

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

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Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better. The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness: and the end of his talk is mischievous madness.

-Ecclesiastes 10:11-13

It seems unrealistic that we can bypass celestial voicemail and chat personally with the Creator of the universe, but that's exactly what the Bible says we can do.

-From *Bruce and Stan's Pocket Guide to Talking with God*¹

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”², 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

¹ Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, *Bruce & Stan's Pocket Guide to Talking with God* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishing, 2000).

² 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.*

contexts of, e.g., literature and film,³ 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 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”?

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.

³ Cp. Tamar Szabó Gendler and Karson Kovakovich, "Genuine Rational Fictional Emotions", in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, edited by Matthew Kieran (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 241–253.

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.

2. A Working Definition of Theistic Prayer

Providing a strict definition of prayer is by no means an easy task. Prayer can be expressed verbally or non-verbally, ritualistically or spontaneously, through bodily actions or merely mental activities, in communal or individual settings.⁵ Likewise, there is an assortment of “doings” that may be performatively enacted through these varied expressions of prayer and a wide array of functions that such acts of praying may serve. Nevertheless, having a provisional definition of prayer in hand may better assist us in investigating our guiding questions concerning the possibility and fittingness of non-doxastic prayer. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on theistic prayer.⁶ Still, some of the criteria set out below may be less than obvious at first glance, even with respect to theistic prayer. It will thus be helpful to first briefly examine the motivations for insisting on these features of prayer and not others. As we shall see, these features are all closely intertwined with one another. However, it is worth examining them individually to understand each’s significance for understanding what prayer is and does.

First, 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 is an activity that places (or aims to place) the human being in relation to that which is viewed as sacred. It is thus *medial* in a few sense. First, the activity of prayer provides a *medium by which* the aforementioned

⁵ Cf. Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer", in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 577–583, at 577.

⁶ This definition might also apply to some cases of non-theistic prayer, as in certain forms of Buddhist prayer. Cf. Rita M. Gross, "Meditation and Prayer: A Comparative Inquiry", *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 22 (2002): pp. 77–86. However, since there may be non-theistic forms of prayer-like activity that do not clearly meet the above definition, I will allow for the present that the term ‘prayer’ might be more broadly applicable than the criteria set out here permit and will restrict myself to contexts of specifically theistic prayer.

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.

Yet despite being relational, prayer is not, in the first instance, a two-way street. It is importantly a *positional* act, in that the particular situation and/or standpoint of the praying subject(s) *matters* to understanding what is being done, and it is directed outward in ways expressive of that situatedness. As Augustine writes, prayer is “the mind’s affectionately reaching out toward God”.⁷ Yet in this affective and expressive “reaching out”, we also see Augustine gesturing 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 it turns out that Krishna does not exist and thus cannot be said to receive my prayer.⁸ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, any possible response by the sacred addressee of a particular prayer is not itself an instance of prayer. Thus, 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.⁹

⁷ 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), at 87.

⁸ Note that the idea that I can pray to Krishna without Krishna’s existing is a separate issue from the question of 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 intuitive and uncontroversial. We will take up the latter question below.

⁹ [CROSS REFERENCE TO SONDEREGGER?]

Why is this so? 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.”¹⁰ 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. While some readers may actually prefer the more “acquiescent” connotations of the term in the context of prayer, I prefer to employ instead the term *reverential* to connote the relevant attitudinal orientation to which I am referring. 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. Yet it also allows that one may adopt a negatively-valenced stance toward the inequality in question. Indeed, it may be the very manifestations of the relevant 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.¹¹

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ [CROSS REFERENCES TO CRISP AND TIMPE?]

Finally, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, prayer as I am conceiving of it here is essentially *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.¹² 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.¹³ Literally speaking or conversing *with* God is not the same as praying *to* the divine. If Enoch truly walked with God (Genesis 5:24), he did not pray as in so doing, nor did Moses pray in his “face to face” encounter with God (Exodus 33:11). Likewise, merely responding to divine calls or exhortations do not, by themselves, necessarily constitute instances of praying. Adam’s responses to God’s queries in the Garden do not intuitively count as cases of prayer (Genesis 3:10ff), nor does 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.¹⁴

¹² Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by R.G. Smith (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010; 1923).

¹³ This understanding of theistic prayer diverges from that of William James, who defined prayer as “meaning 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.

¹⁴ Merold Westphal (2005), by contrast, views prayer as a fundamentally *responsive* activity to acts of divine speech. Yet Westphal also 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

This is not to say that prayer 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. Likewise, many of those engaged in prayer hope for, invite, or even expect some sort of response on behalf of the divine, and there are many conceptions of God on which God does commonly answer prayer. Nevertheless, there is also a very real sense in which prayer is an activity that takes place in the context of 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 (e.g., to the utter transcendence of the divine, or to the limitations of human language and other artifacts in their ability to fully mediate God's will). This perceived distance can also help explain both the unidirectionality of prayer and the appropriateness of adopting a reverential stance in prayer.

Of course, the absence of the addressee of prayer may also refer to a God who is perceived as *hidden* – a God who does not show Godself or who remains silent despite one's prayerful exhortations. Indeed, perceptions of divine hiddenness may themselves represent an occasion for undertaking prayer in the first place. One central function or aim of some forms of prayer may be to *remedy* ("re-mediate") the gap between the praying subject and the hidden God – to achieve a kind of mutual *communion* with that which is perceived to be absent. It is thus not surprising that

The Phenomenology of Prayer, edited by Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 13–32, at 19).

While I agree with Westphal that the second speech-act, when combined with the first, might legitimately be understood as (at least 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 discuss presently, it can be a sense of divine *absence* that elicits the occasion for prayer.

many individuals when engaged in deep prayer claim to come to “feel” the presence of the sacred while praying.¹⁵ Still, as we shall see, it seems important to distinguish the act of prayer itself from this sort of 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 relate themselves dialogically 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, 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). It also allows that there may be a diversity of forms of prayer that fall under this conceptual umbrella. Let us turn now to examine a few of these modes of theistic prayer.

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 of prayer that fall under this definitional umbrella and discuss the possible functions that such prayerful

¹⁵ 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, no. 2 (2014): pp. 92–103, at 97.

activities might serve. Although these types of prayer may overlap, it will help to distinguish some general categories to which we can later refer. 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*

While we often think of acts of contemplation as detached, impersonal activities, 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 prayed to better understand God and nature while being protected from ignorance.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Indeed, 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

¹⁶ 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 *Regional Identities and Cultures of Medieval Jews*, edited by Javier Castaño, Talya Fishman, and Ephraim Kanarfogel (London: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 263–284.

¹⁷ Cp. Marilyn Adams, "What's Wrong with the Ontotheological Error?", *Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (2014): pp. 1–12.

remade me, you have given me every good thing that is mine, and still I do not know you.¹⁸

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 through prayer, not to arrive at some abstract propositional truth about the Deity but 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.¹⁹ 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 *nosce te ipsum* (or *gnothi seauton*) of classical philosophy – the injunction to know what one really is – 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 result that one comes to know both oneself and God better through contemplating the divine reverentially in the second person.²⁰

¹⁸ Anselm of Canterbury, "Proslogion", in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages. The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions*, edited by Arthur Hyman, James J. Walsh, and Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2010), pp. 161–181, at 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁰ [CROSS REFERENCE TO GREEN?]

3.2 Ritualized Prayer: (Re-)Orientation, (Re-)Affirmation, and Performatively “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 orienting (or re-orienting) the *will* of the praying subject(s) in various ways. Here, we find a wide variety of forms of prayer. 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,²¹ 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).

Importantly, 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”.²² At the same time, as Cuneo notes, the content of what is conveyed through actions with expressive import need not match up to some corresponding mental state in the agent performing those actions 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. I need not even feel contrite to successfully utter a prayer of confession in the context of the church liturgy. The reason for this is that ritualized prayer is characterized by its

²¹ Terence Cuneo refers to these three acts as 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.

²² *Ibid.*, 157.

essentially embodied, repetitive, and public nature. While in principle performable by individual subjects in private, ritualized praying is nevertheless a fundamentally *social* act, insofar as it arises, not spontaneously, but rather diachronically out of the norms, values, and communal practices of particular religious traditions. It is endorsed and practiced by the religious community, but it also serves to bind that community together through shared practice.

While 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 virtues of ritualized prayer. As Howard Wettstein notes, such kinds of prayer allow that “we need not wait until the appropriate experiences present themselves” to be able to engage with God liturgically.²³ We can meet the criteria of prayer set out above, even if we cannot wholly instantiate the feelings and thoughts such prayers express. And even where appropriate 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 to relate themselves in fitting ways to the sacred.²⁴ 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 assist us in expressing 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. While many religious participants may usually just be “going through the motions” during worship services, even such

²³ Howard K. Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 45. See also Cuneo (2016), 160.

²⁴ Wettstein (2012), 45.

mundane engagement with ritualized prayer can, as Cuneo points out, both encourage “the regularization of attitudes to which it so ably gives voice”²⁵ and, over time, provide one with the “ritual knowledge” of “how to engage God in ways that are fitting”.²⁶ It allows religious subjects to affirm and re-affirm the tenets of faith in ways that can appropriately relate them to a God whose distance makes second-personal address difficult, even in cases where the corresponding attitudes and emotions might be occurrently absent on the part of the subject.

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. In ritualized petitionary prayer, for example, we ask God to forgive our sins, to assist those who are ill or who have died, to guide those in positions of political power, and to bless those whom we love. One way of understanding such prayers is that, through them, we express fitting attitudes of supplication before God. Yet we seem to be doing more than that – especially when we pray such prayers *together*. We seem to be engaging in a kind of *collective symbolic action* – one that indicates both the fact that there is evil in the world and that we are limited in combatting it. We thereby demonstrate our failures as moral agents and express our hopes that such evils may be remedied. And in so doing, we also *performatively declare that we stand for the good and in solidarity with one another*.²⁷ 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

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Cuneo (2016), 164.

²⁷ Cp. Robert M. Adams, "Symbolic Value", *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (1997): pp. 1–15; see also Cuneo (2016), 29-33.

narrative, God's purposes".²⁸ Thus loving God and loving others becomes embodied in a single act of symbolic prayer.

3.3 Personal Prayer: Forging Intimacy

Finally, I would like to turn to 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 a kind of volitional re-orientation, the function of personal prayer has more to do with forging and strengthening a deeply affective and intimate relationship with the divine. To be sure, both contemplative and ritualized prayer may be (and often are) 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",²⁹ which – while still 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 and/or symbolically standing for something. Instead (or additionally), 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

²⁸ Ibid., 29, 30, 33.

²⁹ Wettstein (2012), 47.

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.³⁰ 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 interact with a close friend. God is addressed as a concrete object who is familiar, responsive, and above all *personal*. 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”. So how are we to square this common 21st-century 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

³⁰ Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 80-83.

the conversational model of the Vineyard Christians conflates prayer and communion – that what such congregations have in mind with ‘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, as with the cases of contemplative prayer above, 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 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 – or the telephone model with which we began – 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.³¹ Granted, most if not all organized religions have certain core propositions they take to be fundamental to the faith.³² Yet any particular religious tradition is more than the sum of its propositions. Indeed, the religious life is much more about *doing* than straightforwardly *believing*, even if the latter often accompanies the former. And although analytic philosophy of religion has largely focused its energies on questions surrounding the rationality of religious belief, with the result that such belief is taken in contemporary scholarship as central to the religious enterprise, Cuneo rightly points out that “this tendency threatens to offer a distorted picture of the religious life, as this way of life is fundamentally concerned not so much with being in this type of doxastic state with 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”.³³ Indeed, the religious life understood in this sense is “thoroughly practical”.³⁴

Instead of characterizing religion as a set of propositional candidates for belief, where religious faith is just a matter of believing such propositions with a high enough level of credence, 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

³¹ On this point, cf. also Cuneo (2016), 18.

³² The task of uncovering and elucidating these propositions is presumably one of the primary tasks of systematic theology.

³³ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

of certainty *might* make one more likely to commit oneself to that tradition,³⁵ 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.³⁶ Such commitment, then, when combined with a hopeful or at least positively-valenced attitude toward the content of the relevant propositions,³⁷ can be sufficient to ground the practical orientation that makes up the life of faith.

Yet commitment by itself might 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 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*. What is often ignored in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion is that 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

³⁵ 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 certainly is not sufficient for religious faith. The question here is whether it is necessary.

³⁶ Cp. *Ibid.*, 215-16, n.2.

³⁷ Cp. 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, no. 4 (2013): pp. 357–372, at 360 (my emphasis). I take up the attitude of hope again below.

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.³⁸ 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 is an activity that makes us not merely passive, hopeful recipients of religious experience but 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 not insignificant degree of imagination. To relate to God, we need something immanent, something *relatable*, with which we can connect, and this is what the religious imagination provides in prayer: It gives the religious subject a way to cognitively and affectively “reach out toward the divine”, namely through second-personal address.

³⁸ While I do think that imagining may take both propositional and non-propositional forms, I leave open here whether or not the limits of conceivability set the limits of the imagination. If so, then perhaps we can only imagine what is logically possible, meaning that (on the assumption that some religious concepts like the Trinity or the Incarnation are, in fact, paradoxical), when we take ourselves to imagine certain religious paradoxicalities, we can only imagine them under some particular (conceivable) aspect. That is, we cannot think of God as simultaneously wholly three and wholly one without falling imaginatively into either the heresy of tritheism or modalism.

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. At the same time, 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 as adults we have a tendency 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 in talk therapy. This is not to say that prayer is equivalent to these forms of second-personal pretense. What is important is merely to note that second-personal imagining is not difficult for us; indeed, 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.

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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, 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.

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ 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*”. 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, no. 6 (2017): pp. 98–122.

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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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, 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.⁴³ Indeed, 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

⁴¹ Luhrmann (2012), p. 77.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 301ff., my emphasis.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

“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”⁴⁴ – 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” 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 misleading. The Vineyard Christians are not unaware that the God of the Bible (or that of classical theism) is not the kind of God with whom one could “have a beer” or “go on a date”.⁴⁵ 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

⁴⁴ On this point, cp. Rachel Wagner, “The Importance of Playing in Earnest”, in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory P. Grieve (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 192–213.

⁴⁵ Luhmann (2012).

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”⁴⁶) 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.⁴⁷ Something similar can be said of the unidirectionality clause: Praying, whatever Bruce and Stan (or whoever) might say, is not the same as talking with God. Put a bit differently, prayerfully pretending to converse is not the same as actually conversing. And, as I will discuss below, it perhaps good that this is so.

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

⁴⁶ 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).

⁴⁷ I should note here that I am not confident that practitioners of such prayer would describe what they are doing in this way, especially if doing so might be understood as either frivolous pretending or otherwise denying the reality of God. I am merely pointing to one possible interpretation of what might be going on in this kind of prayer, in which the conditions I have laid out above are met and in which the prayer of such practitioners might not be said to lapse into a kind of irreverent idolatry (see below).

distinct from the functions of purely contemplative or ritual prayer.⁴⁸ At the same time, 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 de-secration 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

It is interesting, though not at all surprising, that religious epistemology (and analytic epistemology in general) has generally focused on belief as the cognitive attitude at the center of their enterprise. After all, it would seem that belief is a necessary feature (or at least a very significant component) in knowledge (at least of the propositional sort). 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

⁴⁸ Poloma and Pendleton (1989) 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, no. 1 (1989): pp. 46–53. Bradshaw et al. (2008), 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”. Matt Bradshaw, Ellison Christopher G., and Kevin J. Flannelly, "Prayer, God Imagery, and Symptoms of Psychopathology", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 4 (2008): pp. 644–659, at 654.

refrain from belief. Yet non-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.⁴⁹ 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). That is, there are good reasons to think one *ought* to engage in certain forms of theistic prayer non-doxastically.

Each of the three forms of theistic prayer discussed above – contemplative, ritualistic, and personal – 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

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Verena Wagner and Alexandra Zinke for alerting me to this point and look forward to their future work on suspension.

neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god”.⁵⁰ And while Marilyn Adams is not wrong that the “idea that we cannot sing and dance before the first cause fails to take seriously Who the first cause really is”,⁵¹ there is something admittedly odd about addressing a *causa sui* or a wholly transcendent God second-personally. Indeed, this 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,⁵² 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,

⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. by J. Stambaugh (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1969) 72. The Heideggerian suspicion toward “ontotheology” (and toward metaphysics in general) is taken up in more detail in Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2001), as well as John D. Caputo, “Continental Philosophy of Religion”, in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 667–673.

⁵¹ Adams (2014), 12.

⁵² Cf. Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr et al., “Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94, no. 3 (2017): pp. 509–539.

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.

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 can motivate action, sometimes 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.⁵³ 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”.⁵⁴ 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.

⁵³ Cp. Howard-Snyder (2013).

⁵⁴ Cuneo (2016), 51.

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 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. Indeed, 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”.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ 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.