians like Brown, who writes in his book, “We have called [prayer] the practice of the presence of God. It is the out-reaching of the human spirit to that which is without and above – the instinctive cry of man for some reality that shall satisfy his deepest longings and embody his highest ideals. But what that highest is and where it is to be found, or how we shall recognize it when we have found it – these are the questions . . . for which there are no clear answers” (Brown, 1927:4). Brown eventually worked out a theological answer to this question about prayer’s effectiveness and meaning. But for many, the uncertainties about prayer that accompanied these conceptions were not worked out only in theology but in practice as well.

The question of how Christians recognize the answers that an immanent divinity gives to prayer continue to resonate within a wide spectrum of contemporary Protestant and “spiritual” devotional manuals. The contemporary devotional manuals that I analyze in this essay represent a number of positions along the Protestant theological spectrum, but each share the view that God is immanent within nature and society, and encourage their readers to detect God’s voice within daily life events and coincidences through journaling or autobiographical writing. As we come to observe, hearing an immanent deity’s voice is far from impossible. Nonetheless, the techniques, and the concerns that prompt attention to them, appear distinct from practices cultivated to interact with deities who are understood to be transcendent, distant, and anthropomorphic. Speaking with an immanent, loving God means engaging in prayer in a different way than what is suggested by recent literature on cognition and prayer. While experimental cognitive literature on prayer articulates the divine as superhuman, agentic, transcendent, and anthropomorphic, contemporary Protestant and spiritual writing manuals frequently teach their readers that an anthropomorphic and transcendent deity is theologically (and even psychologically) misguided, and encourages readers to cultivate different techniques and practices especially shaped to hear an immanent God.

Following historian Cynthia Garrett’s observation that the “rhetorical problem of how to address God reflects the epistemological problem of how we know God [and] how we determine what he is like” (1993:333), this paper observes how contemporary religious writers determine the proper way to hear and detect God’s voice, and in so doing articulate theologies of immanent divinities. These, in turn, shape the kinds of prayers that are possible and viable for believers. Viewing prayer as a communicative act, I note how a particular kind of uncertainty emerges for those who seek to embrace and pray to a God who is an immanent, omniscient presence, and focus on how their practices answer this uncertainty. I concentrate in particular on contemporary spiritual journaling and autobiography writing manuals. This prescriptive literature articulates both disciplines and techniques for hearing God, and suggests schematic orientations to the world that scholars might use to reflect upon and perhaps extend current sociological understandings of prayer, text, and practice.

## **2. Prayer as a communicative act: locating uncertainty**

Prayer is generally understood as a communicative act between humans and the divine. Yet as a communicative *act* it is somewhat peculiar in that God’s (the addressee’s) presence and action is often quite uncertain. Anthropologist Webb Keane notes, “in contrast to face-to-face encounters of conversation analysis, the presence, engagement, and identity of spiritual participants in the

speech event cannot always be presupposed or guaranteed. Prayer often seeks to bring about interaction between human beings and other kinds of beings that would (or should) not otherwise occur. . . . Even belief in the omnipresence of divinity does not assure that one can interact with it” (Keane, 1997:51). In contrast to interactions between humans, prayer generally involves uncertainty about whether and how the divine listens and responds, making these relations unusually complex (Wuthnow, 2007).

At some level all communicative acts (even between mere mortals) proceed with a certain degree of uncertainty. Uncertainty arises in the basic question of whether the addressee hears (comprehends) what is said. “Noise” occurs in misalignments between what the speaker intends to convey and how the addressee understands and responds. Bakhtin (1986) devotes considerable attention to this issue and posits that socially developed and recognized speech genres help to mitigate uncertainty in most interactions. We thus speak within generally recognizable “forms” that both listeners and speakers use to convey or glean social information about the expectations for an appropriate response. A speech genre thus also presents information about the speaker’s moral and emotional tone, as well as information about the nature of the social relationships between the speakers. Bakhtin locates the primary uncertainty within a speech act (that is, the “noise” within it) in the relationship between what is said and what is heard: that is, within the *speaker’s* ability to *convey* meaning and the *addressee’s* ability to *understand*. Speech genres are, in this sense, practices and forms that minimize a particular kind of uncertainty. Bakhtin likewise in passing contrasts human interactions and interactions between humans and God (or a “superaddressee”) where God understands “perfectly” what a speaker means: noise and misunderstanding is absent.

Prayers are also speech acts, governed by particular kinds of speech genres. As Keane’s quote above suggests, the fact that prayers can be distinguished as acts of communication with a divine actor (presence or agent) organizes the certainties and uncertainties within these speech acts in different ways. In the cases that I analyze in this essay, for example, the divine is considered always present and moreover (by virtue of being immanent within all things and people) perfectly able to understand each person’s true meaning and deepest yearnings. Thus the uncertainty that is typical in speech acts, namely whether an addressee will understand the speaker’s meaning is not a question in conceptions of prayer made to an immanent and omnipresent divinity. All the same, a new uncertainty emerges, namely how the petitioner can hear or understand God’s answers. As we will see, this uncertainty is overcome through techniques developed to “hear” God’s answers in various events, life stories, narratives and activities.

Recent psychological literature focusing on prayer and religion pays comparatively little attention to non-agentic, immanent conceptions of divinity. Building on psychobiological evolutionary models of religion’s emergence as a response to particular biological and psychological conundrums, gods are interpreted and posited as conjectures that play certain functions (Atran and Norenzayan, 2004; Dennett, 2006). These gods are by definition agentic and transcendent: they are employed by actors to solve certain local problems of cognition (Barrett, 1998, 2001, 2002; Bering and Johnson, 2005; Lawson and McCauley, 1990). For example, they emerge as explanations for domain violations (Wuthnow, 2007; Boyer, 1990). In these studies, gods are almost by definition agentic and anthropomorphic. For example Bering and Johnson define “supernatural agents” as “emotionally invested in their own apparently arbitrary rules for human conduct, emotions, and desires . . .” (2005:133). As such, the uncertainty relating to communication is similar to that occurring in regular speech events, namely whether the speaker is able to convey her meaning so that the divine hears and responds properly.

This superhuman agent is certainly observable in some lived religious contexts. All the same, it does not adequately capture the range of active formulations of divinity, nor the types of speech acts, practices, and cognitive schema used to address or apprehend these various formulations. Cognitive studies instead present a specific understanding of divinity as a cross-cultural and pan-historical cognitive structure. Various conceptions of divinity that are actively at work in the world do not fit within this frame, including the immanent divine of William A. Brown and other actively articulated understandings of divinity within other religious traditions (Fitzgerald, 2000; Taves, 2008). Cognitive scholars have argued that people cognitively experience the divine as a supernatural agent even if the theologies and expressions of a religious group or individuals claim otherwise (e.g. Barrett, 1998).<sup>1</sup> But this is an unsatisfactory argument for those who might wish to connect findings developed in experimental research to lived religious experience outside of the laboratory. Religious people do not pray to abstractions or general ideas, rather they pray to divine interlocutors whom they understand and experience as having specific capacities and interests (Cerulo and Barra, 2008; Griffith, 1997; Orsi, 1996; Lambek, 2003). Thus, different types of divinities demand different kinds of “listening.” As such, religious traditions are active producers of different kinds of religious schema, which shape cognition in powerful ways (D’Andrade, 1995; DiMaggio, 1997). Contemporary Protestant and spiritual writing manuals presents one such set of practices and speech genres.

### 3. God, immanence, and prayer

Contemporary interests in an immanent and non-anthropomorphic divinity have roots in robust theological traditions in the United States expressed in the writing and practice of American Protestants (including primarily but not exclusively liberal mainline Protestants) and metaphysical religious thinkers and practitioners (Schmidt, 2005; Albanese, 2006). A strong argument for an immanent divinity, and an accompanying interest in developing understandings of prayer that conformed to this conception emerged within liberal Protestant discourse and theology in the early twentieth century. As several historians have noted, conflicts between Protestant modernists and fundamentalists, liberal Protestantism’s embrace of science and modernity, and new understandings of the subconscious and unconscious mind (Ostrander, 2000; Taves, 1999; White, 2008) turned liberal Protestant theologians to consider God as an all-powerful presence that worked through the laws of nature. This in turn suggested that prayers for miracles that exceeded the laws of nature were misguided at best. As one triumphant theologian claimed, “religious thought is gradually casting off its coarse anthropomorphism” in favor of a scientific and rational understanding of “divine immanence” wherein God’s “Living Will” was evident in nature and its principles. “Nature being but the fixed form of the divine causality, we must say that events in general are at once natural in the mode of occurrence and supernatural in their causation” (Bowne, 1905:17–18). Many began to view petitionary prayers as “gauche,”

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<sup>1</sup> Bering and Johnson for example state that while many Americans do not recognize the “supernatural agents” posited in psychological lab studies as their “own,” (that is, as having anything to do with the God of Christianity), they have nonetheless “discovered” such a supernatural, arbitrary deity in the Christian scriptures. Thus, they argue, their studies on how individuals respond to supernatural figures do not exclude the “Western notion of God” (2005:136). Unpacking the logic underlying this gloss on scripture is beyond the scope of this paper, but the claim that psychologists are better than practicing Christians at interpreting the scriptures or recognizing the divine highlights the sticky theological claims that evolutionary psychologists enact in the quest for objective, non-culturally bound definitions of religion, the gods, prayer, and so on.

and that “any person who could not see the presence of deity in ‘the life activity of the cell or in the autumn coloring of the leaves’ had an injured soul” (Mullin, 1996:242).<sup>2</sup>

As titles such as *The Life of Prayer in a World of Science* suggest, however, those who embraced these claims also encountered new questions about how to engage a number of practices understood to be central to Christian life. While theologians were critical of what they perceived as the magical thinking of old-style prayer, they likewise feared that embracing a non-anthropomorphic deity would put an end to prayer. Writers like Brown thus claimed that prayer’s true nature would become evident in a new scientific mode, insofar as Christians could observe that answers to prayer worked out within the natural realm.

Put another way, an immanent God *heard* all prayers and likewise understood the praying person’s meaning completely. But this raised the question in turn to how an immanent God might respond to prayer. Did the activity of praying affect the course of human events, or was it merely a psychological or social ritual that made those who participated in it feel better or reinforce a feeling of community? Even though petitionary prayers seemed immature, few wanted to suggest that prayer was merely a human activity and merely “psychological” in its effects. Some thus argued that prayer was primarily a practice through which Christians came to understand divine will through contemplation. Protestant mystics like Rufus Jones emphasized ways to train the body and mind to calmness in order to better feel and experience God’s constant immanent presence (Jones, 1922; Schmidt, 2005). Others turned their attention to building techniques for understanding an immanent God’s response. In so doing, they cultivated ways to mitigate the uncertainties that arose in these communicative acts, namely “hearing” or “detecting” the responses that an immanent, omnipresent, but non-human divine provided to prayer. Others tilted toward mind-cure and metaphysical religious practices, which suggested an active role for the believer in shaping, channeling or directing divine energy (Albanese, 2006; Ostrander, 2000:128).

The practices promoted by earlier liberal Protestants and metaphysicals to hear God’s voice within the warp and woof of life include (among others) meditation, contemplation, and writing. The contemporary devotional manuals that I analyze articulate and reproduce strategies for hearing God through keeping close record of daily events, rescripting one’s life within a formulaic narrative, and using writing to cultivate contemplation. These strategies and others suggest the proper ways to hear God, and in so doing reproduce theological understandings of this immanent divinity. Notably, the inclusion of self-identified evangelical authors in the sample suggests that the practices discussed here have been somewhat decoupled from their theological origins. The adoption and appropriation of practices across surprisingly diverse religious traditions can be observed in a number of religious contexts (e.g. Klassen, 2005; Griffith, 2004) and demand further investigation beyond the scope of this paper. In every case, however, we can observe how authors encourage writing as a way to reveal God’s presence and answers. Such practices shape individuals’ orientations toward the world and make it possible to hear God’s voice and thus to overcome the uncertainties that emerge in praying to an immanent God.

#### 4. Journal and autobiography manuals: inscribing God’s answers

Private writing has long been an important devotional practice for American Protestants, albeit with varying theological understandings about its purpose and its effect (Brekus, 2006;

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that conservative Protestants were equally interested in articulating the true relationship between God’s laws, presence, and modern science. Their approaches are of equal interest, but outside of the scope of this paper. See Ostrander (2000) and Larson (1997) for entry points into these issues.

Leigh, 2000; Payne, 1998; Shea, 1988). Contemporary religious and spiritual writing manuals encourage writers to cultivate writing as a way to illuminate God's presence and activity in an individual's life. Manuals with titles such as *Writing the Sacred Journey*, *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal*, and *Memoirs of the Soul* present writing techniques through which individuals can hear an immanent God.

I identified writing manuals by searching booklists from major denominational and independent Protestant publishers (both mainline and evangelical) as well as major publishers that specialize in "spiritual" titles. I subsequently conducted online searches for additional volumes for a total of 45. I read 35 volumes and selected 21 manuals for analysis (a full list appears at the end of the essay).<sup>3</sup> Eighteen manuals focus exclusively on spiritual writing of one or more forms (diaries, journals, autobiographies). The three exceptions (Cameron, Drury, Parish) make writing a central but not exclusive focus. With the exception of three authors who identify themselves as evangelical Christian, all authors are self-identified liberal Protestants or "spiritual" authors of Christian (primarily Protestant) family origin. Six manuals are explicitly structured for use in adult Sunday school classes or other classrooms, while the rest address a solitary reader. All of the manuals claim that God is present within the workings of nature and human interactions and encourage their readers to develop substantially similar techniques for detecting and realizing this presence. Nonetheless, the "spiritual" and "Protestant" books can be distinguished in how they explain these techniques. Books written for Protestant audiences draw frequently on scriptural passages and Christian exemplars, while books for spiritual or indeterminately religious audiences draw upon a broader range of non-Christian scriptures, texts, and exemplars. These differences are interesting in their own right, especially as these books marshal a diverse set of religious sources in order to authorize very similar writing practices. As this essay's focus is on the practices and techniques for hearing an immanent God, and the ways that these practices shape similar orientations toward divinity, I do not pursue the differences.

All of the books in my sample were published between 1990 and 2007. Several of the "spiritual" books (notably *Conversations with God* and *The Artist's Way*) are perennial best sellers. It is impossible to learn from the texts themselves how widespread their impact has been, and we have little data to analyze whether writing manuals have effectively increased the numbers of people who write or increased the dedication of those who do.<sup>4</sup> Read within a broader range of contemporary devotional guidebooks in mind, we can nonetheless approach these texts in order to observe and interpret the types of techniques and cognitive schema through which individuals are taught to engage an immanent divinity. To do so, I coded each of the books (each on average 150 pages) with an open coding method, identifying passages focusing on (a) rules and methods or techniques for writing; (b) relationships between the divine and humans which were further distinguished as God's communication to the writer, the writer's communication to God, and feelings of God's presence. In addition, I coded each explicit reference to prayer and miracles, and took note of the secondary literature (e.g. Biblical passages, poetry, psychological studies) to which authors referred.

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<sup>3</sup> The volumes not selected for analysis either focused insufficiently on teaching writing as a devotional practice or represented other religious positions beyond the scope of this paper's focus (for example, Catholic or Jewish). A full list is available upon request.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the books in my sample are regularly taught in classroom settings, for example in adult Sunday School classes, secular adult education courses, and (in the case of autobiographical texts) in retirement homes. Other books certainly have less impact. Likewise, while my research into contemporary spiritual practice in Cambridge Massachusetts suggests that a majority of metaphysical seekers also have some form of writing practice the scope of journaling and autobiography writing are rarely captured in surveys on contemporary Christian devotion in the United States.

#### 4.1. *Why and how to write*

Autobiography and journal manuals offer practical advice on how to use writing about one's own life to understand God's role in one's life, and thus the innate value and meaning within it. Writing is a central practice that allows individuals to seek, find, and record the answers to this concern. While the texts' central claim is that writing "uncovers" the truth of God's presence, it is likewise the case that "uncovering" takes place through specific practices. That said, techniques take second place rhetorically to authors' claims that writing is a natural and simple activity. Anyone can write a text that reveals (rather than inscribes or creates) God's presence in a coherent and meaningful life.

The language of discovery courses throughout these texts. Writing is primarily about uncovering, revealing, or remembering God's work where it has been ignored or forgotten. Elizabeth Andrew states: "You can only discover why a story matters by telling it or writing it" (2005:10). Furthermore, writing and remembering cultivates greater awareness in daily life. "Journal writing is an antidote to 'spiritual sleepwalking.' It can aid us in that basic Christian discipline of wakefulness" writes one (Klug, 2002:20). Manuals locate the "problem" of God's silence in individuals' lack of awareness, which in turn stems from the stresses, distractions and pressures of modern lives. Richard Morgan suggests that it is modernity "itself" that works against this attention. "Americans are a pragmatic people who tend to identify themselves with what they do (doing) rather than who they are (being) . . . This future orientation blinds them to the reality of God in the present moment" (2002:42).

Both autobiography and journaling manuals instruct that writing is the antidote to these pressures, and that writing of any kind reveals the same truth. "Anyone can write a spiritual autobiography, because God is active in each of our lives," Richard Peace writes before cautioning "However, persistent refusal to hear and heed the Voice reduces it to a mere whisper and relegates it to the background of our lives" (Peace, 1998:57–58). As such, writing not only makes it possible to hear God but, ultimately, to live a more godly life. Writing is not a "special" task reserved for those who have a special story to tell (indeed, the claim in all of these books is that each person has a unique and special story). Spiritual writing is an exercise of spiritual cultivation, one through which individuals learn how to better understand God's work in their lives. It takes place through confronting (rather than creating) coherent life narratives, or the divine forces that work to orchestrate life's small "coincidences".

Much like other devotional practices, writing requires the proper tools, rituals, and intentions. Over half of the authors devote considerable attention to the details of time, place, space, and tools of writing, including the types of notebooks or blank books, pens, or pencils, that writers might use. Notably, all but one manual describes spiritual writing as a longhand (not computer mediated) process. Spiritual writing is recorded in notebooks and preferably takes place in the same cozy sofa or favorite hammock, and at the same time, each day. The absence of computers and emphasis on routine suggests clearly that "writing" is about more than putting words on the page. It is also a physical and perceptual experience, a notion that is echoed in many of the books' descriptions of the time and ritual of writing. Ron Klug tells his readers that journaling is a "retreat" or a "Sabbath time – a time of rest and solitude, a time to come apart to be with God and to reflect on the word, to search for the will, and to record the insights I receive" (Klug, 2002:35). Julia Cameron likewise encourages her readers to think of the "morning pages" they write as a necessary ritual. Both authors suggest that writers begin by reciting a prayer or by invoking creative, divine forces. In these instances and in others, the distinction between writing and praying itself becomes somewhat blurred, so that writing itself becomes a "conversation with God" (Grason, 2005:152; Walsch, 1995), a point I return to in section 5.

#### 4.2. *Discerning God's plan: writing or revealing coherence and coincidence*

As writers inscribe their stories they begin to recognize God's presence. The unending claim within manuals is that "God . . . meets us in the mundane details of our daily lives" as well as "in our daydreams and dreams" (Broyles, 1999:9). Thus recovering the workings of God in one's life is the key focus animating both journaling and autobiographies. Writing embeds individuals in worlds where God is always at work in every way. Small details, chance encounters, and unexpected occurrences become rich with significance and meaning. Richard Peace states: "to write a spiritual autobiography is a sacred task in that the process makes us aware of the spiritual dimensions of our lives. God is active in all lives at all times, but not all people notice" (1998:11). In both types of manuals, these practices of growing awareness are keyed as building awareness of a reality that is fundamentally already there.

God's presence emerges everywhere so that the best practice is to "[w]rite what comes to you at the moment. Stay alert and watch for answers that come from your reading, from sermons, conversations, radio, or TV. God has many channels through which truth can reach you!" (Klug, 2002:79). Christine Baldwin (1990) encourages her readers to listen with the "ear of the heart," where writers listen "in silence" until they begin to hear God. "Listening to our life is like listening to the voice of God," Morgan claims (2002:19). Even the most conservative authors makes clear that ". . . it's not uncommon for the Lord to speak through a comment a friend makes, a note someone sends, a radio talk-show guest, a conversation over dinner. If we meet regularly with believers. . . they will speak a word of God to us" (Budd, 2001:72–73).

Manuals thus teach writers that they are reclaiming their natural awareness to underlying spiritual and divine realities. They are not, in other words, fabricating or textually orchestrating (nor even editing) their stories. These truths are as "evident" as words on a page. As Elizabeth Andrew suggests provocatively, "If Meister Eckhart was right when he said, 'Every creature is a word of God and is a book about God,' then the best window onto the sacred story is our own. Beneath all spiritual memoir is this common principle: Our stories reveal holiness" (232). Notably, manuals suggest that such a shift in perception is a return to a more natural view of the world: it is often described as a "subtraction" or a purification of overexcited minds.

But the manuals are more complicated than this, as the techniques for observing the obvious offered in these books exhibit a range of strategies through which God's presence can emerge. Autobiographical writing and journal writing present two different writing techniques through which God's plan and presence becomes clear. Autobiography manuals invariably emphasize that narrative reveals coherent themes and patterns that are a sign of God's presence, while journaling manuals emphasize that focused concentration on daily events reveals amazing "coincidences" which are signs of God's work. Both approaches emphasize that writing "reveals" things that people otherwise miss, but they nonetheless present specific techniques for interpreting the revealed presence of an immanent God.

Dan Wakefield writes that spiritual autobiography is centrally a process of coming to terms with one's life. "I am certain that the spiritual aspect . . . is crucial to the fullness of the enterprise, for it leads people to reflect on their life experiences not only in the deepest but also in the most holistic kind of way. As one student said . . . 'It made me look at my life as a continuous flow, a pattern of related events, rather than a series of miscellaneous happenings'" (1990:35). Reading one's life as a continuous flow becomes possible as writers "map" the events of their lives that unfold in various life stages. Authors encourage prospective autobiographers to draw a timeline of their lives, using with markers, rulers, and large scrolls of paper. Says Wakefield, "To draw a map of our spiritual journey is to look for the experiences and changes, the turning points,



triumphs and crashes, dark nights and mountain peaks we each have traversed to become the kind of person we are” (1990:93). What emerges from this exercise is not “a blind impersonal sequence of events over which we have no control, but rather [a story that] reveals to us a guiding hand pointing to a personal encounter in which all our hopes and aspirations will reach their fulfillment” (1990:95–96). Morgan writes, “Remembering our stories helps us perceive ways God has shared in our personal history. We remember incredible answers to prayer and grace moments, times when God helped us through what seemed impossible crises” (2002:19). And thus, while every person’s story is “unique,” its meaning is revealed insofar as it conforms to generally predictable patterns of life’s ups and downs. Autobiography manuals suggest that every person passes through specific “life stages,” and thus encourage readers to embed various events within their lives into a culturally shared narrative of life’s progress (Smilde, 2007; Holland et al., 1998). Beginning writers can take comfort in these templates: if they have “forgotten” their story, these templates can help them “remember.” Morgan suggests that methodically investigating the various “stages” of life “restores those parts of ourselves we have forgotten, suppressed or denied” (23).

Manuals also suggest that recalling and remembering is itself a “mystical” or holy process. All memories become holy by virtue of their having been recalled. Anything that does not slip through the cracks of forgetting is important; in this way, everything that one recalls is presumed to have some important message to relay. Richard Peace (1998:59) states that all recollections are guided by God: “In the end it is the Holy Spirit who reveals what we need to know in order to piece together a spiritual autobiography.” Christine Baldwin echoes this sentiment: “If you understand holiness to be that which is worthy of regard, awe, and reverence, then certainly memories are holy. A fruitful question to ask as you’re writing down bits from the past is, ‘Why do I remember this?’ Chase down the mystery in any memory and you will encounter revelation. Memories carry some unknown factor, even when they appear utterly pedantic” (Baldwin, 2005:47).

Journaling manuals in contrast encourage writers to meditate on ongoing daily events. Prospective journalers are encouraged to be alert to moments that may reveal God’s design, either because of their unexpectedness or by their “connection” to other events that might take place in the future. Inspirational writer Squire Rushnell devotes two books to documenting meaningful coincidences in his life and others’ (what he calls “God winks”). These stories provide ample examples of how a “God wink” can provide information about choices of spouse, job, moves, or the like. To detect God winks, Rushnell suggests keeping a small, pocket-sized notebook and pen in hand at all times, to allow for easy recording of potential “wink” events. He takes his “God wink journal” out of his breast pocket anytime something notable happens; even if he does not know what the true meaning of such an event might be, tells his readers that its meaning becomes clear in retrospect. God leads him to “pick up” on these seemingly disparate events, and likewise directs him to understand their coincidental meaning, which provides evidence both of God’s presence and direction.

Coincidences defy the laws of probability but not the laws of nature. They are thus not “miracles” which problematically suggest that God works outside of the laws of causality, but all the same can stand as powerful evidence of God’s work as designer and manipulator of a complex universe. Rushnell says, “A God wink is . . . a message of reassurance coming when you most need it . . . It might be said, in fact, that coincidences are the best way for God to establish a perpetual presence in your life. Think about it . . . if you were God and wanted to communicate with human beings without using a human voice, how would you do it? You’d perform little miracles, wouldn’t you?” (2001:4). And, as writers who focus on synchronicity explain, it is in

recording and making these links evident to ourselves that “our invisible connections to the Big Design” come into focus (Johnson, 2006:141). God eventually reveals himself everywhere, Katrine Stewart writes: “one must remember that God does not reveal Himself through our reasoning alone. He comes to us by the unpredictable path” (2001:44). Divine unpredictability has less to do with God’s capriciousness than individuals’ lack of attention to God’s Big Design, if not human inability to understand the routes of divinely shaped coincidence. Elizabeth Owens likewise chimes in: “Life is not a series of coincidences, dumb luck, or random happenings. Our lives have purpose” (Owens, 2004:183). Richard Peace claims, “God is alive and active in the universe, and when we start to notice, it is hard to stop noticing” (1998:57).

By “recalling” or “recollecting” or “discovering” life’s coherence and coincidences, writers record and also inscribe God’s presence. An immanent, law-governing and law-governed divinity emerges both through writing one’s life as a coherent narrative, and by paying attention to “coincidences” that alert writers to divine presence that is actively at work through nature to smile upon, and wink at, those who doubt or who are troubled.

#### 4.3. *Coming to terms with an immanent God: learning what is possible*

Sandy Grason confides, “we all have these whispers [from God], but they often get drowned out by the other voices in our head” (2005:140). God speaks *sotto voce*, but his presence and his work within individual lives are always evident for those who know how to look. We see in passages such as these that writers are encouraged to see God working in every quotidian space. Ignoring daily life is, in fact, part of the problem of hearing God: as we have already seen, writers state that the busyness of modern life keeps Americans from attending to the present moment where they might find God. But the rush of life is not the only stumbling block to hearing God. In addition, manuals suggest, readers harbor misunderstandings about God’s powers and actions which writing practices can likewise help to overcome.

All of the books claim that those who expect to encounter God in miracles or in surprising peak experiences will likely be disappointed. Such expectations are ill founded and only lead to disbelief and doubt. The fact that mistaken views of God, and in particular expectations for miraculous acts in times of distress, may cause people to overlook how God actually is at work in their lives. Thus, the authors claim, writing presents various strategies to train their attention on the true and ongoing work of God in daily life. Many, like Richard Peace, counsel at numerous turns that extraordinary moments are not a necessary component of a spiritual story. Rather, “all . . . experiences – mystical encounter, worship, fruit of the Spirit, and so on – communicate that God loves us” (1998:99). Those people who passively wait for peak experiences will never see God’s work. This claim is further established as manuals point to how past religious exemplars (whether Thomas Merton or St. Augustine) were themselves writers and memoirists (Drury, 2005:7; Wakefield, 1990:4). These authors argue that the discipline of writing to reveal God’s presence is not a “new” idea but in fact the missing key to a saintly life. Some writers go so far as to link contemporary journal writing to biblical figures, and in so doing seek to “correct” the misunderstanding that God does not speak to ordinary believers. Ann Broyles states, “If Yahweh spoke to [the great figures in the Bible]. . . through their dreams, is it not possible that God is even now speaking to you in your dreams?” (1999:86; see also Parish, 1999). Broyles’ rhetorical question is meant to be answered, “Yes, God does.” But in making such claims, the authors are not arguing that contemporary dreams are extraordinary, but rather that the miracles and stories in the Bible are more or less ordinary, where God is constantly present in dreams, daydreams, and other surprising (but not unnatural) encounters.

These various claims on the Bible's ordinary miracles is further reinforced by autobiography manuals that provide readers with the ability to use their narratives and autobiographies to overcome misguided views of God as a transcendent and agentic miracle-giver. Autobiography manuals that encourage readers to plot their lives on timelines suggest that writers should look back to their childhood and adolescence and recall the immature understandings of divinity (as a wrathful God of judgment, a granter of miracles, or an "old man") that they previously harbored. Both Richard Morgan and Dan Wakefield encourage their readers to follow this plot forward, and to narrate how damaging these previous views of God were to their spiritual development. In writing an autobiography, one becomes more mature in faith that approaches God as an immanent and loving divine presence.

A journal or autobiography also can be used to help writers understand why they feel abandoned by God. Katrine Stewart, like many authors, describes the "dark night of the soul" or entering a "spiritual desert" as a natural feeling that is a regular part of life. However, she says, those who are armed with a journal that records "what God has done for me" are less likely to fear the feeling of God's absence. She claims, "'We have no excuse whatsoever to forget the Lord's blessings . . . In the age of computers and video film, our lives (and God's goodness) can be documented from the day of birth – and even before birth!" (2001:55). Keith Drury says journaling "is communing and communicating with God through writing. . . . When God seems distant, it is time to journal, for this discipline brings our communication with God nearer." Likewise, manuals counsel readers that they can read their journals as records of their maturing faith in God's design, and to understand unanswered desires not as God's lack of love to them, but rather as a lack of understanding of God's response. Elizabeth Owens counsels, "Sometimes a 'no' answer is the best answer for our situation. We may not understand that while we are praying for our desired outcome to manifest, so we must learn to trust in the process. The Universe has a bigger, better plan for us. Everything really will work out for our highest and best good. *Flow with events.*" (2004:161). Squire Rushnell counsels, "The highway to what you believe to be your destiny may occasionally seem dark and lonely. But you are never alone. Get going, and start looking for the confirming signs that you are on the right path. You'll soon see the God Winks – the coincidences and answered prayers – reaffirming that your life is being directed by a super global positioning system" (2006:36).

## 5. Writing and reading as prayer: encountering God on the page

Manuals articulate various relationships between writing and prayer. Some authors seek to keep the two practices distinct. Keith Drury writes, for example, "Journaling is not a substitute for prayer but a supplement to prayer, it's a huge blessing to your prayer life because it helps you focus on what you want to communicate to God . . ." (2005:69). Authors claim that the writing that people do creates a "record" or lasting archive of God's presence, and as we have seen, numerous authors suggest that writers regularly read over their diaries or their autobiographies. Indeed, several authors suggest that writers set aside a regular time during the year (LuAnn Budd suggests New Year's Day) to read over the past year, and to follow that reading with prayers of thanksgiving and praise. But even these statements hint at the ways that the distinctions between writing about God's presence in one's life and encountering God in the act of writing are far from clear cut. Many journals themselves come to contain prayers, for as Ron Klug notes, "when writing about things of deep concern, it is natural for the Christian to turn words into prayer. If we're writing about happy events, we may be led to write brief words of praise and thanksgiving. Or we can write a longer prayer about the situation. . . . If we are writing about a problem or a friend . . . in pain, we may write a prayer of intercession" (Klug, 2002:41).

As journals and autobiographies shift from being merely places to record and reflect on God's presence to sites for actually speaking to God, they likewise become sites where God's work and presence can be intimately felt and heard. Describing a difficult time when a young friend was dying of cancer, Baldwin frequently went to her journal to ask questions of God, and likewise found answers there. "Even if there isn't an answer, there is a response. There is a sense of the sacred reaching toward us, as we reach toward it. And the most tangible evidence of this mutuality often occurs in the journal. The voice of the sacred appears gently on the page, written in our own handwriting but carrying the message of support and comfort . . . which we do not generate alone" (2005:39).

The hints and sometimes explicit statements that God's voice is embedded within the words and phrases that writers produce in moments of holy concentration are perhaps not surprising, given the emphasis in each of these books that the process of writing takes place in a holy and sacred time. In these moments the distinction between praying and recording God's answers sometimes collapse. Both questions and responses become manifest, and the writer's hand merges with God's. Writing places individuals "in the presence of the living God," who will "naturally be part of your journaling whether you look for the Divine or not," Anne Broyles states. "Many people who journal discover that the more they write, the more their words become connections to God, unselfconscious prayers" (1999:17). Julia Cameron, best-selling author of *The Artist's Way* and champion of "free writing" avers that the purpose of morning writing is that it "symbolize[s] our willingness to speak to and hear God." Cameron tells her readers, that they will find the "hand of God moving through your hand as you write" (1992:85). Broyles instructs her readers likewise to "Take a few moments to relax and prepare yourself for God's spirit to work within you in this time of journaling . . . Give [your] full attention to God, who can speak to you through your journaling" (1999:16). And Sandi Grason encourages, "The more comfortable you become with asking questions, being still, and listening for answers, the more you will be able to tap into all the wisdom of the universe. This means that even the biggest questions or dilemmas you find yourself contemplating may be answered on the blank pages of your journal" (2005:153). In these passages, we see that an immanent God is not merely represented but also apprehended in the process of writing.

In writing, Elizabeth Andrew writes, individuals "give words to His work. We try to get hold of the vapors inside us and make them solidify" (2005:51). It is the solidification of God's work within a text that makes prayer possible, Katrine Stewart says. "Praying to God begins by looking at a tree. The deepest relationship of which we are capable has its origins in the everyday experience of taking a good look at what is in everybody's backyard. We are not launched into the life of prayer by making ourselves more heavenly, but by immersing ourselves in the earthy: not by formulating abstractions such as goodness, beauty of even God, but by attending to trees and tree toads, mountains, and mosquitoes" (2001:55).

## 6. Discussion

Spiritual journaling and autobiography manuals present numerous techniques for encountering, revealing, and apprehending the work of an immanent God. These techniques not only teach individuals to see and hear God's immanent work within the warp and woof of daily life, it also teaches them not to harbor expectations that God will work in ways that go beyond the rules of nature. Indeed, these manuals teach individuals that hoping for miracles or God's direct intervention into history is an immature view that needs to be overcome in order to apprehend God's true design and purpose. These accompanying practices teach individuals that

daily events are read as both holy and meaningful, and arguably provide the narrative means through which meaning and coherence emerge, while the process of narration forges causal links between individual events, these books displace writers' attention to their own activity by suggesting that divinity is immanent, and that God is present in the holy space of writing itself. Some manuals suggest that it is God's own words that emerge on the page. As such, writing becomes more than a place to record and ponder God's work in one's life. It becomes the very moment of conversing with God.

We now can turn to think about what these practices suggest about cognition and about prayer. As noted in section 2, cognitive psychology presents a particular articulation of divinity as the basic, underlying cognitive position from which all prayer emanates regardless of cultural context. This divinity is transcendent, agentic, superhuman, and anthropomorphic. The examples presented in this paper suggest not only that there are other ways of imagining or understanding the divine, but also that these alternative ways are accompanied by practices through which individuals can apprehend and address the divine. D'Andrade perhaps anticipated this understanding by noting that various schemata can be articulated and learned in order to "overwrite" more familiar schema (D'Andrade, 1995; DiMaggio, 1997). This is perhaps what we observe when reading these manuals. Even if this is the case, one can note further that manuals' explanations of how individuals experience God's presence through writing is the *inverse* of the explanations that this literature suggests.

In short, while sociologists or cognitive psychology scholars might note that writing is a practice through which individuals are learning to cultivate appropriate ways of hearing the divine, the authors of spiritual writing manuals claim otherwise. Manuals frequently state that spiritual writing is a natural expressive form that anyone can practice, and that can restore any individual to their true relationships. Spiritual writing is further distinguished from secular writing techniques including the 'rescripting' that contemporary psychoanalytical procedure and group therapy is said to engage (Wakefield, 1990; Grason, 2005). By deemphasizing the active role of the individual in authoring a text and instead emphasizing catharsis or divine intervention, the agency (of both the divine "forces" and of individuals) shifts in interesting and unexpected ways. Rather than state that praying to anthropomorphized deities is the "default" psychological state which needs to be "overwritten" by those who believe otherwise, we might inquire into the practices and techniques that make prayer techniques appear natural and commonplace in some contexts but not in others.

Additionally, the practices and orientations suggested in devotional writing manuals at times include practices that raise a new kind of uncertainty. When writing becomes a space to not only "record" the work of an immanent God but to also "encounter" an immanent, non-anthropomorphic God, writers confront the question of how to distinguish their own thoughts from God's. Most of the writers sidestep this issue by suggesting that God does not speak directly through one's own thoughts, but others including Cameron (1992) and Walsch (1995) embrace this uncertainty and transform it into a creative ambiguity. In the settings and discourses where the source of the messages one receives remains ambiguous, "prayer" comes to potentially share connections with forms of contemplation, possession, and other forms of divine embodiment. Further analysis comparing texts and manuals that encourage meditation, contemplation, and other similar practices might be fruitful either to expand or clarify our definitions of prayer in relation to how they are cognitively and somatically experienced.

An additional critique of current cognitive psychology on prayer also emerges in this analysis. This paper suggests that the ways that people understand and experience the divine, as immanent or transcendent, anthropomorphic or agentic, matters to the ways that they pray and, likewise,

that these practices shape their experience of the divine. Even within the extremely narrow range of religious practices shaped within twentieth century American Christianity we see variation in the ways that experiences of divinity and prayer are shaped in practice. However, such variation is rarely engaged in experimental cognitive psychology research, which has articulated prayer as always relating to a particular type of divine agent. The examples in this essay suggest that we need not turn to stock interpretations of non-Christian religions (e.g. Buddhism, which frequently is cast as a “non-theistic” religion, despite its own highly variegated practices and theological articulations) in order to question the limits of current literature’s views of religion as a living set of practices and traditions. Likewise, concentration on the variability of prayer practices and schemata in the contemporary American context might provide further impetus toward conducting comparative projects that are sensitive to the empirical, lived differences in locally articulated religious schemata.

Thus, in addition to suggesting that cognitive psychological research expand its investigations into various kinds of divinity, this exploratory look into the practices of overcoming the uncertainty of praying to an immanent divinity suggests possible routes for further expansion of our understanding of prayer. Future research might pursue the degrees to which these narratives and approaches to writing effectively shape individuals’ and groups’ perceptions and understandings of the worlds in which they live, and of their own capacities to interpret or create meaningful lives. Likewise, scholars of religious cultures might draw on the literature in cognition and perception in order to interrogate the ways that theological differences are articulated in daily perceptions and religious practices.

## 7. Conclusion

Historian R. Bruce Mullin suggests that late twentieth century Protestant questions about prayer “stand on the shoulders” of early twentieth century answers to questions about how God speaks back (1996:266). As this essay demonstrates, the concerns of theologians like William A. Brown have not dissipated, but rather continue to emerge in the practices of various contemporary religious and spiritual writers and groups, both within and outside of the liberal Protestant milieu. The practices articulated in these earlier moments now circulate in new ways and new contexts. As they appear and reappear in these devotional writing manuals, individuals and groups continue to mull over the question of how God answers, and learn to encounter an immanent God. Writing manuals not only reassure readers that God provides messages to particular individuals with particular meaning, but that hearing these messages is a simple and natural process. The immanent God that emerges in this recent literature is thus not only present in nature’s design, but in the specific designs that God has for each person. This God is thus both present in the rules of nature, and specifically loving and capacious in caring for his creatures. Throughout, these manuals depict God as an encouraging and comforting mystery.

All the same, the loophole that allows Christians to hear an immanent God ultimately locates the “problem” of hearing God in the person’s capacities to hear the ever-present response. If an individual encounters problems on the way to discovering “coincidences” or coherence, it is not because of God’s failure to speak, but of individuals’ capacity or willingness to hear. While manuals caution writers that they will sometimes hit dry spells, writer’s block, or even the “dark night of the soul,” they also claim that perseverance in writing will inevitably allow them to cultivate the spiritual senses with which they can hear God: all will be perfectly revealed to the “ears of the heart” (Baldwin, 2005; see also Schmidt, 2000).

This emphasis on proper technique has not continued without criticism from other theologians who take immanence in another direction. Various recent books argue that Christians should in fact accept the silences that troubled theologians such as William A. Brown. James Carse thus encourages his readers to find comfort and mystery not in the beauty of nature or in surprising coincidences but in God's "silence." Carse admits, "I have never heard God speak . . . what I have experienced, and experienced repeatedly, is the silence of God." Carse argues that it is wrong to view God's silence as his own failure to listen properly. Rather than trying to overcome God's silence, he encourages Christians to ponder "what we can truly ask God for, what God can actually give us, and what we are able in fact to receive from God" (1985:8). Carse's critique strongly questions the claims that devotional writers make, and rejects recent desires to hear God's voice. Yet even his critique suggests the emergence of new (or transformed) practices for encountering an immanent God. What shape these might take, and how they might impress themselves upon believers as natural and essential, remains to be seen.

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**Courtney Bender** is associate professor of Religion at Columbia University. She is currently completing a monograph on contemporary spirituality, memory, and practice in American society that will be published with the University of Chicago Press, titled *Worlds of Experience: Contemporary Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*.