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### BOOK REVIEW: Bernard Spilka and Kevin L. Ladd, *The Psychology of Prayer: A Scientific Approach*

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The *Psychology of Prayer: A Scientific Approach* offers a dense yet remarkably useful tour de force through the last 30 years of social scientific research on prayer. It is a major contribution that highlights the expanding role of prayer in the psychology of religion. While authors Bernard Spilka and Kevin Ladd view prayer as a critically important personal religious activity, their discussion is uncompromisingly scientific and offers substantive insights and recommendations for an empirical study of this rich human experience. Locating prayer as a psychological phenomenon, the authors offer a straightforward conceptualization: “Prayer is the psychology of religion in action and literally reflects virtually every facet of behavioral scientific psychology, from its neural roots to complex social responsivity” (p. 2).

This book is a useful introduction to the various ways researchers have approached prayer psychologically. My own experience of prayer seems to be more expansive than the categories covered, but this is understandable since empirical approaches necessarily slice up experience into quantifiable pieces. People have been praying for thousands of years, and it is heartening to see that social scientists are beginning to chart this vast territory replete with religious and psychological meanings.

Spilka and Ladd accomplish a remarkable undertaking, given the range of studies critically scrutinized. As respected leaders in this field, these authors stake out prayer’s central place in the psychology of religion. The reader is guided through a wide range of topics related to prayer research and can hone in on special areas of interest relevant to believers, scientists, psychologists and pastors.

Delving into Spilka and Ladd’s meticulous analyses helped me become familiar with this field and to identify recommendations pertinent for future research on the prayers of Sun Myung Moon. Here I will cover selected topics that a general reader may find interesting as well as key points that I find valuable for future studies of Moon’s prayers.<sup>[1],[2]</sup> Yet although *The Psychology of Prayer* includes 37 pages of references, there is only one that examines prayer in the lives of religious leaders.

Studying prayer in the life of the late religious leader Sun Myung Moon is certainly a worthy pursuit for the psychology of prayer. A comprehensive approach will yield information about the characteristics and interactions of his core beliefs, emotions and cognitions within the recorded texts of his prayers. These findings will bear theological and psychological importance and contribute to an understanding of the inner life and thought of Sun Myung Moon. Ideally, a comprehensive research agenda embracing various methods should be developed where empirical approaches to Moon’s prayers are one of many perspectives that shed light on the interior dynamics of this contemporary religious leader.

While not meant to be light reading, *The Psychology of Prayer* is a resource for pastors and religious thinkers to examine how prayer has been studied in relation to a range of social, mental and physical outcomes. Researchers will find the initial chapters on the foundations for a psychological approach to prayer and its multidimensionality to be especially important for the construction of theoretical frameworks. Religious educators will appreciate the chapter on developmental perspectives, which examines how the experience and role of prayer changes over a lifetime. Pastors will discover a plethora of findings to assist in efforts to strengthen their congregants’ motivation to pray. Chapters examining prayer as coping, the effectiveness of intercessory prayer, the neuroscience of prayer, and prayer in relation to health issues condense implications of relevant studies and are especially useful for readers thinking about directions for future research. Some may find it cumbersome to wade through important but rather technical material on the challenges of quantitative

research. With patience, however, lay readers are able to find impressive studies with findings that support prayer's role in dealing with life's difficulties and its centrality in human experience.

## Prayer and Marriage

In assessing the research on prayer and marriage, Spilka and Ladd find the literature to be quite sophisticated and less plagued with ambiguities when compared to other domains of study on prayer. Many conclusions are well supported from studies with large samples that have been replicated. In this section Unificationists may feel affirmed by the robust empirical support for their home-based spiritual practices and from studies that show the effectiveness of couples praying together. A recent large scale study of 1400 people on prayer and marital adjustment, for example, found that the attendance of both marital partners at church services and their joint participation in home-based practices related positively to relationship satisfaction.

Not surprising to Unificationists is research that finds truly religious couples who feel themselves part of a divine triangle. Other studies confirm the positive role for prayer in how marital conflict is resolved and how prayer may help to counter infidelity. In two investigations, prayer is found to strengthen attachment in couples and is associated with less extramarital romantic behavior. Prayer is negatively correlated to infidelity in a third study as well, which used independent observers to rate the commitment levels of the pray-ers.

## Prayer and Health

Often people invoke prayer when facing significant health issues. Spilka and Ladd's conclusion on prayer's efficacy for improving health outcomes however, is mixed. There are many studies that more or less affirm prayer's positive impact. However there are other researchers who find significant problems with these types of studies. They cite common errors such as the ambiguity of constructs, problems in the research design, or author's tendency to stretch the implications of findings.

Avoiding studies that referenced supernatural or theological domains, Spilka and Ladd offer various pathways to explain how prayer might influence health psychologically:

1. The placebo effect: the pray-er believes he or she will get better and the power of suggestion supports this perception.
2. Those who pray tend to lead healthier lifestyles than those who do not (selection effect).
3. Prayer activity itself acts as a diversion from illness.
4. Prayer acts fundamentally as a coping support, thus aiding the immune function of the body
5. Prayer functions as a social support helping the believer deal with health issues.

When prayer aids the believer to feel relaxed, hold positive expectations, or have a greater sense of security and well-being, the immune system benefits. Prayer is also good for the heart. This truism known intuitively by practitioners is affirmed in research that looks at prayer and psychological responses to cardiac problems. Spilka and Ladd point to optimism as a connecting factor in how prayer influences the patient in pre- and post cardiac surgery. They call for more precise thinking on the specific mechanisms by which prayer improves health and conclude that framing prayer as a means of coping and control may be helpful toward this end.

## Prayer and Motivation

A powerfully refreshing aspect of this work is the authors' openness to considering the role that inspirational writings have for an empirical approach to prayer. Religious teachings on the question of "why pray," hold content not often considered important by psychologists. Some theorists reduce a believer's desire to communicate with God based on personal wants and needs alone. Spilka and Ladd point out that this position tends to ignore the need for a serious exploration of how personal beliefs and teachings interact with wants and needs of the believer.

Most people pray because of some unfulfilled desire or an impending sense of threat or danger... Under such circumstances, one feels a need to resolve ambiguity, fear, anxiety and helplessness, and normally, for people who pray, prayer is the prime resource to resolve these concerns (p. 29).

Expanding on the higher needs of Maslow's model, Spilka and Ladd see that prayer can be experienced as an avenue for personal growth, transformation, rejuvenation and a way to better the lives of others, rectify personal errors, strengthen character weaknesses and discover new insights applicable to personal and social

life. Prayers can be examined to discover the range and depth of these motivations, especially when uttered at times of crisis, stress or an intense moral challenge.

The suggestion to view the need to pray as an aspect of Maslow's higher level motivations is particularly relevant in examining motivations of religious leaders. Utilizing Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a model, I envision research that looks at the extent to which motivational elements in Moon's prayers fit the model. This type of study may identify domains of motivation unique to Moon or to religious leaders in general.

Religious leaders pray privately, but just as important to explore are their public prayers on special religious occasions. Spilka and Ladd affirm the importance of studying prayer in relationship to context. Therefore examining psychological and theological themes in Moon's prayers on occasions of special significance such as True God's Day or Unification Church weddings called Holy Blessings may be important. Existing research reveals that God is imagined in a variety of complex ways dependent on the nature of the situation and the kinds of prayers offered. The role of the pray-er and his/her sense of identity on specific occasions is often evidenced in the narrative of prayers. A study comparing psycho-logical themes in Moon's prayers associated with Unification holidays or significant events may show differences and similarities over time, which is another important vector of understanding how context influences prayer. The authors note that much of this type of research has been conducted on Christian populations and underscore the need for research involving believers of non-Christian traditions.

It is heartening to see that Spilka and Ladd broadly describe prayer as "responsive communicative behavior colored by individual motives (i.e., wants or cravings) that are inherent in simply being human" (p. 11). Locating prayer as a natural human activity, the authors assert that any definition of prayer must embrace many vectors of understanding, including the believer's cognitions, motivations, personality and social behavior (p. 13). An Unificationist theory of mind would certainly affirm prayer as a natural activity that is psychologically informed, but more importantly, grounded ontologically.<sup>[3]</sup> The spiritual mind's core function is to focus intention toward activity centered on the impulse to love. Prayer is viewed as an activity that strengthens motivation and experience of the practitioner's innate connection to the divine. Consistent practice of prayer fortifies the believer's mind/heart with the spiritual world and the heart of God.<sup>[4]</sup> Theoretically speaking, a Unificationist view would necessarily view prayer holistically—affirming that the psychology of the believer both influences and is being influenced by her experiences in prayer.

## Prayer and Coping

In essence, all living entails coping, and prayer is coping behavior. At every moment, physically and mentally, a person acts to survive and achieve gratification. For most people, religion, spirituality and prayer are integral parts of this universal process (p. 88).

As coping behavior, prayer is concerned with perceived images and intentions of the Deity, one's personal feelings of deservedness, expectations of positive results and other possibilities. Spilka and Ladd review key studies that show to a greater or lesser extent that prayer is associated with improved sense of well-being; social connectedness; emotional management; and, dealing effectively with anger. Therefore Unificationists should be supportive of the suggestion that for research purposes, prayer can be seen as a complex coping response to various stressors, needs and wants over the life span. Prayer is an activity that enhances the individual's internal locus of control and self efficacy; a behavioral response to internal and external stressors such as death or tragedy; and a form of religious coping that includes a search for meaning, intimacy/spirituality and personal transformation (p.18-19).

Reading through the authors' discussions on the usefulness of framing prayer as a coping response, I could not help thinking about the many personal tragedies Sun Myung Moon encountered in his life, such as the untimely deaths of three sons or facing the tax evasion conviction that resulted in spending nearly two years in Danbury prison. On each of these occasions he prayed publically with close followers and/or family members. These prayers can certainly be examined in terms of coping factors, and will likely yield findings of both psychological and theological importance. As a coping behavior when facing unexpected difficulties, the central question a pray-er asks is: To what extent do I "matter" to God? This inquiry, closely related to the experience of divine control and connection, is especially important in how a religious leader responds to events that may be perceived as a break in trust, interest or change in his relationship to God. How did Moon respond in prayer when tragedies happened to his family or his followers? Did his sense of self, intimacy with God, and theologically driven intentions change when facing distressing circumstances? These are a few

possible research questions generated out of a coping framework that may be helpful when looking into the content of Moon's prayers when responding to difficulties facing his family or the movement he led.

### Prayer as Cognitive activity

As a cognitive activity, prayer can be explored via the pray-er's intentions, the content of prayer itself, and its social and theological influences. Spilka and Ladd note: "When prayer is studied cognitively, attention is directed toward its meaning and interpretation, and such factors as beliefs also enter the picture" (p. 24). Inherent in prayer are ideas that involve the nature of the God to whom the prayers are directed, His/Her control in human and spiritual matters, and the nature of the practitioner to the deity. Identifying beliefs, emotions, and themes that are within the verbal expressions of pray-ers is important for a cognitive analysis of prayer. The authors delineate various taxonomies, such as Inward, Upward and Outward, which offer broad categories to organize the psychological and theological content. I found the description of how researchers identified common categories across prayers to be particularly valuable for an initial thematic analysis of Moon's prayers. A more detailed examination of these studies is certainly important toward this end.

Spilka and Ladd argue that the influences of prayer on cognitive processes are manifold and central, whether these are understood as beliefs, experience or behavior. Hence, multi-dimensional indices are critical, including the theological origins of prayers. Religious teachings often speak directly to the motivations for and within the activity of prayer, and its associated meanings for personal and community life. While social scientists have largely avoided introducing theological concerns into a psychological understanding of prayer, the authors propose that, "if we are to fully understand the concept of prayer; specifying its ontological context is critical" (p. 42).

### Future research on prayer

In the final chapter Spilka and Ladd look to the future of research on prayer, offering recommendations on the development of theory as well as methodology. Their detailed assessments and critiques of studies across multiple categories demonstrate a respect for prayer's central place in psychological research. It is challenging for researchers to be dispassionate about the partnering of science and religion, no matter how it is conceived. Spilka and Ladd affirm there will be continuing difficulties in describing limitations, domains of interest and inquiry, and how to best use the findings from scientific studies in both religion and psychology. Thus, "Psychologists of religion must work particularly hard to avoid simply serving institutionalized faith and theology" (p. 164).

Empirical research in this area poses some specific challenges. For example, Spilka and Ladd note the wide range of definitions of prayer across studies and point out that constructs and methodologies exploring prayer may unintentionally support certain theological positions. Some readers will find the critical eye brought to bear on this topic to be refreshingly candid. Others, looking for scientific evidence to support deeply held beliefs about prayer's efficacy, may find it burdensome to harvest pertinent information amongst technical discussions of research methodology. Lay readers are here forewarned that understanding Spilka and Ladd's proposals requires a focused intellectual engagement. In my view, a careful examination of the field should inform and highlight areas for caution or special consideration when using science to support theologically grounded statements. If believers are going to buttress theological positions or the teaching of spiritual practices with social science, it might as well be findings from the most reliable studies.

A Unification perspective resonates with the authors' view that examining prayer psychologically leads to new perspectives on how prayer functions in the human mind, the ways it impacts mental and physical health, and how religious teachings influence the experience of the pray-er. Accordingly, psychological research (empirical or phenomenological) on Moon's prayers will offer important avenues to explore his theology, his sense of self, his identity in relationship to God, his sense of mission, and his understanding of the movement he founded and led. This type of research should be informed by existing scientific theory to contribute to the field and avoid serving institutionalized faith and theology alone. For Unification scholars especially, the potential tendency to hagiography after Moon's recent death needs to be counteracted with an empirically based approach grounded in existing literature and conceptual frameworks.<sup>[5]</sup> This does not mean that it should be limited to existing theory; in fact, the potential to expand and offer new models to understand prayer vis a vis a study of Sun Myung Moon's prayers is important as well.

The largest volume of Moon's prayers in English includes translations from Korean of selected prayers from 1956 to the mid-1990s organized thematically. This text is meant for the reader's edification and understanding of Moon's prayers as "testimonies issuing from the depth of his bones, of Reverend Moon's secret

communications with God.”<sup>[6]</sup> For the researcher, however, this volume provides a rich and vast database from which to explore content within and across prayers uttered over decades. Zin Moon Kim, editor of an earlier text compiling Moon’s prayers, notes the difficulties of translating “the depth of the prayers themselves” from Korean to English.<sup>[7]</sup> Nevertheless, the vast breadth of data available provides researchers with a remarkable primary source from which to develop and test theories, identify psychological and theological content, draw inferences on Moon’s cognition, motivation and personality as a religious innovator, and make contributions toward understanding the nature of prayer itself. Electronic versions of the text allow for organizing the data into time periods or categories related to specific contexts, such as prayers on religious holidays or events that Moon established.

Spilka and Ladd offer many possible directions from which to begin a scientific study of Moon’s prayers. Especially since Moon claimed prophetic and messianic status, an exploration of how he understood himself in relationship to God through the content of his prayers seems highly relevant to both religion and psychology. Applying science to prayer however, requires grounding in one or more theoretical frameworks.

In my view, attribution theory and communication theory can be components of a broad conceptual structure useful as a starting point for studying Moon’s prayers. General attribution theory assumes that (1) people seek to make sense out of their experiences, (2) there is a need to predict or control events, and (3) a desire exists to protect or maintain self concept and self-esteem. Events that “challenge or threaten any of these needs are likely to elicit attributions” (p. 34). In other words, when illness or disaster strikes, there is a greater chance of attributional thoughts and prayer behaviors occurring. Spilka and Ladd believe that attribution theory has much potential for explaining the “why, when and how” of prayerful behavior, even though it has not been directly applied to prayer. Communication theory presents a model that highlights the emotional nuances of prayers and examines how the relationship between the pray-er and God changes. Spilka and Ladd discuss a study that carried out an extensive linguistic analysis of 800 prayers written in the chapel of a pediatric hospital. The analyses looked at variables relating to causality, insight, and positive and negative emotions. “Such work demonstrates considerable potential for similar studies on prayer as it relates to a variety of issues and contexts” (p. 166). Applying communication theory to Moon’s prayers seems to provide yet another possible point from which to begin.

I also found Spilka and Ladd’s three motivational constructs to be relevant for exploring what drives prayer in Moon’s life. The first two concern the intention to connect with others through self-reflection and the search for meaning. Especially noteworthy however, is the third motivational construct—that of “bold assertion,” statements or declarations that challenge the status quo. Spilka and Ladd note that these prayers “possess a sense of entitlement; it takes a strong-willed individual to challenge the manner in which their omnipotent Deity operates” (p. 172). Examining how “bold assertion” operates in Moon’s prayers may be an especially fruitful avenue to pursue understanding his self-concept as a religious leader with a messianic role.

Rev. Chang Shik Yang describes some of Reverend Moon’s prayers as “glorious declarations of victory over Satan, proclaimed in a roaring voice.”<sup>[8]</sup> Along with strong statements of accomplishment or status, Yang observes that Moon’s prayers are “sometimes a lover’s intimate whisper with God and sometimes an expression of genuine parental love for humanity and all God’s creatures.” Clearly, identifying the range and interactions of motivational constructs within Moon’s prayers themselves is an important endeavor. Identifying domains of motivation in Moon’s prayers might lend empirical support to existing theory or expand these with new categories particularly relevant to the psychology of religious leaders.

Unificationists will be appreciative of Spilka and Ladd’s position affirming that scientific investigations of prayer should avoid reductionist views and take seriously prayer’s theological underpinnings as possible sources for generating theory and hypotheses. Theological ideas about God, self, and others both inform prayer and are informed by prayer. Thus, Unification ideas regarding the nature of motivation and cognition can also be used to offer hypotheses in regards to its founder’s prayers. Prayer can be seen as a behavior stemming from a complex interaction of belief and experience, thus offering researchers multi-faceted ways to pursue its motivational, cognitive and social dimensions. *The Psychology of Prayer* provides insights for theory formulation and methodologies important for future empirical research on Moon’s prayers. It is a highly recommended resource for Unification scholars, pastors and believers.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Sun Myung Moon, *Prayers* (New York: HSA Publications, 2000).

[2] Sun Myung Moon, *A Life of Prayer: Prayers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon* (New York: HSA Publications, 1991).

[3] Joong Hyun Pak and Andrew Wilson, *True Family Values* (New York: HSA-UWC, 1996), pp. 163-169.

[4] Anthony J. Guerra, "Unification Liberation Theology," *Unification Theology in Comparative Perspectives* (Barrytown, NY: Unification Theological Seminary, 1988), pp. 129-44. See especially the discussion on Unificationist prayer as revolutionizing in its capacity to help the believer escape a passive role in the divine-human relationship.

[5] Ernie Rea, "The Unification Church," *Beyond Belief*, BBC Radio 4, Jan. 7, 2013. BBC News. This interview and discussion with noted sociologist of new religions Dr. Eileen Barker considers the future of the Unification Church now that its founder and leader, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, has passed away. [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pnmxj](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pnmxj).

[6] Chang Shik Yang, "Foreword," *Prayers*, p. vii.

[7] Zin Moon Kim, "Foreword," *A Life of Prayer*, pp. x-xi.

[8] Yang, "Foreword," p. vii.