



This presentation is the result of my interrogation of the persistent gut-level discomfort I have felt about praying with research collaborators when I enter the field. Most anthropologists I have spoken with express surprise at my concern, finding the question of whether to pray with participants quite unproblematic. It seems like a no-brainer - of course you'd participate in prayer. I hope over the next 20 minutes to problematise this easy assumption.

Before I start, I want to out myself...

## Repugnant?

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I am one of anthropology's 'repugnant others': I am an active, believing Christian. A relatively orthodox Protestant, I grew up in the Lutheran Church of Australia, but married an Anglican and am currently a member of an Anglican church in Melbourne of the 'low church' (but still liturgical), evangelical, egalitarian variety.

I declare this at the outset because I suspect most of you will spend the next 15 minutes trying to figure it out anyway and, more importantly, because I'm quite convinced no scholar can distance themselves completely and objectively from their beliefs. This is not to say that I intend to present a specifically Protestant or evangelical perspective. Rather, my intention in clarifying my own positionality is to ensure that that I don't hide behind some facade of objectivity but am held to account for rigour and balance precisely because of my position as a believing anthropologist.



As an anthropologist, prayer is fascinating. It can reveal the inner desires of the heart. It puts emotions and longings into words. Marcel Mauss suggests that “in the case of prayer...the demands of language are such that often the prayer itself will specify the precise circumstances and motives which give rise to it.” As a source of data – and as a relational expression of having connected with your research consultants – to be invited to pray together seems like a significant achievement in anthropological research with Christians.

Liar?

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And yet, I still feel uncomfortable about praying with Christian consultants despite the fact that it is something that is both natural to me and an anthropologically rich source of data.

This paper will elaborate how, as a Christian, when I pray, my primary orientation is to God while as an anthropologist, when I do cultural analysis, I feel oriented to the speaker, and the world. So as a believing anthropologist I share both the ritual practice and the belief that what I am doing in prayer flows from and is directed to God. To turn away from God towards another person during that act, I think, would make a liar out of me when I say “yes, I will pray with you”.

I want to turn briefly to present an overview of Christian theologies of prayer and compare it with anthropological treatments of Christian prayer, before reflecting on what implications this has for participating in prayer in the field.



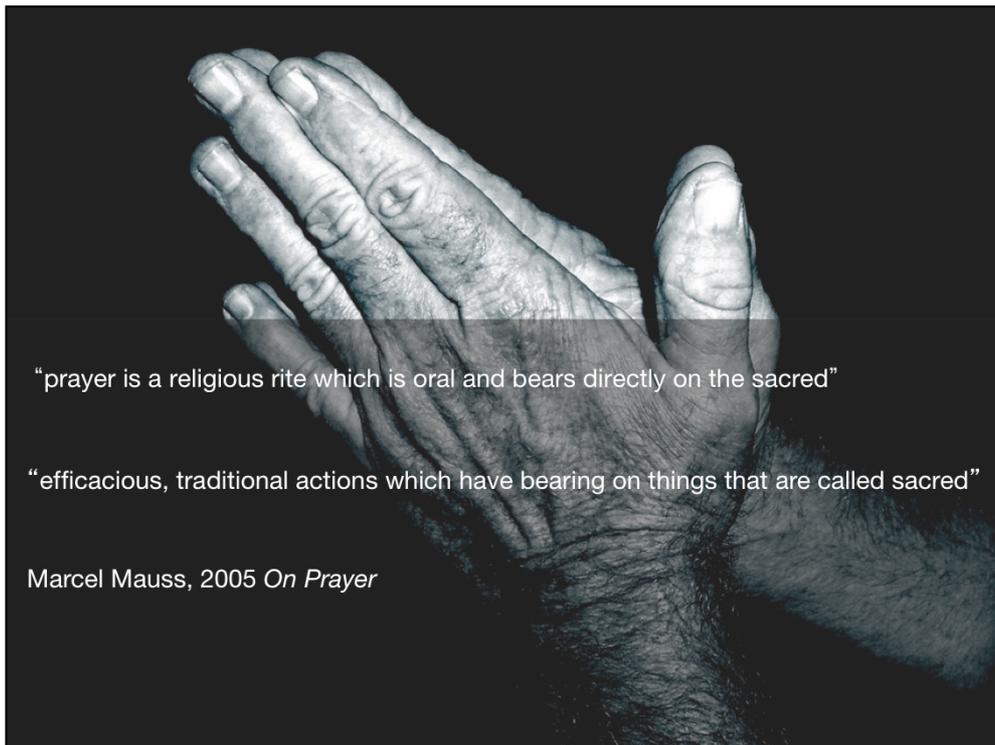
Theologically, prayer holds a central place in Christian faith. And the two are nearly always conceived of as inextricably linked. For John Calvin, “true prayer is impossible apart from faith, stems from faith and is a fruit of faith.

Calvin characterizes prayer as an intimate conversation with God and in this he echoes St Augustine of Hippo. For Augustine, prayer is in the first instance, a turning of the heart toward God. Secondly, it is conversational: speaking to God. It is not merely a calling out to God, but a ‘calling in’, an invitation to God to enter into the individual who prays. Furthermore, this speaking to and calling in is not done by the initiative of the one who prays, but rather it is God who takes the initiative. Prayer in this sense, is about shared presence between God and the one who prays. Prayer is \*relational\* between God and the believer.

In many traditions, most notably, Orthodoxy, oral or bodily prayer develops into prayer of the mind and prayer of the mind in the heart. Prayer that is simply oral or bodily is not fully realised prayer. Prayer heads in a direction from language towards what the book of Romans describes as the “groaning of the Spirit”. Such wordless prayer is not so much prior to language as transcendent of it.

Karl Barth reflects that the Protestant reformers (often implicated in the modern priority of the individual) made no distinction between praying individually or corporately, he says, “when Christians pray it is the Church, and when the Church prays, it is Christians”. They also did not distinguish explicit from implicit prayer. Instead, for the reformers “prayer is at once word, thought, and life”. This idea that prayer is not just an oral act, but a whole of life enactment, is similarly found in much contemporary liberation theology.

From the anthropological perspective, perhaps the most detailed treatment of prayer is the never quite finished doctoral thesis of Marcel Mauss. For Mauss, prayer is an activity that unites belief with ritual action,



“prayer is a religious rite which is oral and bears directly on the sacred”

where a religious rites are defined as,

“efficacious, traditional actions which have bearing on things that are called sacred”

For Mauss, prayer is a social phenomenon. He rejects the view that prayer is a primarily individual phenomenon which can only be known through self-reflection or the questioning of those who pray. Rather, he asserts that because religion is fundamentally social in character, so therefore must prayer be. Furthermore, the form of prayer, such as the use of prayer books or of certain postures, means that “even in the religions which allow most scope to the individual, all prayer is a ritual form of speech adopted by a religious society”.

It is much less common for contemporary anthropologists to systematically analyze prayer in the style of Mauss. Most contemporary anthropologists of Christianity present prayer as a minor aside in an overarching narrative of religious behaviour but rarely make it the focus of ethnographic attention. This is the case, for example, with Harding’s study of fundamentalist speech and Simon Coleman’s work on the Word of Life church in Sweden.

Matt Tomlinson (2004), in one of the few exceptions, focusses on the socio-historical function of chain prayers in Fiji and concludes that in this context prayer is an act of powerlessness that serves to diffuse a sense of immediate danger. For Cannell (2006), specific forms of written and repeated prayers are texts that become locations of meaning and objects of desire and exchange. Prayer in these contemporary ethnographies is usually presented as a wholly human endeavour, a speech act, a form of exchange, a way of perpetuating social structure. The divine-oriented, or even -initiated, aspect of prayer emphasised by theologians is rarely engaged with.

Of course, the actual lived realities of praying in different times and places will be diverse and will in all likelihood confound both the doctrinal and anthropological search for definitional clarity described above. But hopefully this brief overview provides a relaxed framework in which to start reflecting on how anthropologists might approach the practice of prayer in the field. This brief review identifies at least three key characteristics of prayer on which Christian theologians and anthropologists are in accord:

## Agreement:

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- Belief, a relational orientation towards the divine, is a necessary precondition for prayer;
- Prayer, while often conducted individually, is a social act;
- Prayer, while sometimes silent and meditative, is an oral or at least linguistic activity.

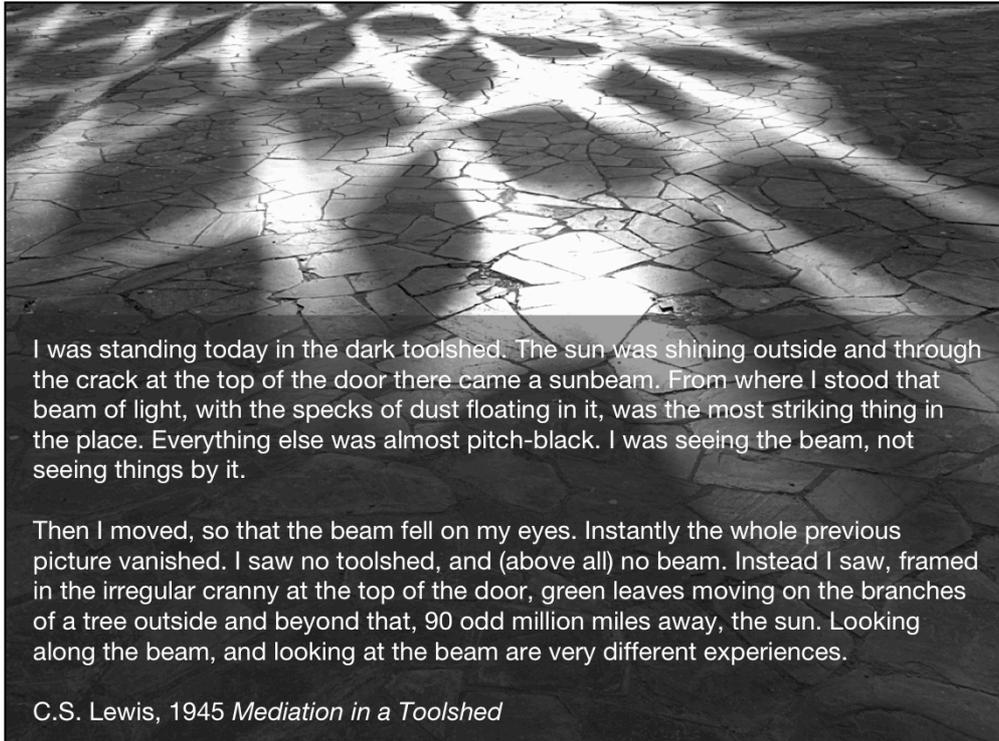
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However, Christian theologians emphasize that which a secular anthropology struggles to allow: that prayer is the two-way manifestation of relationship between humans and the divine. That is, as far as I have read, in anthropology prayer is presented as a human act, rarely as a divine one.

Both theologians and anthropologists have demonstrably studied prayer. Nothing I'm presenting today is to suggest that prayer is somehow off-limits or unknowable. What I do want to problematise, however, is how we can know what goes on in prayer, and the significance of making the decision to take part in prayer.

First, I want to talk about the practice of participant observation



I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

C.S. Lewis, 1945 *Meditation in a Toolshed*

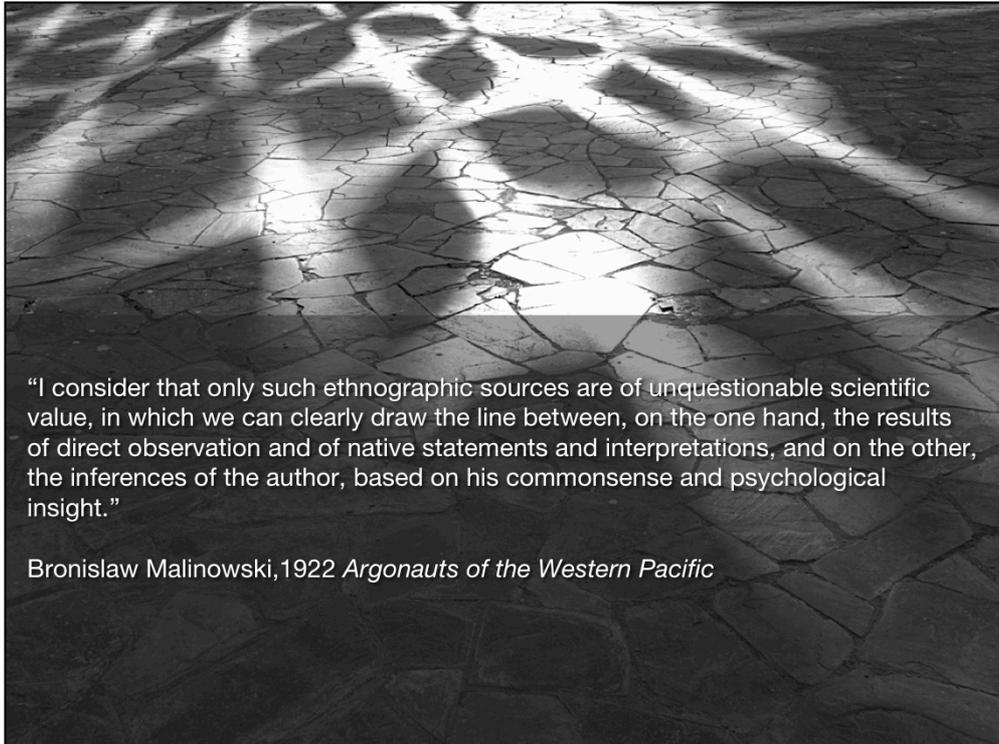
Let me start by sharing with you a metaphor used by C.S. Lewis in his “Meditation in a tool shed”,

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For Lewis, we can know about the light by looking at it - seeing the detail of the motes of dust - and we can know about it by standing in the beam of light and looking along it - to the outside. He correlates observational knowledge with looking at the beam and participatory knowledge with looking along the beam. In doing so, he approaches the distinction between those more scientific approaches to ethnographic knowledge and phenomenological ones.

For founding fathers, such as Malinowski, participation was primarily a route to better observation. He opens *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* with these words,



“I consider that only such ethnographic sources are of unquestionable scientific value, in which we can clearly draw the line between, on the one hand, the results of direct observation and of native statements and interpretations, and on the other, the inferences of the author, based on his commonsense and psychological insight.”

Bronislaw Malinowski, 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*

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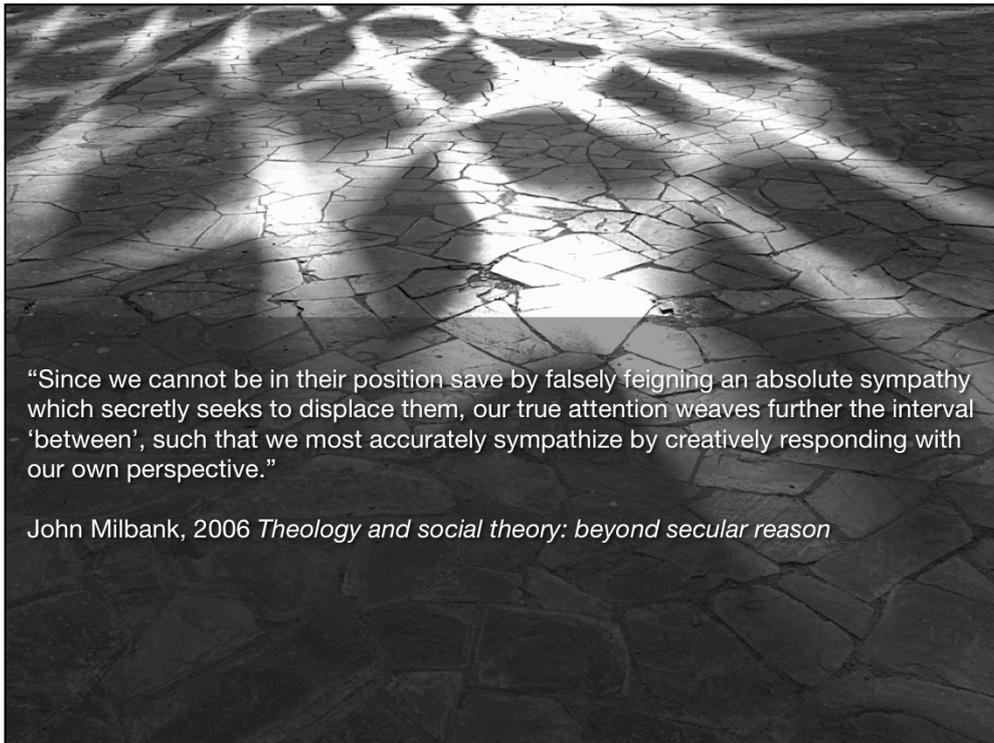
In this statement of method Malinowski identifies a gap between (a) the experience and knowledge of the community the anthropologist seeks to work with and (b) the anthropologist’s interpretation of this.

For more contemporary scholars, however, participation is part of the journey towards knowledge. Phenomenological approaches, see participation as an integral part of truly knowing the research subject and as a precondition for explanation. For example, for Scott Lash, ‘intensive’ methodologies such as ethnography produce phenomenological or ontological knowledge by being present in and with the object of study and understanding them on their own terms.



In searching for this nearness, however, many phenomenologists would acknowledge that it is only ever a process of becoming nearer; that there is never a guarantee that my experience aligns exactly with the object of my intention . We can never fully appreciate the experience of the other. While this could be seen to doom to utter failure any social science that attempts to interpret the experience of someone else, following R.D. Laing, I would suggest that even though our understanding is always limited, as we experience one another experiencing – that is, as we respond to one another – we get closer to sharing something of each other’ s experience.

This commitment, that nearness is generated in dialogue, in experiencing the other experiencing, cements participant observation as a valid and valuable field method. Furthermore, theologian John Milbank suggests that claiming the very experience of the other through sympathy is unethical and that responding from our own position is the only authentic path,



“Since we cannot be in their position save by falsely feigning an absolute sympathy which secretly seeks to displace them, our true attention weaves further the interval ‘between’, such that we most accurately sympathize by creatively responding with our own perspective.”

John Milbank, 2006 *Theology and social theory: beyond secular reason*

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If prayer is a phenomenon uniting ritual with belief, or an act presupposing faith, then openly unbelieving anthropologists necessarily cannot participate in the full experience of the act of prayer. And this may amplify the ‘secret displacement’ of the research subject. For surely the experience of an act which demands faith is substantively different for those who honestly confess to have none compared with those for whom the experience is an expression of their own relationship with the divine. This does not preclude unbelieving anthropologists from the study of prayer. But it demands that explanations of prayer - of what it does, how it makes people feel, what they intend to achieve through prayer - must be grounded in dialogue with those who pray.

Conversely, full participation in prayer as a believer may preclude observation. Although I have already acknowledged that prayer is a social act (even at its most meditative), we’ve also seen that most Christian traditions see prayer as something primarily oriented to God. The believing anthropologist who re-orient themselves away from God towards another person for the purpose of observation and analysis risks moving out of an authentically prayerful space. Again, this does not preclude believing anthropologists from the study of prayer. The believing anthropologist while perhaps experiencing something nearer to that of their research subjects must still acknowledge their distance from their research subjects. If we use C.S. Lewis’ metaphor, there is no guarantee that the researcher and the researched are looking along the same beam of light toward the same vista. The very same demand for knowledge to be produced in dialogue weighs upon the believing anthropologist and the unbelieving anthropologist.

So perhaps the ethnographic practice of participant observation will not be dramatically affected by this challenge. Both the believing and the unbelieving anthropologist can just get on with praying in the field. Maybe it is that other fundamentally important part of ethnography - writing - the translation of the social and experiential into the textual that requires transformation. If, as Milbank suggests, creative response to the other is more authentic and ethical than feigning an unobtainable absolute sympathy, then the shape of ethnographies written by believers and unbelievers will necessarily be different because the position from which they are creatively responding is different. Even when their subject matter is the same.

For two corresponding reasons, then, I suggest anthropological treatments of prayer which fail to engage with the interpretation of believing participants fall short of the necessary depth. On the one hand, they fail to draw the distinction Malinowski demands between ‘native statements’ and the inferences of the author. And on the other, they ‘secretly displace’ their research subjects by assuming that their own experience of the act of prayer exactly corresponds with that of their research subjects. Both issues need to be confronted by believing and unbelieving anthropologists alike.

But there is a further problematic for the believing anthropologist who would pray in the field - and that is a commitment to prayer as efficacious action.



As a final reflection on the ethical conundrum I feel I face about praying with research participants in the field, I'd like to follow Engelke and Tomlinson in suggesting that the anthropological study of prayer may have focused too heavily on what prayer means. If "Christian sermons...approach the limits of meaning in their determination to attain fixity", then surely Christian prayer approaches the limits of meaning in its journey towards the groaning of the Spirit, the acknowledged inadequacy of language to fully communicate the desire of the heart.

If prayer is simply a verbal or oral act, for which the primary anthropological challenge is decoding meaning, then taking part in the act in the field is not so contentious. If however, prayer does something - if Mauss is more correct than he realizes when he calls it 'efficacious action' - then the decision to take part becomes a moral one. The same ethical consideration that another anthropologist may direct towards illegal activity, or participation in producing physical harm, for the believing anthropologist must be directed towards prayer, because for the believing anthropologist, praying with research participants does not simply mean something, it does something. It calls on the living God to listen and act in response to the desires being articulated.

The colloquial refrain, perhaps directed to the unbeliever after praying, "Did you really mean it?", helps to draw both meaning and effect together. For it suggests that meaning is not simply about understanding, but also about commitment. To 'mean' something goes hand in hand with an intentionality toward something. This paper has contended that for the praying believer this orientation or intention is primarily God-ward, which has implications for the phenomenological knowledge created by participation in acts of prayer and for the ethical decision about whether to participate in prayer at all.



Questions?

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