

Are You There, God? It's Me, the Theist: On the Viability and Virtue of Non-Doxastic Prayer

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1. Introduction

The idea of “non-believing prayer” sounds strange to many contemporary Christian ears. Can one really be said to pray (or to pray authentically) if one doesn’t believe in the existence or proposed attributes of the addressee of one’s prayer? Certainly at least some of the ways we tend to think about prayer appear at first glance to rule this possibility out. Take, for example, the popular analogy employed in some evangelical circles comparing the act of praying to making a “phone call to God”: If prayer were really a kind of “telephone to glory”¹, it might appear rather odd for someone to try to make such a “call” if they didn’t think anyone was listening on the other end of the line. Indeed, if we think that praying, like acts of trusting or thanking, essentially involves taking up a *second-personal attitude*—viewing and addressing God as a “You”—it might appear necessary for one to presuppose the existence of some object to which (or, better, some *subject to whom*) these attitudes are addressed. Certainly, we do appear to be able to experience certain emotions and attitudes regarding characters and settings we take to be unreal in the fictional contexts of, e.g., literature and film,² but we rarely find ourselves taking on second-personal attitudes when reading books or watching movies. Were someone to say she “trusts” Harry Potter, or “is angry at” Captain Kirk, or “is grateful to” Jane Eyre, we might be more inclined to think that

¹ Compare the lyrics to the song “Royal Telephone” made famous by singers like Jimmy Little and Burl Ives: *Telephone to glory, oh, what joy divine! / I can feel the current moving on the line / Made by God the Father for His very own / You may talk to Jesus on this royal telephone.*

² Cp. Tamar Szabó Gendler and Karson Kovakovich, “Genuine Rational Fictional Emotions,” in Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 241–53.

she is either not speaking seriously or that she has somehow confused fiction with reality. So what are we to say about the feasibility of non-doxastic prayer? Is it possible for someone to pray agnostically or skeptically? And, if so, can their prayer be sincere and fitting? Or is such a person nothing more than a foolish, perhaps even pathological, “babbling” whose talk is mere “mischievous madness”?³

In what follows, I want to investigate these questions in more detail. Since much depends on the way we understand prayer and the function(s) it may serve in the religious life, I will first provide a working definition of theistic prayer. With this understanding of prayer in hand, I will proceed to discuss a few different types of prayer, and I will explore the ways in which these kinds of prayer may legitimately be performed non-doxastically. If I am right, it may turn out that belief⁴ is not always—or perhaps even usually—required for a subject to sincerely engage in prayer of various sorts. I will then take this claim even further by suggesting how what I call “prayerful pretense” might, in some circumstances, even be more virtuous than prayer proceeding from full doxastic certitude in the existence of the kind of God who could be the recipient of such forms of human prayer.

2. A Working Definition of Theistic Prayer

Providing a strict definition of prayer is by no means an easy task. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on theistic prayer. Still, since some of the criteria I set out below may be less than obvious, it will be helpful to briefly examine the motivations for insisting on these features of

³ Cp. Ecclesiastes 10:11-13.

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I will understand ‘belief’ as referring to a propositional cognitive attitude that involves something like near-certainty or at least credence above some relevant threshold on the part of the believing subject.

prayer and not others and to examine them individually to understand their respective significance for understanding what prayer is and does.

(1) Mediality: Prayer is most generally a *relational* activity. It is something in which religious participants actively engage (as opposed to a state in which they find themselves), and it aims at placing the human being in relation to that which is viewed as sacred. It is thus “medial” in a few senses. First, prayer provides a *medium by which* the aforementioned two-place relation may arise. Second, it can serve to *mediate content* from the subject(s) to the object. Third, prayer can also play a therapeutic, or *re-medial*, role for the subject(s) themselves. It can provide hope or be a comfort; it can foster confidence or aid (self-)reflection; it can reconcile one person to another or bring disparate individuals together in solidarity.

(2) Positionality and unidirectionality: Despite being relational, prayer is not, in the first instance, a two-way street. It is a “positional” act, in that the particular situation or standpoint of the praying subject(s) matters to understanding what is being done and is directed outward in ways expressive of that situatedness. As Augustine writes, prayer is “the mind’s affectionately *reaching out toward* God.”⁵ In this affective and expressive “reaching out,” Augustine gestures at another important feature of prayer, namely its “unidirectionality”. There are several reasons for prayer’s being best understood as one-directional. First, it is not necessary that prayer be responded to, nor even that it be received by that at which it is directed, to count as prayer. I can pray to Krishna for strength without Krishna answering my prayer. Moreover, I can even be said to pray to Krishna if

⁵ Cf. *Sermo IX*, in the appendix to Augustine of Hippo, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini, Hipponensis Episcopi, Sermones Inediti: Cura et studio D. A. B. Caillau* (Paris: Paul Mellier, 1842), 87 (my emphasis).

it turns out that Krishna does not exist to receive my prayer.⁶ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, any possible response by the addressee of a particular prayer is not itself an instance of prayer. While it is fitting to say that the people pray to God, it would be inaccurate—and potentially *inappropriate*—to say that God prays to the people in response.⁷

(3) Reverence: Part of what would make it unfitting to speak of God as praying to the people has to do with the way that the relationship of human beings to the Divine is conceptualized in prayer contexts. Prayer is, in some sense, a *deferential* activity. As Teresa of Avila writes in *The Interior Castle*, “[A]nyone who has the habit of speaking before God's majesty as though he were speaking to a slave, without being careful to see how he is speaking, but saying whatever comes to his head and whatever he has learned from saying at other times, in my opinion is not praying.”⁸ In this sense, then, prayer is an activity in which the addressee of the prayer is conceived of as standing in a relationship of perceived superiority to the praying subject, whether that superiority take the form of power, knowledge, love, or greatness (or all of the above, as we find in much monotheistic perfect-being theology). Yet the term ‘deferential’ may connote a kind of obsequiousness or submissiveness that need not accompany prayer in all its forms. A better term to connote this attitudinal orientation is perhaps “reverential”. Acting reverentially is a way of taking the action in question (and its objects) seriously, in a way that acknowledges the purported inequality of the two relata of the prayer relation. But it also allows that one may adopt a *negatively-valenced stance* toward the inequality in question. In some cases, it may be the very manifestations of the relevant

⁶ Note that this is distinct from whether I can pray to Krishna without *believing* that Krishna exists (or exists as the kind of thing that could respond to prayer). I think the former idea is fairly uncontroversial. I take up the latter below.

⁷ For an alternative viewpoint, compare Katherine Sonderegger’s essay in this volume.

⁸ Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila: Volume 2*, Trans. by K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1980), 286.

inequality that are under discussion in the prayer itself (as, perhaps, with the lament of Job). In some cases, then, reverential prayer might not inappropriately express attitudes of complaint, lamentation, anger, resignation, or even accusation.⁹

(4) *Second-Person Directionality*: Finally, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, theistic prayer is “second-personal”. This should not be understood as meaning that prayer is always addressed to some particular person, but rather that the praying subject (whether verbally or non-verbally) adopts a second-personal voice and/or stance with respect to the sacred or divine. In this sense, then, although prayer is unidirectional, it is not monological. The “grammar” of prayer is importantly *dialogical* in the sense that it manifests a unidirectional “I-Thou” stance.¹⁰ Speaking *to* is importantly different from speaking *about*: The stance involved in treating the second relatum of the prayer relation as a “You” who is being addressed is essential to an activity’s being a prayer and not some other form of activity. At the same time, prayer is *not* dialogical in the sense that the two relata of the prayer relation necessarily engage in mutual dialogue with one another.¹¹ Literally speaking or conversing *with* God is not the same as praying *to* the divine. Moses did not pray in his “face to face” encounter with God (Exodus 33:11). Likewise, merely responding to divine calls or exhortations do not, by themselves, constitute instances of praying. Thus Adam’s responses to God’s queries in the Garden are excluded (Genesis 3:10ff), as is

⁹ For more on this idea, see Oliver Crisp’s and Kevin Timpe’s essays in this volume.

¹⁰ Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by R.G. Smith (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010 [1923]).

¹¹ This understanding of theistic prayer diverges from that of William James, who defined prayer as “every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine.” Cf. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 399-400.

Samuel's initial response, "Here I am," to the divine call (1 Samuel 3), even if both involve taking up a second-personal stance toward God.¹²

(5) *Absentiality*: Prayer's one-way dialogicity does not mean that it cannot be one way of responding to events viewed under the aspect of special divine action. Indeed, one may react to the feeling that one has been divinely called, blessed, or even cursed by falling to one's knees in prayerful worship, gratitude, or repentance. Moreover, many of those engaged in prayer hope for, invite, or even expect some sort of response on behalf of the divine, and on many theological views God does commonly answer prayer. Nevertheless, there is also a very real sense in which prayer itself is an activity that takes place in the *absence* of the addressee. One way of understanding this absence is to point to the radical metaphysical distance between the human being and the sacred as perceived by the praying subject and manifested in her reverence.

Of course, the absence of the addressee of prayer may also refer to a God who is perceived as *hidden*. Perceptions of divine hiddenness may even represent one occasion for undertaking prayer in the first place. Indeed, a central function of some forms of prayer may be to *remedy* ("remediate") the gap between the praying subject and the hidden God—to achieve a kind of mutual

¹² Merold Westphal, by contrast, views prayer as a fundamentally *responsive* activity to acts of divine speech. he concedes that Samuel's 'Here I am' is "only the beginning of a performative" that is completed in a second speech-act, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Cf. Merold Westphal, "Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self," in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (eds.), *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 13–32, at 19.

While I agree that the second speech-act, when combined with the first, might legitimately be understood as the opening to a prayer, I do not think that *merely* by taking on a second-personal stance and responding deferentially to a divine call one has automatically engaged in praying. Further, I am hesitant to make *all* prayer a matter of responding to some perceived divine speech-act. Indeed, as I note, it can be a sense of divine *absence* that elicits the occasion for prayer.

communion with that which is perceived to be absent.¹³ Still, it seems important to distinguish the act of prayer itself from the intersubjective, experiential communion that can serve as one of its ends. While prayer may sometimes represent the occasion by which one comes to commune discursively with God, it itself is an act that necessarily takes seriously the distance between humankind and the sacred. Where this gap is wholly eliminated, it might seem inappropriate to speak of prayer, *per se*.

Ultimately, then we may understand theistic prayer as a *(re)medial, positional, unidirectional, and reverential activity by which human beings second-personally and dialogically relate themselves to a representation of the sacred in the perceived absence of the direct presence of that which is represented*. This definition points to significant features of prayer that can assist us in better classifying it among religious practices and distinguishing it from other kinds of religious activities. For example, on my definition prayer may be understood as a form of worship, yet one distinct from mere praise (which need not be second-personal) or communion (which is not unidirectional).

3. Forms and Functions of Theistic Prayer

The above definition allows us to delineate an entire spectrum of activities that might be appropriately called “prayer”. In this section, I would like to name a few prominent forms that fall under this definitional umbrella and discuss the possible functions that such prayerful activities

¹³ Compare the study of evangelical Christians in which participants reported “that during a typical time of prayer in daily life, they felt the presence of God within one minute or less of starting prayer.” Raymond L. Neubauer, “Prayer as an Interpersonal Relationship. A Neuroimaging Study,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 4/2 (2014), 92–103, at 97.

might serve. This will put us in a better position to examine the possibility of non-doxastic prayer in the next section.

3.1 Contemplative Prayer: *Oratio quaerens intellectum*

Much contemplative and devotional literature in theistic traditions takes on an explicitly reverent, unidirectional, second-personal form. For example, Pseudo-Dionysius opens the *Mystical Theology* with a prayer to the Trinity, and there is an entire collection of 12th-century Jewish philosophical prayers, addressing God as, e.g., the “Cause of Causes” or “the First of the First and the Eternal of the Eternal,” in which subjects pray to better understand God and nature while being protected from ignorance.¹⁴ It is also not of little significance that Anselm of Canterbury’s famous ontological argument in the *Proslogion* is embedded within the larger context of a prayer.¹⁵ In Chapter 1 of the *Proslogion* Anselm begins with a reverent second-personal reflection on divine absence, emphasizing the unidirectionality (and potential futility) of his contemplative endeavor:

Come now, O lord my God. Teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. Lord, if you are not here, where shall I seek you, since you are absent?
[...] Lord, you are my God [...] but I have never seen you. You have made me and

¹⁴ Cp. Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 183f.; Y. Tzvi Langermann, “A Collection of Jewish Philosophical Prayers,” in Javier Castaño, Talya Fishman, and Ephraim Kanarfogel (eds.), *Regional Identities and Cultures of Medieval Jews* (London: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 263–84.

¹⁵ Cp. Marilyn Adams, “What's Wrong with the Ontotheological Error?,” *Journal of Analytic Theology*, 2 (2014), 1–12.

remade me, you have given me every good thing that is mine, and still I do not know you.¹⁶

Here, Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum* is not a cool-headed third-personal reflection on the existence and nature of the divine. It is a deeply personal—in fact, second-personal—contemplative exercise that aims, not to arrive at some abstract propositional truth about the Deity but rather at an intimate and profound *understanding* of what that God could be. Understanding here is not just a cognitive achievement; it is also deeply affective and sensual. It is a way of “reaching out” to grasp the divine by contemplating it second-personally. It is thus no accident that the *Proslogion* concludes with both cognitive and affective second-personal language, and with the sensual metaphors of hunger and thirst.¹⁷ In this sense, then, contemplative prayer can serve to increase understanding and love of the divine.

Yet the aim of prayerful contemplation need not only concern the divine. One may also thereby arrive at important truths about one's own self and what one is in contrast to that which is prayerfully contemplated. Through the act of prayer, then, one may also better come to understand the *self and its place in the world*. This is not a trivial point, insofar as the exhortation of classical philosophy to *know thyself* has been inextricably tied to understanding of the divine in classical theism and mysticism. And prayer is one means of bridging this gap in understanding, with the

¹⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, “Proslogion,” in Arthur Hyman, James J. Walsh, and Thomas Williams (eds.), *Philosophy in the Middle Ages. The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2010), 161–81, at 161.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

result that one comes to know both God and oneself better through contemplating the divine reverentially in the second person.¹⁸

3.2 Ritualized Prayer: Orientation, Affirmation, and “Being For”

A further category of prayerful activity is that of ritual prayer. Whereas the goal of contemplative prayer has primarily to do with *understanding*, ritualized prayer has more to do with (re-)orienting the *will* of the praying subjects in various ways. Some ritualistic prayers are predominantly devotional or penitential, as perhaps with the *Ave Maria* in Roman Catholicism or the Vedic prayers in Hinduism. Others are embedded within the liturgical context of collective worship, and involve patterns and sequences of actions such as blessing, petitioning, and offering thanks,¹⁹ as well as acts of confessing, declaring, promising, even lamenting. Some are prescribed, as with the *salat* in Islam or the *tefillah* in Judaism, others offer a script for expression in various liturgical and private contexts (as, perhaps, with the Lord’s Prayer).

Ritualized prayer carries what Terence Cuneo calls *expressive import*: Like other ritual activities, its “function is not [merely] to state propositions but to express respect, affection, gratitude, and the like.”²⁰ Additionally, it is characterized by its essentially *embodied, repetitive, and public* nature. While in principle performable by individual subjects in private, ritualized praying is nonetheless a fundamentally *social* act, insofar as it arises diachronically out of the norms, values,

¹⁸ For more on the relationship between prayer and self-knowledge, see Adam Green’s essay in this volume.

¹⁹ Terence Cuneo claims these three acts constitute the “central pattern” of the Christian Orthodox liturgy. Cf. Terence Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 156.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

and communal practices of particular religious traditions. It is endorsed and practiced by the religious community, and it also serves to bind that community together through shared practice.

Importantly, as Cuneo notes, the content of what is expressed through these embodied public acts of prayer need not match up to some corresponding mental state in the agent performing them in order to be successful. I need not occurrently feel grateful to efficaciously utter a ritual prayer of thanks, nor need I presently be in a state of awe when reciting a prayer of praise. Although ideally the attitudes expressed in ritual prayer would match up with those of the subjects performing the prayer, the fact that we are not always in an affective position to feel the way we ought, points to one of the further functions of ritualized prayer—namely that, as Howard Wettstein notes, “we need not wait until the appropriate [affective] experiences present themselves” to be able to engage with God liturgically.²¹ We can meet the criteria of prayer set out above, even if we cannot wholly instantiate the feelings and thoughts such prayers appropriately express. Moreover, even where fitting religious feelings *are* present, Wettstein claims, ritual prayer gives subjects the tools to speak meaningfully and appropriately about their experiences—to give voice to their feelings and relate themselves in fitting ways to the sacred.²² Indeed, given that we are not always especially adept at taking up appropriate second-personal attitudes toward the divine, the repetitive structures of ritualized prayer can help us express ourselves in ways suitable to the nature of the relationship in question.

In this sense, ritualized, repetitive prayer can serve to direct and re-orient the will in ways that productively prime attitudes and actions which relate us fittingly to God. Even if one is just “going

²¹ Howard K. Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 45. See also Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, 160.

²² Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience*, 45.

through the motions” during worship services, such mundane engagement with ritualized prayer can, as Cuneo points out, both encourage “the regularization of attitudes to which it so ably gives voice”²³ and, over time, provide one with the “ritual knowledge” of “how to engage God in ways that are fitting.”²⁴ It allows religious subjects to affirm and re-affirm the tenets of faith in ways that can appropriately relate them to a God whose transcendence makes second-personal address difficult, even in cases where the relevantly normed attitudes and emotions might be occurrently absent.

But ritualized prayer can do more than orient our wills toward the sacred. It can also improve our volitional situation with regard to our fellow human beings. Especially when we pray such prayers *together*, we are engaging in a kind of *collective symbolic action*. And in so doing, we are also able to performatively declare that we stand for the good and in solidarity with one another.²⁵ Ritualized prayer, then, can provide us with a means to move our attention away from our egoistic attachments to our own concerns and to refocus our wills on the wellbeing of others. It shifts us from what Cuneo calls an “ethics of proximity” toward an “ethic of outwardness,” where “by standing in solidarity with the marginalized we ally ourselves with what are, according to the scriptural narrative, God’s purposes.”²⁶ Thus loving God and loving others becomes embodied in a single act of symbolic prayer.

3.3 Personal Prayer: Forging Intimacy

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, 164.

²⁵ Cp. Robert M. Adams, “Symbolic Value,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 21/1 (1997), 1–15; see also Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, 29–33.

²⁶ Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, 29, 30, 33.

Finally, there are forms of prayer in which the *personal* nature of the relationship between the individual and the sacred takes center stage. Whereas contemplative prayer pursues understanding, and ritualized prayer aims at volitional, affective, and/or cognitive re-orientation, the function of personal prayer has more to do with forging a deeply affective and intimate relationship with the divine. To be sure, both contemplative and ritualized prayer may be deeply personal in this way, but this category may also include less-structured, more “informal” individualistic forms of prayer that correspond more closely to the telephone model we considered at the outset of this paper.

Such prayer takes very seriously the second-personal aspect, sometimes in ways that appear to sacrifice the absence condition we postulated above. Wettstein, for example, compares traditional Jewish prayer to “a thrice daily audience with God,”²⁷ which—although compatible with the unidirectionality of prayer—appears to imply that prayer puts one in the presence of the divine in a more literal way than that of merely contemplating or symbolically standing for something. Here, one stands in prayer before God as one stands before a thing of great majesty—namely, in *awe*.

In what appears to be an even more stark divergence from the definition of prayer we gave above, the evangelical Vineyard Christians studied by anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann engage in prayerful exercises aimed at coming to hear the voice of God in their everyday lives: Congregants spend time “chatting” with God, going on “date night” with God, even “singing” with God in the shower.²⁸ In other words, they view prayer not as Wettstein does, as a way of standing in second-person awe of the glory of the divine, but more as a way of engaging God as one would a close friend. God is addressed as a concrete object who is familiar, responsive, and above all *personal*.

²⁷ Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience*, 47.

²⁸ Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 80-83.

This is neither the God of classical theism nor that of the apophatic mystics. This is a personal God who regularly acts—and *interacts*—with religious individuals, not as an exception but as a rule.

While such an understanding of prayer maintains the relational, (re)medial and second-personal aspects of prayer, it appears to stand in direct tension with the unidirectionality and absence conditions. Further, it might even be viewed by some Christians as moving in the direction of irreverence (if not blasphemy), insofar as it transforms the unsurpassable God of classical theism or the unknowable God of apophatic mysticism into an intimate (and wholly immanent), super-powerful “best buddy,” with whom one can “chat,” “go on dates,” and “sing”. How are we to square this common contemporary understanding of private, personal, intersubjective prayer with the definition we gave above?

One option is to simply revise our definition of theistic prayer by jettisoning the unidirectionality and absence clauses (and perhaps rethinking what counts as reverence). This is certainly a theoretical option, but it is then unclear what prayer is supposed to be and how it is to be distinguished from other religious (or mundane) activities. Another possibility is to suppose that the conversational model of the Vineyard Christians conflates prayer and communion—that what such congregations have in mind when they talk about “prayer” is ideally more like Enoch’s walking with God than Hannah’s entreaty to the divine. Here, “practicing prayer” as we defined it above may still be extremely helpful in opening one up to the possibility of genuine interaction with God in ways that other, less (second-)personal spiritual exercises are not. But on such an account, prayer is best viewed as an important *antecedent* to communion, not as a matter of communion itself.

At the same time, it is not clear that this is what such evangelicals have in mind. Their kind of prayer, they think, actually involves *dialogue*, not just dialogicity. God is personally encountered *in the act of prayer itself* and interacts with the subject in real time. Indeed, I think there is a perhaps more charitable understanding of what is going on in the evangelical case than a mere conflation of prayer with communion. And I suspect that a closer inspection of what might be understood by “non-doxastic prayer” can provide us one way of understanding how the evangelical conversational model can appropriately meet the absence and unidirectionality requirements of the definition of prayer we gave above without doing too much damage to the reverence condition and making of prayer an unrecognizable, potentially blasphemous charade. I will return to this idea shortly, but first it will be instructive to see just how non-doxastic prayer might be possible in the first place.

4. “I and Thou”: Commitment, Imagination, and Prayerful Pretense

It is my contention that non-doxastic prayer is not only possible, it is both actual and fairly common in the religious sphere. To see how this might be so, a few preliminary comments are in order.

First, and most generally, it is important to see that religion is not—or is not just—a set of propositions to be believed.²⁹ Although most organized religion traditions have certain core propositions they take to be fundamental, particular religious traditions are always more than the sum of these propositions. And while analytic philosophy of religion has largely focused its energies on questions surrounding the rationality of religious belief, Cuneo rightly points out that “this tendency threatens to offer a distorted picture of the religious life,” since most religious practice on the ground is “concerned not so much with being in this type of doxastic state with

²⁹ On this point, cf. also Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, 18.

respect to propositions about God as with conducting oneself in certain ways with respect to God that count as engaging God, and knowing how to conduct oneself in those ways.”³⁰ Understood in this sense, Cuneo thinks, the religious life is best characterized as “thoroughly practical.”³¹

Instead of characterizing religion as a set of propositional candidates for belief, then, a much more promising correlate attitude for religious faith is not belief but rather something like *commitment*—not only to the propositions of the tradition in question but also to the rituals, practices, persons, and norms of that tradition. This non-doxastic understanding of faith places more emphasis on the affective and volitional aspects of the religious life rather than the merely cognitive elements. And while believing the propositions of a religious tradition with a high level of certainty *might* make one more likely to commit oneself to that tradition,³² one need not fully take them on board as true to commit oneself to them. One may not even think the propositions are much more likely to be true than their denial to be so committed.³³ Such commitment, then, when combined with a hopeful or other minimally positively-valenced attitude toward the content of the relevant propositions,³⁴ can be sufficient to ground the practical orientation that makes up the life of faith.

Yet commitment by itself does not go all the way to explaining how someone can engage in second-personal religious activities such as prayer. Even if one is affectively inclined toward and

³⁰ Ibid., 165.

³¹ Ibid., 148.

³² It need not. One could be wholly convinced by the truth of some religion and be motivated to do absolutely nothing. Or one might, as with Ivan Karamazov, choose to rebel. Thus, belief is not sufficient for religious faith. The question here is whether it is necessary.

³³ Cf. Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, 215-16, n.2.

³⁴ Compare Daniel Howard-Snyder’s claim that one can be said to have faith that p “only if one cares that p and one is for p’s truth, at least in the sense that one considers p’s truth to be good or desirable.” Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Propositional Faith. What It Is and What It Is Not,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 50/4 (2013), 357–72, at 360. I take up the attitude of hope again below.

volitionally committed to such activities, how can one *authentically* pray in a theistic context, if one is unsure, agnostic, or skeptical that the addressee of the prayer is there? Here, the cognitive element of religion again becomes important—yet it is not the attitude of religious belief that matters in this context but rather that of the religious *imagination*. To get religious concepts cognitively “off the ground” in the first place takes a feat of imagination on the part of the religious participant, be she a full believer or a committed non-believer. The concept of a non-corporeal creator and sustainer of the universe who “embodies” certain characteristics such as power, wisdom, and love; of an “eternal person” outside of all time who can respond to human beings in time and act specially in the world; of a trinity or a *deus homo*; of a *God* who cares about this world and its inhabitants—all this is impossible without the imagination, at least if religion is to be *meaningful* to the religious subject. Religion is enshrouded in metaphor and narrative, in allegory and myth, in image and story. Stripped of these aspects, it ceases to *matter* for us; it ceases to be something we *care* about committing ourselves to.

Prayer is no exception here. The act of praying is so fundamental to the theistic religious life that a theistic tradition without prayer might seem somehow empty. Prayer is one of the central ways in which human beings relate themselves to what they conceive of as sacred, and its active character makes it easy to understand why. In praying, *we* are the ones who engage God; *we* call out to a “Thou,” to a distant yet somehow familiar someone. Prayer makes us active participants in the divine-human relationship, be it imagined or real (or both). Indeed, even for the individual who believes in God with full conviction, being able to take up such a stance with respect to the divine requires a significant degree of imagination. To relate to God, we need something immanent, something *relatable*, which is what the religious imagination provides in prayer: It gives

the religious subject a way to cognitively and affectively “reach out toward the divine” through second-personal address.

But can one really take up a second-personal stance with respect to a metaphor? Can one speak of praising, thanking, or petitioning, if one does not think there is someone to whom these attitudes are addressed? As I mentioned at the outset, although we may experience emotions with regard to fictional characters in literature and film, we rarely take up second-personal attitudes toward them. Yet second-personal imaginative stances are all around us. Children are experts at devising imaginary friends to whom they speak and with whom they interact. Even adults tend to anthropomorphize inanimate and non-personal objects in second-personal ways: We yell at our computers when they malfunction, coax our cars into starting on a cold day, speak to our pets as if they understood our complex thoughts, and scold our Roombas when they get stuck in a corner. Likewise, we are given to pretending second-personally in the absence of actual persons: We may give mock interviews to the press in the shower, or thank the Academy for the best actor award in an empty bedroom, or accuse an empty chair of abuse in talk therapy. This is not to say that prayer is equivalent to these forms of second-personal pretense. It is merely to note that second-personal imagining is not difficult for us; rather, it is a kind of thinking to which we, as essentially intersubjective and social animals, are especially prone.

In this sense, it is not far-fetched to see how prayer could be non-doxastic. In the case of contemplative prayer, for example, the quest for understanding might arise out of a kind of skepticism or agnosticism, and one might adopt a prayerful attitude in the hope that such an attitude could lead to the sort of understanding that one lacks, the sort that might psychologically induce belief. Here, the ‘faith’ of *fides quarens intellectum* might involve a commitment to certain concepts and propositions that one does not necessarily believe, perhaps because one does not fully

understand what they mean, even if one has a sense of their deep significance. The search for understanding, then, takes the form of *oratio*, which in turn allows one to imaginatively contemplate the nature of Divine second-personally in a way that can transform “mere” commitment into committed conviction.³⁵

However, contemplative prayer need not be aimed at belief at all. One can understand how certain concepts hang together, what they mean, and why they might be significant without thereby believing that they are, strictly speaking, indicative of reality. Likewise, one can successfully *do* things with those concepts without the conviction that they correspond one-to-one with the way things really are.³⁶ And one may find that second-person pretense assists one in such understanding—understanding of what, e.g., the God of classical theism *could* be—in a way that is emotionally or otherwise personally significant.³⁷ Or, as in the case of ritualized prayer, one may come to learn *how* to appropriately engage the divine (whether or not the divine really exists as it is being addressed in prayer) by praying ritualistically. Such prayer can prime one for certain affective experiences and can solidify in one a genuine commitment to the faith, even if certainty (or any degree of belief whatsoever) is lacking. In both cases of contemplative and ritual prayer,

³⁵ I take no position here on whether this is what Anselm is up to or not. I think it doubtful that Anselm takes the “fool” of the Psalms cited in the premise of his *reductio* to be akin to what we encounter in contemporary atheism. But nothing hangs on this. I merely think that the “faith” in “faith seeking understanding” need not be cashed out doxastically in our contemporary philosophies.

³⁶ A parallel here might be to the case of mathematics. One can have a profound (even mystical) understanding of numbers and the way they hang together—as well as what one can *do* with such concepts—without being forced to grant numbers robust ontological status. Wettstein (2012) makes a similar point.

³⁷ This idea may be reflected in something like Richard Kearney’s “God of the possible”—a God “whose *esse* reveals itself, surprisingly and dramatically, as *posse*.” Cf. Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 37. See also Justin Sands, “After Onto-Theology. What Lies Beyond the ‘End of Everything’,” *Religions*, 8/6 (2017), 98–122.

then, belief is not necessary to meet the conditions provided by our working definition of what prayer is. Indeed, the absence condition is doubly met in non-doxastic prayer of these sorts, insofar as God is absent, both formally in the prayer itself and doxastically as the intentional object of a belief.

But what of personal prayer—especially the conversational prayer of the Vineyard Christians? Can such prayer really be non-doxastic? As Luhrmann notes, many religious subjects who engage in this kind of prayer report *knowing* “beyond a shadow of a doubt” that God is present, which would seem to entail belief.³⁸ At the same time, the kind of “belief” involved in such knowing is not necessarily the cognitive certainty generally meant by analytic philosophers when they speak of belief. Instead, Luhrmann says, the God of the Vineyard Christians is “hyperreal,” a “deeply supernatural God [who] takes shape out of an exquisite awareness of doubt,” the imaginative representation of which requires a temporary suspension of things one normally takes to be true:

This modern God is [...] so real that you are left *suspended* between what is real and what is [merely] your imagination. [...] [T]his way of understanding God insists on a reality so vivid that it demands a *willing suspension* of disbelief while generating direct personal experiences that makes that God real and integral to one’s experiences of self. As a result, [...] the process of believing *splits off* belief commitment to God as something *special and different* from other kinds of beliefs.³⁹

On the one hand, the God of the Vineyard Christians—this God who is “realer than real”—makes the prayer of these Christians appear “hyperdoxastic”. On the other hand, as Luhrmann claims,

³⁸ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 301ff., my emphasis.

such prayer requires the application of a *wholly different epistemological category* than that which we generally apply to other objects in the world—one similar to the ways in which children treat imaginary friends, only substantially more serious.⁴⁰ When we look a little more closely, I think that approaching these kinds of exercises in personal prayer as a form of what I call “doxastically suspended prayer” might actually better lend itself to a more charitable interpretation of what is going on than those of straightforwardly doxasticist approaches which treat the kind of “belief” at work in such cases as on a par with ordinary factual beliefs in the indicative mode.

Prayer here is best understood as a form of imaginative yet utterly serious “play”⁴¹—a kind of *prayerful pretense*—which creates an epistemically-insulated subjunctive space where praying subjects can come to experience the world and their place in it as a space where the “God beyond being” could listen and speak to them in real time. It can become an activity through which the remoteness or absence of the divine—which must be taken seriously in order to be imaginatively mitigated—is temporarily suspended in a way that allows the religious subject to (second-personally) take up a serious cataphatic, second-personal stance and bring God into a relatable position, thereby engendering a sense of real interaction. Certain things one takes to be true of reality are bracketed in such pretense, allowing other ideas to gain salience and relevance in the play-context (and beyond). One “tries on” various religious attitudes and stances for size, and one thereby learns how to view the world from the religious perspective. This opens one up to the possibility that God, too, can speak. Yet to say that one *believes* that the God as represented in such prayer exists in the same way that one believes the cup on the table exists might be

⁴⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁴¹ On this point, compare Rachel Wagner, “The Importance of Playing in Earnest,” in Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory P. Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 192–213.

misleading. The Vineyard Christians are not unaware that the God of the Bible (or that of perfect-being theology) is not the kind of God with whom one could “have a beer” or “go on a date”.⁴² Yet the second-personal exercises they undertake allow them to experience and relate to the divine in ways that has the potential to *enable* a sense of the divine’s speaking and acting in the world—and potentially create a sense of reverence—even if the concept of God as represented in these exercises is one approached as a close friend or “buddy” and not as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* before whom one stands in silent awe. Yet the mere fact that it is a form of play does not entail that subjects cannot undertake this stance in utter earnestness and throw their whole weight authentically behind it.

Understood as a non-doxastic (or perhaps a “doxastically qualified”⁴³) enterprise of this sort, then, there is a charitable sense in which one might say the exercises of the Vineyard Christians could represent a form of prayer that takes absence seriously, even while suspending it for the sake of communion-like experiences. Something similar can be said of the unidirectionality clause: Praying is not the same as talking with God. Put a bit differently, prayerfully pretending to converse is not the same as actually conversing. But, more on the benefits of this below.

⁴² Luhmann, *When God Talks Back*.

⁴³ If anything, the complex make-believe activity of the Vineyard Christians points us to the fact that the doxastic/non-doxastic distinction in the case of religious practice might be more complex than philosophers have heretofore assumed it to be in discussions about the role of belief in religious faith. Indeed, it is somewhat unclear as to what the relevant candidates for belief are in these cases, and which of those beliefs are psychologically required for “sincere” practice. Most of the Vineyard Christians profess a belief in the reality of a personal God who communicates with human beings. In this sense, their religious faith might be said to be doxastic. At the same time, they readily admit that the God with whom they imaginatively interact is *not* the God which they theologically profess. Rather, they are encouraged “to imagine God as present—theological precision be damned” (Luhmann 2012: 89).

There is some indication in the empirical literature that participation in certain “colloquial” forms of personal prayer can serve a positive psychological function in the lives of religious subjects distinct from the functions of purely contemplative or ritual prayer.⁴⁴ Still, even if psychologically beneficial, there is a theological danger lurking in such prayer—namely, the danger of *idolatry*. If the God of colloquial prayer is believed to exist in the way that God is addressed in such prayer, one has made of the divine a false (or at least *inappropriate*) image—an irreverent desecration of the sacred to which one is supposed to relate in prayer. In this sense, then, we can see one reason why non-doxastic prayer of the form sketched out above might not only be psychologically descriptive of what (at least some) religious subjects are doing; it may even in some cases be recommendable over its fully doxastic counterparts. I thus wish to conclude with a brief discussion of the ways in which prayerful pretense may have an epistemic and moral advantage over certain forms of doxastic prayer.

5. Conclusion: The Virtues of Suspension

Religious epistemology has generally focused on belief as the cognitive attitude at the center of their enterprise. Thus, when we talk about the cognitive and doxastic attitudes of epistemic agents, we tend to talk about the degree to which such agents believe or disbelieve propositions, as opposed to the degree to which they suspend, withhold, or otherwise refrain from belief. Yet non-

⁴⁴ Poloma and Pendleton note that of the four types of prayer they studied (meditative, ritualist, petitionary, colloquial), only the latter was a predictor of subjective happiness. Cf. Margaret M. Poloma and Brian F. Pendleton, “Exploring Types of Prayer and Quality of Life. A Research Note,” *Review of Religious Research*, 31/1 (1989), 46–53. Bradshaw et al., in turn, found that “the perception of God as loving bears a consistent inverse association with symptoms of psychopathology, while the perception of God as remote exhibits a positive association with mental health problems.” Cf. Matt Bradshaw, Ellison Christopher G., and Kevin J. Flannelly, “Prayer, God Imagery, and Symptoms of Psychopathology,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 47/4 (2008), 644–59, at 654.

belief (whether in the form of active suspension, epistemic openness to various possibilities, or merely a lack of concern or consideration) seems to be the default attitude we exhibit with respect to a large majority of propositions.⁴⁵ Indeed, although belief is often taken to be central to the religious life, it is unclear that the large majority of those people we call “religious believers” really possess the attitudes and dispositions that philosophers would ultimately label as “belief”. Yet even if philosophers disagree with me on this empirical point, there is reason to think that adopting a doxastically-suspended attitude in prayer is epistemically and/or morally preferable to certainty (or very high-credence belief).

Each of the three forms of theistic prayer discussed above involve a representation of the divine to which one relates oneself through prayer. Yet the distance condition of prayer also clues us into the fact that God necessarily outstrips our conceptual categories. What is gestured at, real or not, is an idea of “being infinitely beyond,” which almost necessarily rules out the ability of the finite human being to relate to it. In this sense, then, any attempt to “capture” the divine in prayer already commits the sin of idolatry. At the same time, approaches that take themselves to be more “epistemically responsible”—e.g., the wholly transcendent Godhead of negative theology, as well as the abstract “Perfect Being” of classical theism—run up against another problem: They present us with a God who could not possibly be a person, let alone a person to whom we could relate. As Heidegger writes of the “god of the philosophers”: “Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.”⁴⁶ And while Marilyn Adams is not wrong that the “idea that we cannot sing and

⁴⁵ I am grateful to Verena Wagner and Alexandra Zinke for alerting me to this point and look forward to their future work on suspension.

⁴⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. by J. Stambaugh (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1969) 72.

dance before the first cause fails to take seriously Who the first cause really is,”⁴⁷ there is something admittedly odd about addressing a *causa sui* or a wholly transcendent God second-personally, insofar as it already requires making the step that the god of the philosophers is a *Who*.

This is where non-doxastic prayer comes in. The ability of an Anselm to address *aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest* in prayer as a *You*—to profess profound ignorance and yet to confidently address God in the second person—displays, not disbelief, but a kind of cognitive and affective “play” with the tension between classical and personal theism, between God as utterly distant and at the same time as wholly present. It is an enterprise that seeks, not factual knowledge, but *wisdom*. Indeed, the search for understanding might not only display a deep desire to comprehend what God could be but can also exhibit a profound sense of intellectual *humility*—an “appropriate attentiveness” to one’s intellectual limitations and an “owning” of said limitations,⁴⁸ which, at least with respect to the Last Things, seems desirable for epistemic subjects to have. Such humility can also cultivate an *openness* and *willingness* to consider other images and ways of approaching God—a diversity that can give one a fuller picture of divine possibility. Where such humility is a virtue, then, it is one that seems better cultivated through non-doxastic prayer than through an inflexible certainty that one has “locked down” the existence and nature of the divine to whom one speaks.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Adams, “What’s Wrong with the Ontotheological Error?” 12.

⁴⁸ Cf. Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr et al., “Intellectual Humility. Owing Our Limitations,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 94/3 (2017), 509–39.

⁴⁹ There will obviously be a spectrum here, and (as an anonymous reviewer points out) there is definitely room for a “middle ground” of sorts. The question of how open one must be to one’s own epistemic limitations, as well as how much one must temper one’s certainty regarding propositions about God in light of God’s radical transcendence, is a matter for future discussion. The point here is merely that non-doxastic or “doxastically-qualified” prayer may have an advantage over theistic prayer uttered with strong certainty concerning who or what God is.

The cognitive benefits of prayerful pretense are paired with affective and motivational benefits as well. While radical uncertainty may lead to a kind of motivational paralysis and full certitude to rash action, the apophatic-cataphatic play involved in non-doxastic prayer can mitigate the space between these two poles, and foster not conviction but *hope*, an attitude taken to be both a theological virtue and central to the religious life. One who is fully certain has no need of hope, yet the latter sometimes can motivate action as well as the former. Likewise, while certitude may be accompanied by all manner of affective attitudes, hope demonstrates a positively-valenced orientation toward the proposition or state of affairs in question. One will be disappointed if what is hoped for does not come to pass, even if one does not expect it to occur.⁵⁰ Especially in the case of corporate ritual prayer, hope may serve an immensely important function: It may bring together a religious community under its umbrella and encourage collective action in cases in which we might otherwise be paralyzed by despair. As individuals, we often find it difficult to do what we ought in a world in which we are confronted with evil, yet as Cuneo notes, “sometimes we can, by engaging in the corporate actions of the church, perform those actions that, simply by our own power, we would otherwise find impossible to perform.”⁵¹ Non-doxastic prayer can thus help us maintain the degree of hope necessary to act in such ways and thereby assist us in continuing to stand for the good.

Finally, non-doxastic prayer can give individuals with a tendency toward idolatry a healthy shot of apophaticism, while providing those with strong apophatic leanings their daily dose of cataphatic reinforcement. In the case of personal prayer, the tendency to make of the divine a wholly immanent “best friend” threatens to eliminate the divine-human distinction and to eradicate

⁵⁰ Cp. Howard-Snyder, “Propositional Faith. What It Is and What It Is Not.”

⁵¹ Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, 51.

the distance that would make such activities instances of prayer. On the other hand, it seems to me that the overly abstract God of classical theism, as well as the God of radical negative theology who cannot be conceived of (let alone spoken *to*), present approaches to the divine that threaten to make the divine-human gap unbridgeable. In fact, I think an approach that takes seriously the considerations of both (or either) classical theism and (or) negative theology cannot properly view prayer as a fully doxastic enterprise. Yet “healthy cataphaticism” allows that imaginative, non-doxastic approaches to God can be beneficial to the religious life, without giving one over into idolatry. And the same can be said for the evangelical personal pray-er, who speaks to God as though she were on a telephone: The caution that suspension of belief can provide prevents a lapse into idolatrous and narcissistic “babbling” that serves little religious function.

None of this is to say that non-doxastic prayer is always virtuous, nor that fully doxastic prayer is necessarily vicious. Yet the religious life, while psychologically and socially beneficial in many respects, simultaneously places the subject in danger of falling into theological and moral vices that can undermine that life’s very aims and goals. Prayer is one activity in which these dangers are on active display. It is my contention that earnestly playful forms of prayer not only have the ability to cultivate virtuous religious behavior, they may in some cases be more effective in so doing than their more strongly doxastic counterparts. If I am right, this may be a reason to shift some of the focus in religious epistemology away from the rationality of religious belief and toward the virtues and appropriateness of doxastic suspension, and to get past our fears of words like “imagination”, “pretense”, and “play” in analytic philosophy of religion. Indeed, in this sense,

we can follow Plato in learning how to “play the noblest games and [to] be of another mind from what [we] are at present.”⁵²

⁵² From Book VII of the *Laws*, quoted in Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 18.