



Prayer and its Functions in Narratives. Based on Projective Method of Research (Religious Apperception Test). The Results of the Projective Study.

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Abstract

In religious studies, prayer has been extensively researched. Psychological studies use survey methods, so low-educated respondents often cannot comprehend the items. A projective method is presented, based on the Thematic Apperception Test by A. Murray and Ch. Morgan. Data collected in semi-structured interviews are used for qualitative research and for statistical analysis. Quantitative analysis of the references to prayer in narratives has yielded certain results, confirming the usefulness of the test. Qualitative analysis has revealed specificity of the petition and intercession prayer and has called attention to association of location to specific types of prayer.

Keywords: religiosity, structure of religiosity, prayer, projective techniques, TAT (Thematic Apperception Test)

Słowa kluczowe: religijność, struktura religijności, modlitwa, metody projekcyjne, TAT (Test Apercepcji Tematycznej)

Introduction

An attempt to study the way people perceive prayer has been effected, using a tool of a projective nature¹. Prayer has been an object of numerous scientific undertakings in all the fields of the study of religion since it emerged as a discipline of science. To narrow the overview of literature to the most recent endeavours, a large-scale survey in the field was conducted in the US². It helped sketch the map of the prayer as conceptualised in the human mind.

¹ Z. Grudzińska, *Please, God...: Prayer and its functions in narratives. Based on projective method of research – The Religious Apperception Test. Theoretic background and rationale of the study*, “Studia Religiologica” 2012, No. 45/2.

² M.M. Poloma, G.H.Gallup Jr., *Varieties of prayer: A survey report*, Philadelphia 1991.

On the more analytic plane, there exists a body of research concentrating on the relation of faith and its practices to well-being and health, often related to the issue of convalescence or healing. It has brought interesting insight into the issue of the conceptualisation of prayer: for example, Ai *et al*³ has noted the presence of both a salutary influence of prayer on the health of postoperative patients (“the positive path”) and the “negative path” – linking prayer to a preoperative acute stress syndrome.

Another context in which prayer is studied is in the sociocultural approach, where the researcher concentrates on the inter-relational aspects of prayer, such as enhancing connectivity⁴ or giving support⁵. Interestingly, the authors argue for widening the indices present in any study of prayer beyond the simplest “frequency of” measure, often serving as the only way of operationalising the subject under scrutiny.

The research tool

The Religious Apperception Test consists of a set of nine black-and-white cards depicting everyday scenes imbued with a degree of religious elements or symbols. Such method facilitates the research among low-educated respondents. They find it difficult to comprehend the complex language of those questionnaires, which items probe more complex indicators of personal religion than the frequency of church attendance.

Having constructed a tentative system of interpretation of open-structured narratives resulting from the interviews⁶, it has been decided to apply the statistical analysis to the data, converted from the qualitative into the quantitative format. Prayer has been chosen as a prime example of one of the basic elements of religion. The aim of the study has been to investigate the concept of prayer among people socialised in a Catholic society, independent of their faith.

The procedure

The interviews were conducted over the period of several months by the author of the research and a team of voluntary research assistants, who prior to the sessions had been instructed in the procedure. After delivering a standard instruction cards were shown to the respondent in a set order (in three cases there are separate versions for

³ A.L. Ai, T.N. Tice, B. Huang, W. Rodgers, S.F. Bolling, *Types of prayer, optimism, and well-being of middle-aged and older patients undergoing open-heart surgery*, “Mental Health, Religion and Culture” 2008, No. 11/1, p. 131–150.

⁴ K.L. Ladd, B. Spilka, *Inward, Outward, and Upward: Cognitive Aspects of Prayer*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 2002, No. 41/3, p. 475–484.

⁵ K.L. Ladd, D.N. McIntosh, *Meaning, God, and prayer: Physical and metaphysical aspects of social support*, “Mental Health, Religion and Culture” 2008, No. 11/1, p. 23–38.

⁶ Z. Grudzińska, *The Religious Apperception Test “RAT” – a Projective Test to Research the Structure of Religiosity. Constructing the System of Interpretation* (in print).

male and female respondents, to facilitate the processes of identification, which are the essential element of a projective method. A set of auxiliary questions helped elicit content in such cases when the respondent found it difficult to deliver a narrative or when instead of a narrative a description of the picture was being produced.

Every respondent was asked permission to record their narrative. None refused and in most cases the recording did not seem to hamper their eloquence.

After the interview the respondent filled a short questionnaire asking a few demographic data, such as age, education, job and the size of the place of birth. There was a single item establishing belief status in three general categories: non-believer, non-practising believer, practising believer. Those who chose one of the two latter categories were subsequently asked about their religious denomination.

The sample

The sample consisted of 73 respondents, 42 male and 31 female, their age ranging from 19 to 65, with the majority of respondents (35) aged 19 to 25, eleven in the age group 26–35, five in the group 36–45, sixteen in the group of 46–55 and five in the group of respondents whose age exceeded 56 years. It was decided to present the age variable as ordinal, since in any future analysis with the potential of studying the influence of age on the religiosity structure, the ten-year gap was considered as the least period not introducing the cohort effect. As for education, two of the respondents reported having only elementary education, 46 of them had a secondary school education (24 respondents in this group were continuing their education at the time of the research and the remaining 22 were adults with vocational training); 14 had a bachelor's degree, mostly continuing their education and 11 were respondents with at least a master's degree. As in the case of age, there is the same rationale for presenting the data as an ordinal variable.

Overall, the above data reflect the uneven distribution of demographics: the biggest group of respondents were students; on the other hand, there is at least a fair representation of other demographic strata.

On a three-point scale (non-believer, non-practising believer, practising believer) 10 of the respondents declared to be non-believers, 32 declared as believers who do not practice their religion and 31 belong to the group of believers. It is, unfortunately, not entirely clear whether the “practicing” label was construed by the respondents as just church-going or as engaging in deeper religious practices on the individual level. Since it has been argued that in a cultural milieu where religion is an important factor, religious issues are implicit in the process of identity formation, there is no reason to exclude non-believers from the sample.

As for the denomination, 61 of the 63 believers, an overwhelming majority, declared membership of the Roman Catholic Church; one respondent was a Jehovah's Witness and one declared to be a Buddhist.

Results

In all 73 interviews, a total of 196 utterances referring to prayer were identified, distributed among all subcategories as follows:

- prayer for help – 33%;
- prayer for support – 12%;
- prayer for peace of mind – 7,1%;
- prayer of dialogue – 4%;
- prayer of thanksgiving – 1,5%;
- prayer as a ritual – 13,8%;
- prayer seen as an element of a “job description” – 7,1%.

The percentages do not add up to a hundred – the remaining balance consisted of references to prayer devoid of any contextual information which would justify placing them in any of the above subcategories.

Here are some examples of utterances representing every subcategory:

– prayer for help: “she is praying for her health”; “for the return of his son”; “asking for a solution for his family”; “I will pray until I meet the woman from my past”;

– prayer for support: “the father is putting the fate of his son in God’s hands”; “he could pray for assistance for someone close to him”; “prayer and the Rosary are her only support”; “his family has perished and he is crushed and he prays”; “not seeing any other solution”;

– prayer for peace of mind: “she wanted to calm down”; “wanting some peace, she is thinking about reading from the Bible or praying”; “a good way to concentrate in solitude”; “after a hard day he can light a candle and in prayer rest creatively”; “prayer soothes her nerves”;

– prayer of dialogue – “felt the need to go to church and talk to God”; “prayer has meaning as communion with God and with the dead souls”; “during prayer comes understanding, God will explain a lot”;

– prayer of thanksgiving: “the farmer has funded this shrine in thanksgiving for what God has given him”; “I will pass by as I don’t have anything to thank God for”;

– prayer as a ritual: “it is customary to pray in such place”; “he is praying before going to confession”; “they will pray in penance, as commanded by the priest”; “I don’t think that reciting Rosary before confession is a good way to prepare for the sacrament”; “since the priest has come, let’s pray together”; “the rest is just form, to say prayers”;

– prayer seen as an element of a “job description”: “I bet he will pray from his Prayer Book, he is so diligent; “the nuns will return to the monastery and continue to pray”; “they will return to their everyday activity – to praying”; “they wash and tidy and then pray, I don’t know what else they do – mostly scrub and pray and then go to a bar for a quick drink and then go back to scrubbing and praying”;

– positive comments: “she is saying Rosaries for him, she will do it every day and after two years her son will return unharmed”; “seems happy that she could spend this time praying”; “such joy filling his soul”; “good people, they pray for others”;

– negative comments: “If she is seeking solace in prayer now, it is possible that she will lapse into something like Father Rydzyk and those things, she will start going on pilgrimages and giving all her money to this church” (highlighted are words spoken in a sarcastic tone of voice); “I live opposite a church and I can see how they round up their prayers with a visit to a nearby pub”; “nothing will help, he will continue being as unhappy as he is now”.

Quantitative analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out with SPSS for Windows 5.1 software.

The variables in the study were based on the subcategories of the types of prayer which emerged in the content analysis (listed in the previous section), plus the variables of “positive” and “negative” comments in the case of utterances clearly loaded with a positive or negative affect or foreseeing a negative or positive outcome of prayer.

All results (including those for the non-believers) were taken into account, since the object of the study is not to research prayer as activity, but rather the mental representation of the concept of prayer – which, for reasons outlined in the earlier section of the paper, are not specific to believers alone. Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, range and correlations of the variables used in the study.

Several interesting results were noted, although in many cases the correlations were insignificant due to the insufficient size of data. This is, admittedly, a drawback of qualitative research used for quantitative analyses; as the example of the present study has demonstrated, the sample must be adequately large and since every respondent is interviewed individually, it is admittedly time-consuming. For a study concentrating on a single category of utterances coded as referring to religion, like the present one, practice has showed that the sample should not be smaller than a hundred respondents. Nevertheless, the claim that it is a small drawback compared with the richness and authenticity of data sounds only reasonable, considering that in the domain of scientific research one should not cut corners, lest truth be compromised.

As it is, though, a look at the table of mean scores shows several significant results.

There is a clear pattern for positive comments, with the older participants giving distinctly more. Age was also a discriminating factor for petition/intercession prayer (prayer for help), the type most often mentioned by the oldest group. The same tendency can be noted for ritual prayer.

There were only two participants with elementary education in the whole sample, but their narratives differed so much from the other groups that it proves the fundamental rationale for developing a technique which allows to study people with a lower level of education. Here for example there is a marked difference in the number of positive comments, the same for the prayer for help and the ritual prayer.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations vsdemographic data: age, education level, profession and belief status

	Range		Positive comments Range = 3		Negative comments Range = 3		Prayer for help Range = 7		Prayer for support, R=3		Ritual prayer Range = 3	
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age	4,000	19–25									,25	,74
		26–35									,27	,64
		36–45									,60	,89
		46–55									,31	,60
		56–65									1,17*	,98
Edu- -ca- -tion	3,000	Elementary	2,0*	1,41			4,5**	3,53			1,5**	2,12
		Secondary	,13	,40			,84	1,11			,43	,77
		Under-graduate	,35	,49			,78	1,05			,14	,36
		Graduate	,36	,67			,54	,82			,18	,60
Profe- -ssion	4,000	Student										
		White collar										
		Technician										
		Finances										
		Consecr., retired-unempl.										
Belief status	2,000	Non-believer	2,0*	1,41	,80**	1,13			,20	,20	,42	
		Not practising	,13	,40	,12	,33			,21	,06	,24	
		Practising	,35	,49	,25	,57			,51*	,74**	,99	

* significant at $p > 0,005$,

** significant at $p > 0,001$

A word must be said about the choice of groups for the variable of profession. Due to the wide variety of the respondents' jobs some generalisation had to be introduced at the stage of labeling for statistical analysis and here, an unfortunate choice was made: the few consecrated persons were put together with the retired and unemployed - an indiscriminate lumping together of incongruent classes. Thus, it behooves to make a comment at this point in the article. At the stage of content analysis of the individual narratives a remarkable observation was made: the significantly higher

incidence of positive comments in this group came not from the priests and nuns, but from the retirees.

Not surprisingly, there is a tendency of taking a general attitude toward prayer, which depends on the belief status: most positive comments come from practicing believers, none from non-believers. The reverse is also true: most negative comments are made by non-believers. The practicing respondents gave most of the utterances concerning prayer of support and ritual (both results are significant).

A tentative factor analysis showed some promise of potential factors emerging, alas, the sample being too limited, the results cannot be considered valid at the moment. Further analysis will be conducted after securing more input data.

Generally speaking, the results were of the “to be expected” kind, which might be seen to substantiate the validity of the analysis.

Qualitative analysis

Prayer as a carrier of mood

In several instances respondents indicated that prayer is not so much an emotional experience *per se*, as a factor which moderates or channels certain moods:

– “...but it doesn’t seem to be a pleasant prayer; it’s rather sad, like a requiem...”

– “she is trying to make the waiting more enjoyable by reciting the Rosary...”

Praying for help

Praying for help, either for oneself or on behalf of others (petition or intercession prayer), has proved to be the most common type of prayer recognised by all respondents, irrespective of the depth of their religiosity. It is interesting to note, that even among the consecrated persons, a modest sample of whom (nine) took part in the research, the instances of other types of prayer were as rare as among the rest, in spite of the expectation that they would refer to the “basic” prayer of blessing or the prayer of praise, as recommended by the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Having obtained a rich catalogue of references, it was possible to notice certain singularities. Respondents often gave their opinions to the power of such prayer. It seems that many of them have rather clear views and expectations, mostly related to the attitude of the praying person. When reacting to a card depicting a woman praying in a room, one respondent expressed her reservations:

A disgruntled grandma is reciting the Rosary thinking that her life will improve. She is waiting impatiently, thinking that Rosaries will help, that the Mother of God will take pity and send someone.

What will follow?

I am pessimistic about the situation – she won’t see deliverance, she is simply waiting for a miracle. And when it doesn’t come, she will turn bitter and die lonely. If the miracle happens, it will come as an immense surprise for her – because I can see in her face that she is not really waiting – she is praying, but her attitude is pessimistic.

Another respondent's view was more promising, but she also stipulated certain conditions:

I had huge problems with my husband, who was an alcoholic; I suffered terribly and he was at the very bottom, but I prayed and somehow *Bozia* [Polish tender word for Got or, in this case, the Mother of God] gave that everything ended well. Prayer helped me and I went on a pilgrimage to *Częstochowa* twice.

Do you think that every prayer helps?

When you have faith, then yes. But we must wait for this help - sometimes you need patience and to have this faith, that you will be heard. My prayers were heard and fulfilled. As they say: I prayed it real.

In another comment, a respondent who has the aptitude of always "taking life in his hands", echoes this frame of mind, praising people who take steps apart from praying (perceiving a man from one of the cards as someone lonely and feeling approaching death):

Before he put his trust in God and prayed, he had done everything else he could – looked through the directory, his own telephone book, studied old photographs; he wanted to take stock of past events...

Even people who declare religious indifference are convinced that prayer can help "if you let it help":

Someone close to him has left and he seeks solace in prayer.

Will he find it?

I don't engage in religious practices but from time to time it... his future life will not be so good, he will finish with his life – if he really believed it would help him, but he has the rosary beads and he is sad all the time.

Another respondent, a Jehovah's Witness, in his narrative presented throughout strong criticism of Catholic clergy, of the Catholic Church and of the overall conduct of Catholics vs their own faith (bringing up situations proving their hypocrisy); but his narrative lost its acerbity when talking about prayer:

He has a rosary in his hand, which means that he is praying for his wife, who died tragically and he loved her and now he doesn't know what to do.

People pray for various things, but this rosary means that he is Catholic so he believes that his wife is somewhere she has gone to Heaven, shall we say and perhaps he is praying that her soul is there.

Finally, an exchange which seems to cap quite common-spread view of God as helping instance:

Perhaps he came to pray for help in some business – it can be plenty of things...

God helps in business?

It seems that believers have faith in suchlike, otherwise they wouldn't attend the church.

Does it mean that God fulfills wishes?

Well, perhaps.

Will He fulfill his wish [of this man in the picture]?

Perhaps He will.

Depending on what?

I don't know – perhaps on his faith...

Does one have to do something to ensure that God fulfill one's wish, or is it like a lottery?

Some say that you have to believe, others that it is like a lottery.

Location-related type of prayer

It could be observed that people, when projecting different types of prayer onto the characters pictured in the cards, allocated different locations to the specific foci of prayer.

Private space – present in one of the cards, where a person is seen sitting in a room, typically described as “his/her own accommodation”, was seen as appropriate for praying for help, equally frequently for oneself as for a third party. Of all utterances referring to prayer, inspired by this picture (total number 86), more than half (56%) concerned prayer for specific help and 20% were requests for support, while only around 3% pleaded for solace or peace of mind and none were seeking contact with God on a dialogical plane.

On the other hand, another card pictured a person on the frontal steps of a building, which – although without any religious adornment – was generally perceived as a church. Such a location can be characterised as public space belonging to the domain of sacrum. Here most narratives described what the protagonist had been doing inside and many of them indicated prayer (30 utterances). But there was less asking for help – only 10 references to this type of prayer. This type of space was seen as conducive to the need for calming down and praying for inner peace or solace; it was also an appropriate place to converse with the deity (3 utterances, or 10%).

Surprisingly, though, a sacral object found in a profanum public space – in this case, an art gallery, was for a fair number of respondents enough of a stimulus to evoke prayer (7 utterances); here people were mostly seen engaged in seeking contact with God on a dialogical plane (5 references to this type of prayer).

Another card in the set pictures a roadside shrine. It was the only one which gave rise to mentions of prayer of thanksgiving – three utterances in two separate interviews. Of the latter, one comment listed various possibilities for ensuing prayer with thanksgiving by no means heading the list:

They might stop and pray, perhaps the shrine is like a road sign in life, perhaps the source of support, like a buttress, giving silence and calm for meditation, and perhaps in gratitude or plea for help...

Discussion

The research presented here was the first proper study conducted using the new projective measure, RAT. Thus, the results serve two aims.

The nominal purpose is that of studying the mental representation of prayer in the cognitive system of a population raised in the Catholic culture. As far as that purpose is concerned, the results are far from surprising; one could say, “have we not known that from the beginning?” Nevertheless, it does not undermine their value, since it is one thing to intuit certain statements derived from observations of the surrounding reality, and another – to corroborate such observations with scientific data, collected in a way which complies with the current demands of methodological integrity.

Moreover, it is worth noticing the discrepancy between the dogmatic and the factual – only two of the categories described in the official source of religious canon, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, are traced in the average person’s system of constructs. Such observations are of practical value for anyone involved in catechesis and pastoral care.

The large-scale survey conducted in the 80s of the previous century in the US⁷ has mapped out four main categories of prayer, which in part are similar to the categories identified in the present study’s sample: petitionary, colloquial (or conversational, which in the present study was named “prayer of dialogue”), ritual (reciting, so different from the “ritual” as found in the present study prayer) and meditative prayer (conducted without words, being rather a state of mind open for reception of God). The last type is absent from the categories isolated in our narratives. Interestingly, there are also differences in the frequency with which the categories appear. In the American survey, the conversational prayer is the most popular, practiced by 84% of respondents, which the petitionary prayer is considered “the most difficult”⁸, labeling it as being childish, egocentric and relying on illusory faith. The petitionary prayer, which was the most popular category in the Polish sample, belongs to the less often practiced among the American respondents (22%) – more commonly by older persons, especially Catholics. These differences are easily explained by the religious model of both societies – the cosmopolitan population of the USA and the monolithic character of Polish faithful, whose Catholicism is commonly of the orthodox brand.

Another attempt to provide a taxonomy of prayer⁹ posits five types of prayer, drawn from a traditional Christian model of prayer known by the acrostic “ACTS:” Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication, to which the authors add their own category of contemplative, “receptive” prayer (which echoes the “meditative” category identified by Poloma and Gallup’s survey). They then proceed to construct a scale, subsequently used extensively in studies of prayer, for example

⁷ M.M. Poloma, G.H. Gallup Jr., *Varieties of Prayer: A Survey Report*, Philadelphia 1991.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

⁹ S.P. Laird, C.R. Snyder, M.A. Rapoff, S. Green, *Measuring Private Prayer: Development, Validation, and Clinical Application of the Multidimensional Prayer Inventory*, “The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion” 2004, No. 14/4, p. 251–272.

by Whittington and Scher¹⁰. The categories resemble the concepts listed in the Catechism, a natural outcome since ACTS was its inspiration, presenting an early tradition. Therefore it is not surprising, that the practical findings of the reported research present a different picture. It might be argued, that the findings based on the unstructured narratives better reflect the true map of the way prayer is conceptualised by the general population – notwithstanding the fact, that the scale designed by Laird *et al* possesses good psychometric qualities. In any construction of a scale based on a theoretical construct there exists the danger of creating an artifact, since while looking for references to certain types of prayer a scientist unwillingly fails to bring to light any concepts that fall outside the preconceived framework.

Ladd and Spilka¹¹ concentrated on cognitions associated with prayer, constructing scales based on Foster's theory, that the purpose of prayer is to strengthen the connection of the praying person with self (inward), other people (outward) and God (upward). It would probably be a worthwhile challenge to re-examine the data of the present research to check for such cognitions in the unstructured narratives.

A similar attempt could be undertaken to examine the data using Janssen's¹² typology of religious, petitionary, meditative, and psychological prayer. Although both the culture of the Netherlands (with a great percentage of the population either non-religious or engaging in individualistic religious practices) and Janssen's respondents (students only) differs vastly from the present study context, it is not inconceivable that some inspiring similarities might occur.

The other purpose of the study has been to utilise the tool with the aim of further inspecting its worth for scientific research. Inasmuch as the statistical analysis results are not surprising, it may be perceived, paradoxically, as proof that the tool has considerable psychometric qualities and can be recommended for future research in the field of psychology of religion. It allows insight into the structure of personal religiosity in more than one way – apart from qualitative analysis, it may be used for more rigidly structured research of inter-group comparison and factor analysis.

As stated above, for the data to reach sufficient volume to yield statistically valid results, a considerable body of narratives must be collected in a time-consuming manner. On the other hand, the scope of data, once the interviews have been conducted, is enormous, since in a single interview a typical respondent will submit a multi-faceted, multi-layered narrative, which can later be analysed from numerous angles, thus serving as a starting point for several research projects. It might be suggested that this type of research will be effectively conducted by joint teams of scientists, thus cutting down on the consumption of time and effort.

¹⁰ B.L. Whittington, S.J. Scher, *Prayer and Subjective Well-Being: An Examination of Six Different Types of Prayer*, "The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion" 2010, No. 20, p. 59–68.

¹¹ K.L. Ladd, B. Spilka, *Inward, Outward, and Upward: Cognitive Aspects of Prayer*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 2002, No. 41/3, p. 475–484.

¹² J. Janssen, M.H. Prins, J. Van der Lans, C. Baerveldt, *The structure and variety of prayer: An empirical study of Dutch youth*, "Journal of Empirical Theology" 2000, No. 13, p. 29–54.