

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 72 (2016)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Prayer and the Sense of Divine Presence
Autor: Immink, Gerrit
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-877717>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 17.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Prayer and the Sense of Divine Presence

Prayer is a fascinating religious practice. In all world religions prayer is properly basic and even people who are not religious sometimes pray. The ultimate essence of religion, Feuerbach argues, is revealed by the simplest act of religion – prayer.¹ Although prayer is a basic religious act, it is also a complex phenomenon and puzzling to comprehend. On the one hand, prayer is enacted in the concrete life of common people and expresses their needs and desires. On the other hand it is a genuine religious act, given the fact that the praying person or community addresses God. In prayer the addressee is thoroughly essential. «One cannot describe prayer without describing the power to whom it is addressed.»² In prayer the praying person situates him- or herself in the presence of an invisible God. This act of presentation is twofold: (1) the praying person performs an act of presence (presentation) to the invisible God, and (2) believes that the intended addressee is also present and hears the prayer.

Let us first have a closer look at a more or less phenomenological description of prayer.

Under prayer we understand the primarily «personalistic», dialogical turning of a human being towards his God, to show him his own existence in his need or contentment as the domain of «this» God's activity. [...] We can connect prayer only with the appearance of the Deity. [...] The Deity proves in his revelation to be the bulwark of «salvation».³

In this description two characteristics are noteworthy. First, the idea that in prayer the full range of our earthly existence is seen as the domain where

- 1 L. Feuerbach: *The Essence of Christianity*, translated from the second German edition by M. Evans, London ²1888, 122.
- 2 J.-L. Chrétien: *The Wounded Word: The Phenomenology of Prayer*, in: D. Janicaud (ed.): *Phenomenology and the «Theological Turn». The French Debate*, New York 2000, 149.
- 3 C.H. Ratschow: *Art. Gebet*, TRE 12, Berlin/New York 1984, «Unter Gebet also verstehen wir die vornehmlich «personhafte», dialogische Zuwendung eines Menschen zu seinem Gott, um ihm das eigene Dasein in seiner Bedürftigkeit oder Zufriedenheit als den Wirkungsbereich «dieses» Gottes darzustellen. [...] Vielmehr kann man das Gebet nur mit dem Erscheinen der Gottheit verbinden. [...] Die Gottheit erweist sich in ihrer Epiphanie als Hort des «Heils».» 32.

God is actively involved. People call upon God in their human needs and they thank God for the gifts they receive. It is commonly agreed that petition and thanksgiving are genuine dimensions of prayer. Secondly, prayer is related to the appearance or revelation of God. People call upon God because they expect that their God (as He has made himself known) will deliver from evil and grant gifts of favor.⁴ Consequently, many theologians consider prayer to be an *answer* to God.

Modern and Postmodern Critiques

In our secular age, addressing God as a *Person* and *Agent*, and asking for *divine intervention* is not a popular thought. Our world is for the most part a *disenchanted* world: no God, no spirits, no miracles or divine intervention. In particular the more educated sections of the population apprehend the world in terms of naturalism. As John Searle stated quite bluntly: «For us, the educated members of society, the world has become demystified. Or rather, to put the point more precisely, we no longer take the mysteries we see in the world as expressions of supernatural meaning.»⁵ This type of reasoning resulted in a demythologized mindset – a sort of naturalistic worldview. If religion makes sense, it can only be explained in terms of psychological mechanisms, or social and cultural processes.

The Enlightenment culture criticized prayer as communion with God. One of the most influential philosophers who questioned the existence of God was Immanuel Kant. According to him religion must be explained within the bounds of reason alone and his solution is that «God» only makes sense in the realm of ethics.

Everything mankind fancies he can do, over and above good moral conduct, in order to make himself acceptable to God, is mere false worship of the Deity.⁶

Religion only functions properly as long as we are aware of the fact that it is nothing more than the expression of a state of mind. With respect to an ex-

4 G. Buttrick: *Prayer*, New York 1942, 71; Ratschow: *Art. Gebet* (Anm. 3), 31.

5 J.R. Searle: *Mind, Language and Society. Philosophy in the Real World*, New York 1998, 34f.

6 I. Kant: *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, Kant Werke, Band 7, hg.v. W. Weischedel, Darmstadt 1975, 842; translated out of the original german by W.J. Semple: *Religion within the Boundary of Pure Reason*, Edinburgh 1838, 228.

ternal, objectively existing God, Kant argues, we are totally ignorant. This has consequences for the practice of prayer.

Prayer, regarded as an internal formal worship of the Deity, and so as a means of grace, is a superstitious delusion. It is nothing more than an uttered wish: declared moreover in the presence of a Being who stands in need of no information touching the inward sentiments of the declarant. By prayer there is consequently nothing done...⁷

Religion is reduced to the realm of morality and personal piety. It is Feuerbach, who, in line with Kant, offers a critique of prayer with more psychological depth.

In prayer, man addresses God with the word of intimate affection— *Thou*; he thus declares articulately that God is his *alter ego*; he confesses to God, as the being nearest to him, his most secret thoughts, his deepest wishes, which otherwise he shrinks from uttering.⁸

Prayer is the absolute relation of the human heart to itself, to its own nature; in prayer, man forgets that there exists a limit to his wishes, and is happy in this forgetfulness. Prayer is the self-division of man into two beings, - a dialogue of man with himself, with his heart. [...].⁹

In this train of thought the human subject is the source of religion. Religious performances such as prayer do show up in human history. They probably belong to the infrastructure of the human spirit. We must understand these phenomena, however, as created by the human mind. There is no external reality that corresponds to these human projections. They are just what they are: creations of the mind. Further consequences are *illusions*.

It turns out that Feuerbach, although he supports the project of demythologizing, does acknowledge the human need behind prayer. He deliberates how *God* may play a role in the human self.

7 Kant: Religion innerhalb der Grenzen (Anm. 6), 870-871; Kant: Religion within the Boundary (n. 6), 265

8 Feuerbach: The Essence of Christianity (n. 1), 122.

9 Feuerbach: The Essence of Christianity (n. 1), 123.

Pain must give itself utterance; involuntarily the artist seizes the lute that he may breathe out his sufferings in its tones. He soothes his sorrow by making it audible to himself, by making it objective; he lightens the burden which weighs upon his heart by communicating it to the air, by making his sorrow a general existence. But nature listens not to the complaints of man, it is callous to his sorrows. Hence man turns away from Nature, from all visible objects. He turns within, that here, sheltered and hidden from the inexorable powers, he may find audience for his griefs. Here he utters his oppressive secrets; here he gives vent to his stifled sighs. This open-air of the heart, this outspoken secret, this uttered sorrow of the soul, is God. God is a tear of love, shed in the deepest concealment over human misery.¹⁰

Feuerbach is not saying that God is working in the realm of human heart (in a more Pauline or Augustinian way), but leaves some room for 'God-language' when our deepest desires and longings are at stake.

In postmodern thought 'God' and prayer have a slightly different status. It is clear that God certainly is not understood as a *Supreme Being*. In postmodern thought God, too, is not part of the ontological realm, and, furthermore, there is no solid epistemological basis for belief in God. However, God does play a role as a deconstructive, critical factor. God is understood as the *Wholly Other*, the in-breaking event of the totally new, of the *impossible*.

To quote Caputo: «Just when the *Aufklärers* thought the old God was dead and buried, demythologized, psychoanalyzed, and transformationally criticized into the grave by the light of what they called pure reason alone, the old God returned with a fury, in a veritable resurrection, making a surprising counter-attack that flattened the forces of rationalization and scattered the troops of secularization.»¹¹ When we speak of a return of God, so he argues, we presuppose a previous absence, «as if religion were ever absent from any place other than the godless groves and tenured tracks of academia.»¹²

The return of God is staged in a different style of language. «Cast in a deconstructive slant, God is not the possible, but the impossible, not the eternal, but the futural. To call upon God, to call God's name, to pray and weep and have a passion for God, is to call for the *tout autre...*».¹³

10 Feuerbach: *The Essence of Christianity* (n. 1), 121f.

11 J.D. Caputo: *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion*, Bloomington 1997, 152.

12 Caputo: *Prayers and Tears* (n. 11), 152.

13 Caputo: *Prayers and Tears* (n. 11), 113.

The openness to *the Other* is an important dimension of prayer. In this line of thought Chrétien has criticized Kant and Feuerbach and argues that they presented a human-self-centered *interpretation* of prayer. In a phenomenological description of prayer we must admit that prayer has the form of a conversation and a dialogue, and that it presupposes the «Other» and the notion of a «gift».¹⁴ In this vein Westphal understands prayer as «a deep, quite possibly the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling or, if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with myself».¹⁵ Human existence is eccentric existence.

Human Consciousness and Divine Presence

Prayer is performed in the presupposition that God, even though He may be hidden, is a living reality. As Dalferth states: «Christian faith is *faith in God*, faith in God is *faith in a living God*, and for God to be living God must be *present* and *active*».¹⁶ Prayer, as communion with God, is performed in the conviction that God – as addressed in prayer – is *present* and *active*. How should we comprehend God's active involvement and presence?

In prayer God is the intended referent. Addressing God in prayer has a twofold function: a *referential* and an *evocative* (or *invocative*) one. The praying person or community uses the word «God» or other definite descriptions to refer to *God* as the addressee of prayer.¹⁷ This way they identify God as the object of prayer. At the same time, however, the *presence* of this God is evoked or invoked. In prayer God's presence is awaited as an imagined attendance, as a felt presence and an active involvement (God will hear the prayer). I introduce two ways of describing this divine presence.

First we look at a quotation from Calvin. When we address God in prayer, Calvin says, we invoke the *presence* of his providence, of his power and his goodness; even more strongly, we invoke God to *manifest* himself to us in all his perfections. By prayer

14 Chrétien: *The Wounded Word* (n. 2), 147-175.

15 M. Westphal: *Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self*, in: B.E. Benson / N. Wirzba (ed.): *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, New York 2005, 14.

16 I.U. Dalferth: *Becoming Present. An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God*, Leuven/Paris 2006, 39.

17 I.U. Dalferth / Philipp Stoellger (Hg.): *Gott nennen: Gottes Namen und Gott als Name*, Tübingen 2008, 9-12.

we invoke the presence of his providence to watch over our interests, of his power to sustain us when weak and almost fainting, of his goodness to receive us into favor, though miserably loaded with sin; in fine, call upon him to manifest himself to us in all his perfections. Hence, admirable peace and tranquility are given to our consciences...¹⁸

In these various forms of presence, Calvin says, we experience God's-work-in-us. And this results in a certain mode of our state-of-mind: an amazing peace and tranquility. Hence, Calvin suggests that in prayer we invoke God's presence, and the praying person or community experiences this presence. We experience forgiveness and guidance.

In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* the American philosopher / psychologist William James describes religious experiences of all kinds of people. In his study he makes some remarkable comments on what he calls the «objects» of our religious consciousness. Although this reality is «unseen», it nevertheless has a very strong influence on us. He describes these experiences as the experience of a *presence*.

It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call «*something there*,» more deep and more general than any of the special and particular «senses» by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.¹⁹

It is James' intention to show that the reality of the «unseen» elicits a *reaction* in the lives of the faithful. The objects of religious experience, however, are, according to James, more or less abstract – not demonstrable in a concrete way. «It has been vouchsafed, for example, to very few Christian believers to have had a sensible vision of their Saviour; [...] The whole force of the Christian religion, therefore, so far as belief in the divine personages determines the prevalent attitude of the believer, is in general exerted by the instrumentality of pure ideas, of which nothing in the individual's past experience directly serves as a model.»²⁰ That these experiences of Presence are not demonstrable like «normal» sense perceptions does, according to James, not make them illusory.

18 Calvin: Institutes, III.20.2.

19 W. James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Glasgow ¹²1985, 73.

20 James: *Varieties* (n. 19), 69.70

Divine Presence Reconsidered

In his discussion of the reality of the unseen, James follows the current Kantian vocabulary. He emphasizes the fact that the objects of religious experience have meaning primarily *for our practices*. And he asks himself whether the awareness of God could be caused by the instrumentality of *pure ideas*?

But is it really true that the awareness of God is caused either by pure ideas or by sensual perception? And if both sources are improper sources with respect to our human knowledge of God (as Kant argued), how should we then appraise religious experience and our sense of God? It is clear that James himself does not treat religious experience in a reductionist way. Religion means *«the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine»*.²¹ He is, however, very critical of the role of reason and conceptualization with respect to religious experiences. «If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. [...] The inferiority of the rationalistic level in founding belief is just as manifest when rationalism argues for religion as when it argues against it.» [...] «Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow.»²² James seems to hold that the awareness of God is a sort of intuitive knowledge, a sense perception that transcends the normal five sensual senses. He considers the stories of people who report «a felt presence of God» not as illusions, rather as a form of *mystical perception*.

Calvin does not dismiss the role of the faculties of the mind in the act of faith. But these faculties are, according to him, shortcoming with respect to things divine. «Therefore, as we cannot possibly come to Christ unless drawn by the Spirit, so when we are drawn we are both in mind and spirit exalted far above our own understanding.»²³ Calvin holds that God is working *in us*, by means of the Holy Spirit as the internal teacher. This inward working is such that we apprehend and taste the benefits of Christ. Thus our human spirit is enlightened through the Holy Spirit, and this enlightenment implies *a change of mind*. Not a destruction of the human faculties, but a regeneration. «For the soul, when illumined by him, receives as it were a new eye, enabling it to contemplate heavenly mysteries, by the splendor of which it was previously

21 James: *Varieties* (n. 19), 50.

22 James: *Varieties* (n. 19), 88.

23 Calvin: *Institutes*, III.2.34.

dazzled. And thus, indeed, it is only when the human intellect is irradiated by the light of the Holy Spirit that it begins to have a taste of those things, which pertain to the kingdom of God; previously it was too stupid and senseless to have any relish for them.»²⁴

The things of our salvation are too lofty to be perceived by our senses and therefore we can only experience them when we transcend «the reach of our own intellect, and raise our eye above all worldly objects». But how can the mind rise to such a perception and foretaste of the divine goodness? This happens when we are wholly inflamed with love to God. «The abundance of joy which God has treasured up for those who fear him cannot be truly known without making a most powerful impression. He who is thus once affected is raised and carried entirely towards him.»²⁵ Hence, according to Calvin, the human mind is inspired by the Holy Spirit, receives a taste for the love of God and transcends the limits of the ordinary.

Aspects of God's Presence

For a proper comprehension of the notion of Divine Presence we have to consider two questions that are related to this phenomenon. One question pertains to the faculties through which we perceive or apprehend God. Are human beings for their faith in God utterly dependent upon two sources, namely our *ratio* and our *sense perception*? The second topic deals with the question whether our concepts do apply to God.

Alston has argued that God, or some activity or aspect of God, might be presented or given *directly* to our experience.²⁶ Prior to our awareness of God, so he argues, there might be, under certain circumstances, a presentation, or a givenness of God. This presentation occurs prior to all conceptualization and expression in language. Alston further holds that we might become aware of this givenness of God by some kind of *non-sensory mystical perception*. Why, so he says, suppose that the possibilities of experiential given-

24 Calvin: Institutes, III.2.34.

25 Calvin: Institutes, III.2.41.

26 W.P. Alston: Christian Experience and Christian Belief, in: A. Plantinga / N. Wolterstorff (ed.): Faith and Rationality. Reason and Belief in God, Notre Dame 1983, 103-134; W.P. Alston: Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience, New York/London 1991.

ness are exhausted by the powers of our five senses?²⁷ According to him there is a kind of presentation that contrasts with conceptually structured perception and is also devoid of sensory content. It is a *direct apprehension* of God and not an *interpretation* that results from the perception of some other object than God. «Mystical perception is direct in the same way as (face-to-face) sense perception of objects; the object is not perceived through the perception of some other object, but there is nevertheless a distinction between *the conscious experience* involved and *the object perceived*.»²⁸ Thus, in this type of mystical perception there is no fusion between the human consciousness and God. But it is, nevertheless, a direct experiential awareness of God, originating in an act of presentation by God.

Arguing this way, Alston deals in a positive way with experiences of people who say to have felt the presence of God, people who saw God with the eyes of the soul. According to him a believer can be in touch with God. This type of direct awareness or mystical perception, however, does not exclude other types of awareness, such as cognitive awareness by means of conceptual representation or indirect perception by the senses. But it does indicate that a believer can experience the presence of God and be in touch with God or with workings of God.

A second aspect regards the question whether or not our concepts do apply to God. In the Kantian tradition and in some theological circles it is quite common to hold that our concepts do not apply to God. God is Wholly Other, far beyond the reach of the conceptual structures of the human mind and far beyond our sense perception. God is utterly transcendental, beyond the reach of experience and language. But then the question arises what we are doing when we call upon God in prayer. What are we doing when we name Him and designate Him with definite descriptions? I hold that we do indeed refer to God when we name Him, and that we have a certain grasp of the attributes of God, and that in and through our comprehension of these characteristics we do know God as He really is (although our knowledge is limited), namely the benevolent, gracious and righteous God. I cannot go into detail here, but these questions have a long history in philosophical theology. If we want to do justice to the practice of prayer and to Christian

27 Alston: *Perceiving God* (n. 26), 17.

28 Alston: *Perceiving God* (n. 26), 35.

faith, we need a form of *external realism* with respect to these issues.²⁹ With the word *«God»* we refer to the divine subject, and with our concepts we do refer to divine perfections. Unlike Feuerbach I hold that God is not a human projection, but an independent divine being. And in this sense God is an *object* of our awareness and an identifiable *referent*.

These dimensions are important in the practice of prayer for more than one reason. First, the sense of God – even as far as it is understood as a mental state – is not merely emotion, or desire, though doubtless emotion and desire accompany it. Awareness of God, even as a mental state, has a conceptual element in it.³⁰ Secondly, in prayer and in religious belief people have an awareness *of God*. They claim to be in touch with God. God's transcendence should not be understood as so utterly other that His character and His perfections are beyond our ken. Thirdly, prayer presupposes a two-fold relationship between the human and God: reciprocity and asymmetry. In prayer there is hearing and speaking, petition and answer, lament and silence. However, there is also a sense of dependence on the part of the praying person. This is expressed, for example, in the notions of creation and salvation. Fourthly, the existence of God as a divine subject cannot be separated from the *«workings»* or effects in the human realm. It is remarkable that Feuerbach only calls him really an atheist who denies the divine subject.³¹ He somehow seems to appreciate the *«workings»* of divine predicates such as love, wisdom and justice. For a praying community, however, subject and predicates (perfections) cannot be separated, because the praying community addresses God as the subject of these benefits. And, furthermore, prayer is surrounded by a practice of *contemplation*, a practice that is focused on God and the benefits He bestowed upon us.³²

Therefore, prayer as a personal address of God entails a sense of God's presence.

29 F.G. Immink: *Faith. A Practical Theological Reconstruction*, Grand Rapids 2005, 238-266.

30 J. Baillie: *The Sense of the Presence of God*, London/Toronto 1962, 89.

31 Feuerbach: *Essence of Christianity* (n. 1), 14.21.

32 H.U. von Bathasar: *Das betrachtende Gebet*, Einsiedeln 52003.

Abstract

Prayer is a basic religious practice. Understood as communion with God, prayer presupposes a certain awareness or experience of God. How can we apprehend this divine presence? This article deals with modern and postmodern critiques on prayer and searches for a genuine understanding of divine presence in the act of prayer. Both John Calvin and William James may serve as possible models for the reflection on God's presence.

Gerrit Immink, Groningen