Forthcoming in ***Reaching for God: New Theological Essays on Prayer*, ed. by O. Crisp & J. Arcadi (Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).**

Are You There, God? It's Me, the Theist: On the Viability and Virtuosity 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 sincerely) 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 really is a kind of "telephone to glory"[2], it might appear rather odd – if not crazy – 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

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[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 there seems to be a difference between experiencing feelings *about* some fictional object and the idea of feeling something *toward* some fictional agent. Indeed, we don't often 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, "babbler" 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 belief[4] 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 some ways in which what I call "prayerful pretense" might even be more virtuous than prayer proceeding from full doxastic

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[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.

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 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 working 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, which I understand as a *(re)medial, unidirectional, reverential activity by which human beings second-personally relate themselves to the sacred in the perceived absence of the direct presence of the divine*.[6] Not only does this definition point to significant features of prayer that distinguish it from other kinds of religious activities, it also allows that there may be a diversity of forms of prayer that fall under this umbrella. Still, some of the criteria set out here may be less than obvious at first glance. It may thus be helpful to briefly examine the motivations for insisting on these features of prayer and not

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[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 my definition to specifically theistic prayer.

others. As we shall see, these features are closely intertwined with one another. However, it is worth examining them individually to understand each's significance to the activity of praying.

First and foremost, prayer is an *activity*. It is something in which religious participants willfully 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 senses. First, the activity of prayer provides a *medium by which* the aforementioned two-place relation may arise. Second, it can serve to *mediate content* from the praying subject(s) to the addressee of the prayer. 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 one in (self-)reflection; it can reconcile one person to another or bring disparate individuals together in solidarity.

Prayer is also 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 positionally 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*. In other words, prayer is not, in the first instance, a two-way street. There are several reasons for insisting on this criterion. 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

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[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 (my emphasis).

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]

Why is this so? Part of what would make it inappropriate 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] Indeed, 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 in the perfect-being theology of classical theism).

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 "docile" and "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. For while acting

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[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. I take up the latter question below.

[9] [CROSS REFERENCE TO SONDEREGGER CONTRIBUTION?]

[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.

reverentially requires taking the action in question (and its objects) *seriously*, it seems possible to take seriously the proposed radical inequality of the two relata of the prayer relation while at the same time adopting a *negative* or even *resistant* 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 this sense, reverential prayer might sometimes appropriately express attitudes of complaint, lamentation, anger, resignation, or even accusation.[11]

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 (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. Rather, the "grammar" of prayer is importantly *dialogical*: To channel Martin Buber, it manifests a unidirectional "I-Thou" stance.[12] And this stance, which involves 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. (Speaking *to* is relevantly different from speaking *about*.)

At the same time, prayer is *not* dialogical in the sense that the two relata of the prayer relation 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

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[11] [CROSS REFERENCES TO CRISP AND TIMPE CONTRIBUTIONS?]

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

[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.

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]

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. On the other side of the coin, 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. Yet 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

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[14] Merold Westphal (2005), for example, 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 *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 is often a sense of divine *absence* that elicits the occasion for prayer.

mediate and articulate God's will). This perceived distance can help explain both the unidirectionality of prayer and the appropriateness of adopting a reverential stance in prayer.

Alternatively, the absence of the addressee of prayer may also refer to a God who is perceived as literally *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* (or "re-mediate") the gap between the praying subject and the hidden God – to bring about a kind of mutual *communion* with that which is perceived to be absent. It is thus not surprising that many individuals when engaged in deep prayer claim to come to "feel" the presence of the sacred while praying.[15] Still, 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 represent an 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.

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 might serve. Although these forms of prayer may overlap in some cases, it will nevetheless help

[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.

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 section that follows.

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. It is not of little significance, for example, that Pseudo-Dionysius opens the *Mystical Theology* with a prayer to the Trinity,[16] or 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 remade me, you have given me every good thing that is mine, and still I do not know you.[18]

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[16] Cp. Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*: *A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 183f.

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

[18] Anselm of Canterburgy, "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.

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 – is 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 God and oneself better through contemplating the divine reverentially in the second person.[20]

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

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[19] Ibid., 173.

[20] [CROSS REFERENCE TO GREEN CONTRIBUTION?]

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. Many 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, Cuneo notes, in order to be successful the content of what is expressed through actions with expressive import need not match up to some corresponding mental state in the agent performing those actions. 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 essentially *embodied, repetitive,* and *social* nature. While in principle performable by individual subjects in private, ritualized praying is nevertheless a fundamentally *public* act. It arises, not spontaneously, but rather *historically* out of the norms, values, and communal practices of particular religious traditions. It is endorsed and practiced by the religious

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[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.

community, and it serves to intersubjectively 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 writes, 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 means 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 proposed 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 that would relate us fittingly to God, both encouraging "the regularization of attitudes to which it so ably gives voice"[25] and, over time, providing one with what Cuneo calls "ritual knowledge" concerning "how to engage God in ways that are fitting".[26] It allows religious subjects to affirm and re-affirm the tenets of their faith in ways that

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[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.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Cuneo (2016), 164.

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 God. 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. Here, we seem to be doing more than merely expressing fitting attitudes of supplication before God – 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. In so doing, we demonstrate our failures as moral agents and express our hopes that such evils may be remedied. Further, as Robert Adams has noted, we thereby *performatively declare that we stand for the good and in solidarity with one another*.[27] Ritualized prayer, then, provides 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 moves 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".[28] Thus loving God and loving others becomes embodied in a single act of symbolic prayer.

3.3 Personal Prayer: Forging Intimacy

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

[28] Ibid., 29, 30, 33.

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 compromise 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 reverential and unidirectional features of prayer – appears to imply that prayer puts one in the presence of God 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 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.[30] In other words, they view prayer not as Wettstein does, as a way of standing in second-person awe

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[29] Wettstein (2012), 47.

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

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 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. It might even be viewed by some religious adherents 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 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. In other words, the Vineyard Christians think they're "practicing prayer", but what they are really doing is something else.

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, there may be 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 – and 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. 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 somehow 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

[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.

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 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 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.

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[33] Ibid., 165.

[34] Ibid., 148.

[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",

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 *sincerely* pray in a theistic context, if one is unsure, agnostic, or skeptical that the addressee of the prayer is really there? Here, the cognitive element of religion again becomes important. However, contrary to popular opinion, perhaps it is not the attitude of religious belief that is most relevant in this context. Instead, we might do better to focus on the attitudes arising from and within 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 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 legend,

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American Philosophical Quarterly 50, no. 4 (2013): pp. 357–372, at 360 (my emphasis). I take up the attitude of hope again below.

[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.

in image and story – and it is good that this is so.[39] 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 importantly 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 relat*able*, 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.

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

[39] It's also not clear to me that this claim is necessarily incompatible with forms of religious literalism. One could think that image and narrative are central to religion and still maintain that such stories and imagery are literally true.

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 (*qua*, e.g., an absent victimizer) of abuse in therapy. This is not to say that prayer is equivalent to these forms of second-personal pretense. What is important here 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.

Of course, 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. And one can successfully and

meaningfully *do* things with those concepts without the conviction that they correspond one-to-one with the way things really are. A parallel here might be to the case of mathematics. One can have a profound (even quasi-"mystical") understanding of numbers and the way they hang together – and one can *do* things with such ideas, like counting, constructing proofs, demonstrating theorems, and so on – without being forced to grant numbers robust ontological status.[40] Similarly, much of what goes on in science involves employing models that are not taken by researchers to be literally indicative of what goes on in reality. Yet such models may help us *approximate* reality, or they may assist us in doing other things we care about, liking getting around in cars or lifting heavy objects or traveling at high speeds through the solar system. And here, whether the mathematicians or the scientists in question are realists, agnostics, or skeptics about the existence of the objects or their discourse is of little significance. They can successfully interact and communicate with one another in ways that allow them to understand each other, learn from each other, and even perhaps make epistemic progress. In the religious sphere, then, one may find that a certain kind of make-believe – an acting *as if*, if one will – may likewise foster certain relevant kinds of religious understanding. Indeed, specifically second-personal, non-doxastic imaginings in the form of prayer may, e.g., help one better understand what the God of classical theism *could be* – in a way that is emotionally or otherwise personally transformative.[41]

Likewise, in the case of ritualized prayer, one may come to learn *how* to appropriately engage God (whether or not God really exists as that God is addressed in prayer) by praying in ritualistic ways.

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[40] Wettstein (2012) makes a similar point.

[41] This idea may correspond to 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.

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. It can signal one's solidarity with others and be a means of sincerely standing for the good that roots itself in the history of a community in meaningful ways. 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.

But what of personal prayer – especially the conversational prayer of the Vineyard Christians? On the one hand, Luhrmann notes, many of these religious subjects report *knowing* "beyond a shadow of a doubt" that God is present.[42] On the other hand, she calls the God of the Vineyard Christians a God who is "hyperreal", a "deeply supernatural God [who] takes shape out of an exquisite awareness of doubt":

> This modern God is […] realer than real, so real that it is impossible not to understand that you may be fooling yourself, so real that you are left suspended between what is real and what is your imagination. […] In this modern experiential evangelical faith, this 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.[43]

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[42] Quoted in Luhrmann (2012), PAGE.
[43] Cp. Ibid., 301ff.

Here, we see not only the importance of the imagination to such endeavors but also the application of a "different epistemological category" than that which we generally apply to other human beings – one similar to the ways in which children treat imaginary friends, only substantially more serious.[44] In this sense, then, I think that a form of non-doxastic prayer might actually better lend itself to a charitable understanding of what might be going on in (at least some) personal prayer of the sort described above, in a way that still corresponds to the working definition I put forward above.

Prayer here is best understood as a form of imaginative yet utterly serious "play" – a kind of *prayerful pretense*, as it were. It is 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 *cataphatic stance* and bring God into a relatable position, thereby allowing for a sense of 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 –

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[44] Ibid., PAGE.
[45] Ibid.

and hence 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.[46]

Understood as a non-doxastic (or perhaps a "doxastically qualified") 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.

The fact that (in contrast to other forms of prayer) participation in such forms of personal prayer appears to be a positive indicator for subjective happiness, together with the research indicating that a perception of God as remote or unloving is more strongly correlated with symptoms of psychopathology, might indicate that prayer of this kind can serve a positive psychological function in the lives of religious subjects distinct from (or in addition to) the functions of purely contemplative or ritual prayer.[48] At the same time, even if psychologically beneficial, there is a

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[46] Cp. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1958).

[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).

[48] Poloma and Pendleton (1989) refer to this kind of prayer as "colloquial prayer" and 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*

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 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 not 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 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

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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.

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 non-believing attitude in prayer might be epistemically and/or morally preferable to certainty (or very high-credence belief) in some cases. 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 in prayer, real or not, is an idea of something "infinitely beyond", which almost rules out the ability of the finite human being to relate to it immanently. In this sense, then, any attempt to "capture" the divine in prayer already commits the sin of idolatry. At the same time, conceptions of God that are taken by some 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".[50] And while

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[49] I am grateful to Alexandra Zinke for alerting me to this point and look forward to her future work on suspension.

[50] Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. by J. Stambaugh (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1969) 72. The Hedieggerian 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

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*.

Enter prayerful pretense: 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. His prayerful contemplation is an enterprise that seeks, not factual knowledge, but something much more like *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, might be 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.

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.

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 may mitigate the space between these two poles, and foster not intractable conviction but malleable *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.[55]

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[53] Cp. Howard-Snyder (2013).

[54] Cuneo (2016), 51.

[55] Non-doxastic prayer in sports contexts might also have the potential to transform the "unsporting" petition to receive unfair divine assistance into a more careful and "sportsmanlike" hope. (Though the very act of petitioning God to "take one's side", as it were, may remain morally problematic, whether doxastic or not.) Cp. Anthony J. Kreider, "Prayers for Assistance as Unsporting Behavior", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 30*, no. 1 (2003): pp. 17–25.

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 approached or spoken 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 the "mischievous madness" of 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 "babbling foolishness".

None of this is to say that non-doxastic prayer is always virtuous, nor that doxastic prayer is usually vicious. Yet the religious life, while psychologically and socially beneficial in many respects, puts the subject constantly in danger of falling into theological vices that threaten to undermine that life's very aims and goals. Prayer is an activity in which these dangers are on active display. It is my contention that seriously playful, suspending, pretending, or otherwise non-doxastic 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”.[56]

[56] 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.