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An Introduction to Prayer Research in Communication: Functions, Contexts, and Possibilities

E. James Baesler[*]

A historical perspective, and definition of prayer, begins the introduction to this special issue on prayer research. Varieties of prayer are situated in a system's perspective, and contextual and functional dialectics are elaborated for each of the articles in this volume. The methods, interdisciplinary nature, and unique aspects of each article are described followed by possibilities for future prayer research in the field of religious/spiritual communication.

Prayer is evident in every culture with a recorded history. Pre-historic archeological evidence of prayers for the dead date back to Neanderthal burial practices at Shanidar in Iraq and La Chapelle aux Saints in France (50,000 B.C.E., Zaleski & Zaleski, 2005). Some of the first recorded petitionary prayers are etched on cuneiform tablets by pre-Egyptian Sumerians (3,000 B.C.E., Kramer, 1959). Since the time of Sumer, our conceptual understanding of prayer evolved into a multitude of forms and functions described in the sacred texts of world religions (e.g., the *Bible*, *Qur'an*, *Tanakh*, and the *Vedas*). This historical lineage of prayer, from Neanderthal to Sumer, to major world religions, continues evolving in the era of modern social scientific prayer research. Some of this early prayer research is represented by Sir Francis Galton's (1872) statistical analysis of petitionary prayers, and William James' (1902) psychological and empirical writings on prayer. In more recent times, collections of prayer research have been published in the fields of psychology (e.g., edited volumes by Brown, 1994, and Francis & Astley, 2001) and sociology (e.g., a special issue of *Poetics* reports eleven empirical studies edited by Wuthnow, 2008), but there is no comparable collection represented in the field of communication--until now. Moreover, an analysis of academic prayer research publication trends for the fields of communication, psychology, and sociology from 1960-2010 show modest publication increases through 1990, and then a doubling of academic publications over the next two decades in all three disciplines (Baesler, 2012). With the increase of scholarly interest in the social scientific study of prayer, it is appropriate that the field of communication contribute to the interdisciplinary field of prayer research by introducing a collection of essays with a distinctly communication focus in this special issue of the *Journal of Communication and Religion.*

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Prayer is generally defined as spiritual communication with God (Baesler, 2003). [1] Prayers are talked, chanted, sung, listened, meditated, contemplated, journaled (e.g., Foster, 1992), and expressed in art forms like music (Paul, 2006), dance (DeSola, 1986), color (MacBeth, 2007), poetry (Aitken, 1992), and film (McNulty, 2001). One conceptual framework for understanding the variety of prayers is the system's perspective (Von Bertalanffy, 1969; Baesler, Lindvall, & Lauricella, 2011). Forms and functions of prayer are the core processes in a system of prayer that is influenced by a matrix of input variables (e.g., age, gender, religious/spiritual affiliation, and culture) and yields a variety of outcomes (e.g., spiritual, psychological, and physical health for the persons praying, and various types of pro-social and religious/spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors).

Inherent in the system's perspective of prayer are dialectical relationships. Dialectics are pairs of concepts representing endpoints of an underlying continuum with a theoretically infinite number of fuzzy concepts situated between the polar anchors (Kosko, 1993). Dialectical relationships are embedded within prayer processes (e.g., private and public, active and receptive, inward and outward), and between prayer processes and input/outcome variables. An example of a prayer "process and outcome dialectic" is "contemplation-action" where contemplation is a prayer process and action is a behavioral outcome.[2] Two of many possible dialectical relationships are described in the next section as a way to introduce the collection of prayer essays in this special issue.

Prayer operates in a contextual dialectic, embedded in particular *communication contexts* (e.g., Baesler & Ladd, 2009) that range from a single individual to a global community.[3] The essays in this special issue represent a range of communicative prayer contexts: individual prayer at different stages in the life-cycle (Lauricella), partners seeking forgiveness in the dyadic context (Kelley), cognitive and affective experiences during individual prayer (Ladd, Vreugdenhil, Ladd, & Cook), individual, interpersonal, and group prayer during times of illness (Kreps), and prophetic prayer in individual and group contexts (Poloma & Lee). Conceptually, there are additional prayer contexts situated between the poles of the individual-global dialectic that one might imagine: individuals silently praying for different needs during a prayer service, posting on-line prayer requests to a website, praying for someone using a mobile phone, multiple people praying for a specific intention in an internet chat room, and so forth.

In addition to the contextual prayer dialectic, prayers can also be situated along a functional dialectic. That is, prayers serve a variety of *functions* (e.g., Bade & Cook, 2008) from the heart-felt petitionary prayer of need to silent mystical contemplation. The essays in this volume address a number of prayer functions: petitionary prayers for health during times of illness (Kreps), prayers of forgiveness (Kelley), prophetic prayers for guidance and discernment (Poloma & Lee), prayers of connection (Ladd et. al.), and functions of prayer that are unique to different stages of the lifespan (e.g., identity in young adulthood, and coping with declining physical health in elderhood, Lauricella). Additional functions of prayer located along the petitionary-contemplative dialectic include two clusters: adoration, praise, and worship, and mystical prayers of rapture, ecstasy, and union.

Just as there are many functions and contexts of prayer, there are many prayer research methods. This collection of essays represents a diversity of *methodological approaches* to scholarly prayer research. Both Lauricella's lifespan review and Kreps's health review of prayer research are critical/interpretive reviews of a breadth of quantitative and qualitative studies. In contrast, Poloma and Lee's study of prophetic prayer, and Kelley's work on relational forgiveness and prayer, provide a more focused review, and critical interpretation of, specific types of prayer. Finally, Ladd et. al.'s study of interpersonal prayer, and Poloma and Lee's prophetic prayer, represent empirical data based prayer research methodologies. In addition to methodological pluralism, these essays have an interdisciplinary flavor, with both review pieces (Lauricella, and Kreps) spanning the disciplines of communication, medicine, psychology, and sociology. Kelley's work on forgiveness, and Ladd et. al.'s research, draw heavily from the disciplines of psychology and communication. Finally, Poloma and Lee's research on prophetic prayer uses communication, psychology, and sociological resources to support their arguments.

While interdisciplinary in nature, the central theme that binds these essays together is their focus on prayer as spiritual communication. Within this theme, there are *unique* aspects of each study highlighted in this section. Poloma and Lee develop a continuum of prayer (from devotional to mystical) and focus on describing mid-range prophetic prayers. Their national survey data reveal that all three prayers predict a multidimensional measure of love, and data from qualitative interviews illustrate the dynamics of prophetic prayer for discernment in decision making. Turning from types of prayer, Ladd et. al. focus on the private prayer context by asking: how is prayer like a human conversation? Using a survey based method, language content and connectivity functions of prayer are compared with human conversations, and the nature of attachment as a relational component of prayer is explored as correspondence and compensation. Within the context of private and interpersonal prayers, Kelly describes prayer within the Kelly and Waldron model of relational forgiveness. Within this forgiveness framework, prayer is related to: emotion, sense-making, altruistic action, and reconciliation. The prayer of forgiveness may lead to relationship healing, and healing is a common theme in the prayer and health literature. Kreps' review of prayer and health suggests that prayer can function in a number of ways to impact health in a holistic sense, especially as a means of coping with illness (e.g., worry, fear, isolation), and providing relational support. The role of prayer and health in a variety of relationships are discussed including: friends, family, doctors, nurses, and chaplains. Finally, Lauricella's extensive review of prayer across the lifespan covers the life stages of children, adolescents, undergraduates, adults and elders with special attention to the psychological and cognitive development in the early stages of the lifespan, and coping, health, and aging in the later stages of the lifespan.

Collectively, the essays in this special issue introduce communication scholars to the contexts, functions, and topics of communication-focused prayer research. As with any introduction, only a limited number of prayer research topics are represented in this volume. To provide a broader vision of prayer research

possibilities, a cornucopia of topics and questions *not* covered in this special are described in the following section.

First, Googling the search term "prayer" reveals images of individuals with eyes closed, heads bowed, and hands folded. How representative are these images of the *nonverbal characteristics* of everyday private and public prayer? More broadly, what nonverbal characteristics describe the prayerful face, posture, voice, and environment? How might these characteristics compare across religious/spiritual traditions? Second, there is a need for careful descriptive work mapping the *phenomenological experience* of prayer in the context of everyday life. How much can individuals accurately report about their own prayer experiences? It may be that some prayer experiences are so mysterious that they are difficult to communicate. For instance, in some forms of contemplative prayer, the experience is described as being in a "cloud of unknowing" (Johnston, 1973), a place where the person praying is aware of "being" but cannot name specific cognitive content. In such cases, how can individuals respond to specific queries about the content of their prayer experience? Across a number of experiments, Gladwell (2002) notes that when researchers ask for information in the participant's "black box," individuals tend to fabricate stories beyond their ability to accurately tell. The cognitive and linguistic limits of what individuals can report about their prayer experience is debatable.[4] Perhaps a combination of methods, like experience sampling with mobile phone devices, and creative auto ethnographic studies, could provide further insights into the phenomenological experience of some types of prayer. Third, with the rise of new media technologies, early adopter personality types may translate some of their face-to-face prayer activities into the digital environment, or perhaps invent new types of digital prayer. To begin mapping the social media landscape of prayer, research might investigate petitionary prayers offered *for* others, and requests for prayer *from* others, by comparing frequency of prayer for different types of media like: mobile phone, Facebook, Twitter, traditional e-mail, and posts to prayer websites. Finally, research could explore prayer-action linkages more systematically, beginning with the relationship between daily prayer disciplines/practices and, for example, positivity (Fredrickson, 2009), mindfulness (Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, Laurenceau, 2006), and character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

I am deeply grateful to Calvin Troup for his willingness to sponsor this special issue on prayer research, and to all of the authors, and anonymous reviewers, who contributed to the prayer scholarship in this volume. My hope is that this special issue on prayer will educate and inspire others to consider prayer scholarship as a viable and emerging area in the field of religious/spiritual communication research.

Endnotes
[1] In this definition of prayer, "God" can refer to the monotheistic God of Judaism and Islam, the Trinitarian God of Christianity, the Gods of Hinduism, the Creator of Native Religions, Ultimate Reality, Ground of Being, Higher Self, and so forth, depending on the language of the specific religious/spiritual tradition (see Beversluis, 2000). A broader definition of prayer as spiritual communication would

encompass other "spiritual entities/beings" like angels, spirits, human ancestors, and "spiritual forces/energies" like those in the natural world (e.g., earth, air, fire, and water). In this special issue on prayer research, most authors have implicitly adopted the definition of prayer as spiritual communication with "God."

[2] A complete system of prayer accounts for the relationship between contemplative prayer (ontological being) and action (empirical doing) as an ongoing and necessary dynamic tension between an internal religious/spiritual phenomenological reality and an external empirically verifiable reality. There are several ways of managing the "contemplative-action" dialectic including segmentation, cycling, and integration. The process of managing prayer dialectics is similar to the process of managing interpersonal dialectics as described in relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011). For example, "segmenting" might involve devoting specific times of the day to contemplative prayer and other times of the day to active ministry. In a "cyclical" approach, there may still be specific times devoted to prayer and action, but the periods of time are no longer experienced in isolation. Instead, each activity (prayer or ministry) informs the other in a reflexive loop. For instance, prayer may be used to discern appropriate actions in ministry, and the activities of ministry might be brought back into the next period of prayer in an on-going cycle. Finally, in the "integration" approach, contemplation and action co-exist *at the same time*. Three examples of this type of integration follow. Thomas Merton (1949, p. 59), in describing this dualistic state of contemplative action, says that the believer discovers: "...act without motion, labor that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and beyond all desire, a fulfillment whose limits extend to infinity." Dubay (1989, p. 106), interpreting the work of St. Therese of Avila, writes "A person is able to attend to the indwelling presence of the Trinity and yet carry on the ordinary business of everyday life." Finally, Brother Lawrence (Herman, n.d.) is reported to have attained this state of dual awareness by maintaining a sense of God's presence while engaged in ordinary tasks like washing dishes. Further examples of "contemplative practices in action" and "integrated contemplative practice systems" among different religious/spiritual traditions are described in Plante's (2010) edited volume.

[3] Labeling the endpoint of the contextual dialectic "global community" is somewhat controversial because praying as a global community may be considered a rare event or an impractical ideal. Consequently, the majority of prayer researchers use the more frequent and practical label "large group" to represent one endpoint of the contextual dialectic. However, even global prayer may not be broad enough to encompass some religious/spiritual beliefs about prayer with "ancestors", "heavenly hosts", and/or "nature" as each of these terms imply communication with someone or something beyond human life on earth. In addition to the controversy over labeling the macro endpoint for the contextual dialectic, many of the communicative contexts for this dialectic intersect with the geography of prayer. For example, the context of individual prayer may occur in a naturalistic setting like a mountaintop, or in a bedroom closet, while large group prayer may take place in a traditional domed cathedral or under an outdoor canopy.

[4] Often mystics of world religions describe their prayer experiences in the language of poetry (Easwaran, 1991; Teasdale, 2001) perhaps because poetry is the best linguistic approximation of their lived prayer experience. Culturally sensitive linguistic content analyses of these poems may provide one window into prayer experiences like the "cloud of unknowing." Another approach into "black box" prayer phenomenon describes brain activity during prayer using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) (e.g., Ladd, Andreasen, Smith, & Baesler, 2006; Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, 2001; Wallace, 2007). This technique places individuals in a large machine that measures and maps blood flow to different parts of the brain while individuals are engaged in prayer. Proponents of fMRI argue that the observer can directly "see into the black box" and discover brain functions correlated with prayer experiences that are outside the conscious awareness of the person praying. This method increases our descriptive understanding of brain function during prayer, but it does not necessarily imply an *explanation* of prayer phenomenon.

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