

## A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERROGATION OF THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS PRAYERS

Stephen Azubuike Oguji, PhD  
Department of Philosophy  
Imo State University, Owerri

### Abstract

*This paper is an expression of the philosophical worries about the meaning, types and modes of prayer in juxtaposition with two major attributes of God: immutability and immensity; then a brief look at the psychological effects of prayer as well as existential responsibility and prayer. The objective of the essay is to show that prayer, first when looked at from the prism of divine attributes seems superfluous and indeed a contradiction to the meaning and nature of God. Secondly to argue that the awareness and promise of divine help that prayer brings weakens and dries up human existential responsibility energy, even as the magnitude of prayer-defying problems in the world today, despite intensive prayers against them puts a lot doubt on the efficacy of prayer. It is noted that even though prayer can have a calming effect on the psyche yet that is not the exclusive reserve of prayer. The methodology used is critical exposition of the philosophical problems of religious practice of prayer. The major contribution of the paper is the projection of the philosophical difficulties of reconciling religious practice of prayer with rationality, thus making imperative the need for more pro-reflections on the rational foundations of prayer and indeed religious exercises of theists.*

**Keywords:** Philosophical, Interrogation, Rationality, Religious prayers

### Introduction

#### The Concept of Prayer

One common feature in most religions, especially the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the phenomenon of prayer or supplication. Etymologically, the word prayer is from old French *prier* and even modern French *prière* translated into English as "prayer, petition, request." It is also from medieval Latin *precaria* feminine of *precarius* (from *precari* "to ask, beg, pray" (from 'pie' root \*prek- "to ask, entreat") meaning "petition, prayer, obtained by prayer, given as a favour." To pray is to beg, entreat, ask for a favour and petition. Prayer in the Hebrew Bible, as shown in the account of prayer life of the prophets, Jesus and apostles, is an evolving means of interacting with God, most frequently through a spontaneous, individual, unorganized form of petitioning and/or thanking. In the (*Catechism of Christian Doctrine 141*) of the Catholic Church, it is a communication-the raising up of minds and hearts to God. In religion generally, prayer means to talk to a deity or god; the act of praying is a method of changing a situation for the better. The word prayer can also be used in a non-religious way like in begging for

something. For example "I **pray** you'll really listen to my explanation. The concluding addresses or arguments of counsels in a law court before judgement is given are also referred to as prayers.

### **Types, Modes and Contents of Prayer**

Religious prayer, which is the subject matter here may be verbalized in speech, demonstrated symbolically through singing and dancing, could be intrinsic as in meditation, could be a person praying wholly or partially. Prayers could be rendered in spoken prose or poetry or songs lent to the sentiments of praise, thanksgiving or petition. It could be vivacious, topical and expressive of the spiritual, psychological and emotional state of the petitioner. It can also be litanic, panegyric, praise poem, stylized ejaculation or short invocation. Prayer may take two forms: presentation and invitation. Prayers are tailored to fit the occasion and the current frame of mind of the one who utters the prayers. Hence prayers can be joyful, hopeful, despairing. Despite the tone, items mentioned in prayers have personal dimension, a community orientation and universal application. (Ndiukwu 243). For (Shorter 3) on types of prayer "prayer is basically petition, but thanksgiving is a further expression of man's conscious dependence upon supernatural powers. Finally, self-accusation and penitential prayer are used to buttress the petition and reinforce the plea, acting as a form of persuasion."

There are four primary types of prayer in the West as delineated by (Poloma and Pendleton, 43) utilizing factor analysis: meditative (more spiritual, silent thinking), ritualistic (reciting), petitionary (making requests to God), and colloquial (general conversing with God). Further scientific study of prayer using factor analysis has revealed three dimensions of prayer. For instance, Ladd and Spilka's first dimension was awareness of self, inward reaching. Their second and third dimensions were upward reaching (toward God) and outward reaching (toward others). This study appears to support the contemporary model of prayer as connection whether to the self, higher being, or others.

In prayer, the people request such things as good health, healing, protection, safety in travelling, prosperity, preservation of life, peace, procreation, marital bliss, forgiveness of sins, and many others. Prayers are also made for deliverance from the devil's hold sometimes called exorcism; from sudden death and witchcrafts. The community at large may ask for reign of peace, the cessation of epidemics or pandemics and or other dangers, success in war or raids, acceptance of sacrifices and offerings, wellbeing of humans as well as animal and crops are also presented. For some mystics, prayer may just be a simple awareness of the divine.

The concept of prayer to be examined here, however, is that of a devout petition to God or an object of worship, a spiritual communion with God or an object of worship, as in supplication, thanksgiving, adoration, or confession. Particularly, this paper is concerned with prayer as "the speech a man pours out before God which must primarily express – whatever immediate purpose the suppliant may have had in mind – the worshippers earnest desire for a revelation of the divine presence and express that presence dialogically. (Buber, 52)

**The Problem**

The problem of this paper however is that the rational foundations of the phenomenon of religious prayer is always a source of worry to any discerning or questioning mind. First among the rational difficulties that agitate the mind is whether it makes sense to pray in relation to the theological attributes of God particularly immutability, immensity, and divine providence. Breaking down the rational difficulties of religious prayers provokes such questions as: Why pray if God by his nature of omniscience already knows and has ordained the future?" How does omnipotent God in answering prayers interfere with this complex and harmoniously functioning world-machine governed by eternal and inexorable laws?

Also, from the existentialist perspective, the problem of how prayer coheres with existential realities is also difficult. According to Prayer statistics of 2021 as published in Statista.com, in a study on Frequency of Prayer, average of 55% of those surveyed across both developed and developing nations (85% in developing nations and 25% in developed nations) noted they pray at least once a day. Despite many religions in the world and their many undeniable prayer sessions for a better world, the world has experienced less peace, more terrorism, more political instability and generally degenerated or stagnated in many spheres of its existence socially, politically, economically and otherwise. A very fresh example is prayer for better health which does not seem to have paid off as the world has seen epidemics upon epidemic as seen in Ebola epidemic and Covid 19 pandemic. It doesn't seem that fewer accidents occur in air, water and land travels. There is no more peace in the world as more countries are in civil rife

On a kind of general note, the practice of religious prayer is also disturbed by the philosophical problem of evil which essentially can be put thus: If God is all-good and all-powerful as is generally claimed about him: why is there evil (such as diseases, pandemics, injustice, abject poverty, moral weakness, political wickedness, etc.)? Why indeed are there situations that warrant or compel prayer? God should want to prevent evil situations if he is all loving and be able to prevent evil situations if he is all-powerful. In this regard some philosophers, in the light of evidence, after reflecting on the problem of evil, conclude that it is either God is not all-powerful and all-good (he is either one or the other) or he does not exist or he does not answer prayer.

**The Objective**

The objective of this paper therefore is to interrogate the rational foundation of prayer and that way possibly cause or initiate more reflections and debate on the subject. The paper first interrogates rationally how prayer works in relation to the nature of God and secondly the place of prayer in the existential welfare or success equation particularly as is commonly presented in most religious languages or expressions, pointing out clearly how prayer encourages existential irresponsibility. Thirdly, the paper also raises some of the philosophically based questions that agitate the mind particularly about whether God actually answers prayer or not in the light of evidence.

It is important to note that essentially, this paper is not an interrogation on the existence of God or supernatural forces but is particularly whether human actions, wishes or intentions can move God to a particular direction as is usually claimed in prayers. The point is to understand whether an unchangeable (immutable) and ever present God can be moved to

act following prayers. Not only is God immutable: He alone is immutable, unlike every creatural being that is subject to change. But religious language and acts of prayer seem to have as its starting point, the presupposition that God undergoes change in one form or another; that he realizes his being successively through passage from potentiality to actuality in the process of responding to human prayers. The gamut of religious prayers presents God in a continuous process of becoming, so that some form of reality is always being acquired and lost through change in response to prayers.

### **Some Philosophical Works on Prayer**

The problem of how an immutable God seems to undergo some changes in response to prayer has been a subject of interest for many thinkers. A renowned Christian author in *Mere Christianity* (Lewis, 32) attempted a philosophical discourse on how the power of God relates with the natural world. He delved into how the power of God usually called into action in prayer relates with the laws of nature. He exalts the law of nature which he calls the law of right and wrong as being above and beyond the actual facts of human behaviour. This is where he locates the power of God which transcends the so-called natural laws. For him natural laws regulate the way things are, the power of God determines the way things should be. Lewis makes the point that there is a big difference between “the way things are” and “the way things should be” with regard to natural laws like gravity and what he called “human nature.” He drew a distinction between “facts” and “reality.” He said that the Law of Nature was based on some reality that was “beyond” what we experience in this world. It is based on what he called “a real law.” In another place, he explained, “there is more than one kind of reality.” Lewis stated:

When you say that nature is governed by certain laws, this may only mean that nature does, in fact behave in a certain way. The so-called laws may not be anything real—anything above and beyond the actual facts which we observe... The Law of Nature, or of Right and Wrong, must be something above and beyond the actual facts of human behaviour. In this case, besides the actual facts, you have something else—a real law which we did not invent and which we know we ought to obey.

In his thesis, “A Philosophical Analysis of Petitionary Prayer”, (Haas 78) presented a philosophical analysis of petitionary prayer, from the perspective of one who engages in petitionary prayer on a regular basis. His paper looked at the basis for petitionary prayer from the Bible and some traditional thoughts and practices associated with it from the church. Even though he delved into some philosophical problems or concerns that are usually raised against petitionary prayer, he did it with a religious bias hence he is caught in the work doing more of apologetics. He merely defended the Christian perspectives of the problem of free will/divine providence, the problem of hiddenness, and the problem of God's goodness. Again, even though he tried to show that these problems are non-issues when considered from the Christian doctrine of grace of Jesus Christ, yet he failed to show how divine attributes can co-exist with prayers in general particularly traditional religious prayers which can fall into four types: Adoration: Praising God, Contrition: Asking for God's forgiveness, Petition: Asking God for a favour, Thanksgiving: Showing God gratitude. Haas scratched the basic philosophical problems in the practice of

petitionary prayer, such as: Why pray if God has already ordained the future? Does praying even make sense to an almighty transcendent God? And, why should one pray to a God who is invisible, silent, and unknown? He did not deal with the issues objectively given his religious and apologetic biases, appealing more often than not to the scriptures. It is evident that both Lewis and Lauren Haas subtly avoided the problem in question, even though they tried to display their ingenuity yet they succeeded in selling their Christian biases as the philosophical basis for prayer. Generally many reflections on prayer are usually either exhortations or apologetics and thus does not have much for the worries of the philosopher.

Similarly extracts from the writings of (Ahmad and Mahdi 230-232) on the power and acceptance of prayer republished from the second volume of *Essence of Islam* only talked about prayer from the human perspective. Ahmad generally discussed the effectiveness of prayer. He presented prayer more as primordially a human act that elicits a divine response. *In trying to show that to supplicate is human and to respond is divine*, he wrote:

When a child being driven by hunger cries for milk, milk is generated in the mother's breasts. The child does not know what prayer is, but his cries draw the milk. This is a universal experience. Sometimes when the mother does not perceive the presence of milk in her breasts, the child's cries help to draw it. Then can our cries before God Almighty draw nothing? They certainly draw everything. But those sightless ones, who parade themselves as scholars and philosophers, cannot see it. If a person were to reflect on the philosophy of prayer, keeping in mind the connection and relationship which a child has with its mother, he would find it easy to understand. The second type of mercy comes into operation after supplication. Go on asking and you will go on receiving.

Perhaps it was Eleonore Stump's essay (81) that came close to feeling my pulse in terms of how prayer is a contradiction in terms to the meaning of God. In her essay "Petitionary Prayer: is a belief in the efficacy and usefulness of petitionary prayer consistent with a belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God?" Stump constructed a thirteen part argument to show the difficulty in reconciling petitionary prayer with divine attributes. Stump's argument begins with the notion of God's goodness, and works with the notion of God's providence to produce an argument that seemingly destroys the validity of petitionary prayer. It begins with like this.

1. A perfectly good being never makes the world worse than it would otherwise be if he can avoid doing so. 2. An omniscient and omnipotent being can avoid doing anything which it is not logically necessary for him to do. 3. An omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being never makes the world worse than it would otherwise be unless it is logically necessary for him to do so

The argument continues to these premises concerning petitionary prayer:

If what is requested in a petitionary prayer is or results in a state of affairs the realization of which would make the world worse than it would otherwise be, an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being will not fulfil that request. If what is requested in a petitionary prayer is or results in a state of affairs the realization of which would make the world better than it would otherwise be, an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being will bring about that state of affairs even if no prayer for its realization has been made.

And finally, she ended with these conclusions: .Petitionary prayer effects no change. Petitionary prayer is pointless. Eleonore indeed struck the bone of contention by showing that an omniscient God does not need to be reminded of the best things he would do for his world or an all loving God would do good things for his creature without a request. Reconciling this with prayer is my problem. The few available literatures in this area have left many of the questions unanswered.

### **Prayer and Divine Attributes**

The philosophical problem with prayer, commonest forms of prayer: petition, worship or praise, prayer of penitence etc is that there is the conscious belief that prayers can dispose the Supreme God and that way tend to contradict the attributes of the metaphysical God. (Aquinas, 1,2,8) defines an attribute as that which follows by natural necessity upon a fully constituted essence. Given the essence, the attribute is also given. The attribute always characterizes the essence, since it flows necessarily from the essence. Another term for attribute, practically synonymous with it, is property. As the word indicates (i.e. *proprium*, one's own), a property belongs to an essence in such a manner that it is proper to this essence. Thus the power of speech is an attribute or property of man as a rational animal, only an animal can have organs capable of emitting articulated sounds; and only a rational being has ideas which can be communicated to others by means of speech. Attributes reveal the underlying essence. Since the attributes flow necessarily from fully constituted essence, there exists an intrinsic connection between the attributes and the essence, and so the mind of man naturally goes from knowledge of the attributes to knowledge of the essence itself. When speaking of God, we understand by the divine attributes all those perfections which flow necessarily from the divine and which are found in no other being but God. Some attributes of God pertain to his being or essence, and some pertain to his operations. These attributes are absolute, in the sense that they are present in God irrespective of any creatural being. In the context of this paper, among the various divine attributes the ones that are of interest are immutability and immensity.

### **God's Immutability and Prayer**

One attribute of God that is difficult to reconcile with prayer is immutability. As the word indicates, immutability is the negation of mutability. Mutability (Mutation) means capability of change. A thing is said to change when it passes from one state to another. Every change involves two things: a subject who acquires or loses something and a reality which is acquired or lost by the subject. Theists generally maintain that God is in no way changeable. God is immutable; he does not change as a matter of fact, he is incapable of intrinsic change, he cannot change his mind because he is complete. This immediately comes into conflict with prayers that tend to ask God to change his mind and have mercy, heal the sick, attend to a situation and so on. Most prayers generally try to prevail on God to change his mind. In prayer of penitence, that is asking God for forgiveness, for instance, God is asked to change from being angry to being happy just as in prayer of petition, God is made to move in the direction of the petitioner and grant his request. In responding to prayers of penitence or petition there is an intrinsic change in God from

state of being angry to being happy. God is made to change from emotions of anger to that of mercy. The picture presented of God is that of a person who gets angry with his creatures when they behave in ways he does not like (even though given his all-knowing nature, he must have known what they would do even before they did it) and feels better and forgives them when they are remorseful. But an absolutely simple God metaphysically speaking is incapable, despite claims of his absolute power, of moral, physical and intellectual change. Prayer of petition claims or tries to inform or remind the God who cannot undergo any intellectual change or acquire any new knowledge of their problems. This is a big contradiction. Furthermore since God is infinitely perfect, ignorance, whether antecedent or subsequent, must be excluded from Him. God therefore, can neither acquire nor lose knowledge, it follows that God cannot be informed of anything as claimed in prayer of petition

Another disturbing twist to the issue since God is all-loving and knows what is best for his creatures, is the difficulty for him to answer one of his creature's prayers of petition without offending his love for another of his creatures. For instance between the prayers of the sick who is asking God for medication-less healing and the prayer of the medical doctor or pharmacist who is asking God for business growth, which one should God answer? While the sick needs healing to be happy and feel loved by God, the medical practitioners, the physicians and the pharmacists need to attend to the sick to make money and have a business growth. Similar difficult situations will God have in dealing with the prayers of the living who is praying for long life or against the so called untimely death and the prayers those businesses revolve around death: coffin makers, mortuary workers, undertakers. Again who will God answer between the prayers of the unmarried young lady who earnestly desires to be married to a loving young man and the young catholic seminarian who is asking God to protect his vocation to the celibate catholic priesthood or the barren couple who needs 'fruit of the womb' and the universal fear for the geometric rise in population and its survival consequences for humanity or the farmer who needs maximum rainfall for his crops and the people living in erosion prone areas who don't need rain at all. There are of course many of such difficult situations where God will find it difficult to demonstrate his love and yet answer to someone's petition.

The worst seems to be prayer of exorcism or deliverance which seems to present an almighty God as engaging in a conquest with a lower being, the devil over a soul which properly belongs to God. Since God is the only and ultimate principle, (with apologies to the Manichaeans), even if he didn't create but at least he knows the origin of the devil. How then will he allow 'his creature' to, against his divine will, possess his creature for destructive purposes and then engage in fight with the devil to free this his creature. In deliverance prayer, the devil appears unwilling to free its victim, hence the military nature of such prayers.

Even prayer of thanksgiving to God for the good he did equally seems redundant because God by nature is all good and cannot act otherwise. It appears unnecessary to thank someone, a being for acting according to his nature; for doing what he is supposed to do,

what he cannot even decide not to do given his necessary goodness, and an action that is inexorably his nature. God cannot decide not to love; to hate, not to be a good God. It is essentially in his nature to love and be good to his creatures. Even the prayer hypocrisy is most evident when as heard, in some religious gatherings, people are asked to thank God for the good things he did for them which he didn't do for others. We hear such things as 'thank God for keeping you alive as some are presently languishing in hospitals; thank God for this feat you accomplished which many could not even when they put in more effort. In this case, God is presented as a being partial in his love, limited in power and timed by human events all of which are contradictory to his nature.

### **God's Immensity and Prayer**

Immensity is taken here as that intrinsic attribute of God in virtue of which he is necessarily present wherever any being exists which is not God. This attribute is eternal because it is really identical with God's eternal essence and is independent of whether creatural things exist or do not exist. Even if no creatural beings existed, the attribute of God's immensity would be intrinsic to Him and would require that he be present to all creatural beings as soon as they began to exist. If God is everywhere and in all beings then he does not need to be informed in any way about any situation in any of the creatural beings. The omnipresence of God contradicts the acts of prayer where God is told, say, the political crisis in a country. Hence, what is being established here is not only that God is in every being; but that it is redundant to inform him about any being where he already dwells.

### **Prayer as a Disservice To Existential Responsibility**

Existential responsibility is the full awareness and control of one's life without any or serious recourse to the outside world. One is existentially responsible, according to Jean-Paul Sartre and most other existentialist philosophers, when he becomes aware that the natural concomitant to human freedom is personal responsibility and acknowledges that he is responsible for his failure or success in life. Nothing else, including God, is responsible. Once this kind of awareness settles in someone, he responsibly pursues the right values of life, makes careful choices or does the right things with full and proper scientific (cause and effect) attitude. . But since different forms of prayer as have been shown seek for divine help purportedly at the end of human ability, then prayer makes those praying lose the sense of being fully in charge or responsible for their lives and that way provides room for existential irresponsibility. Prayer does a disservice to the existential responsibility of the praying person, because believing that there is a ready divine help in a situation, instead of tasking his mental resources to deal with the situation believes and expects God to help.

It is no surprise then that today, according to statistics released by Gallup in 2014, societies that privilege science over religion make more progress as members generally act as if they carry their fate in their hands, not in God's hands. In a study "How Religion Affects Children's Judgment of What Is Real and What Is Pretend" (Kathleen Corriveau *et al*, 65) found among other things "that religious children cannot tell fact from fiction...." because they are taught to think that miracles are possible — and so for them,

a story that includes a miracle is not obviously fictional. Non-religious children, that is non-praying children by contrast, receive less encouragement to think that miracles are possible - and so for them a story that includes a miracle is likely to be made up. They are thus unaware and unexpectant of any divine assistance and tend to approach life pragmatically while the religious ones, aware and expectant of divine help, live their lives expecting a miracle. Many scientists have regarded the history of miracle in religion as history of superstition, gullibility and fraud.

Prayer thus deceives those who pray into believing that wellbeing in many areas of life – finance, relationship, health, fruitfulness is more of a function of divine activity than the existential choices made, life styles, economic priorities and general cause-effect existential processes. Prayer distorts and in fact destroys the sense of respect for the laws of nature by misdirecting the energy of expectation from the individual to something outside of him and in that way fertilizes mental laziness, dwarfs the person's development-consciousness and reduces the ability to reason scientifically and assume responsibility for his life. (Anele 34) argues that religious or praying minds quickly lose the foundation capacities for fostering human and national development in the following words:

Again on what prayer can do to the psyche, *Your Reality Scans* in the fields of Neurotheology and neuroscience show that people who spend untold hours in prayer or meditation go dark in the parietal lobe, the brain area that helps create a sense of self. Researchers -Andrew Newberg and Richard Davidson - say these people may be rewriting the neural connections in their brains — altering how they see the world. Newberg and Davidson 45 have scanned and imaged the brain of a Methodist minister McDermott, some monks of both Christian and Sikh religion and some Franciscan nuns when they engaged in intense prayer for more than a decade and found out according to Newberg “that the more you focus on something whether its maths... or football or God – the more that becomes your reality, the more it becomes written into the neural connection of your brain.” He noted that there is increased brain activity during prayers.

### **Are Prayers Answered?**

The next problem with prayer is that it appears a waste of human time, energy and attention in comparison with its outcomes. On the efficacy and potency of prayer to change human conditions to the better, my experience and feeling is that prayers are not usually answered as much as man prays. The magnitude of evil and discomfort in the human world does not in any way attest to the amount of prayer against such. God does not seem to respond to prayers, at least as compared to the amount of prayers made to him in different religions in different parts of the world. In 1872, Francis Galton, as reported by (Richards 337) used statistical analysis of empirical patterns to refute the belief that prayers evoke miracles. His studies showed that in spite of their prayers, the clergy lived no longer than physicians or lawyers; that ships with missionaries sank as often as others; and that religious lands had their full share of evil.

Galton's studies conclude that there is no good evidence to hold the position that prayers make any difference in the outcome of human affairs, that those who pray more have

more advantage over those who don't; that those who are religious suffer less evil than those who are not. Evil befall both the religious and the non-religious alike. When large scale earthquakes happen in an area, it does not select its victims. Churches are not spared. Religious and non-religious societies experience bad leaders; citizens of both societies die in accidents. They slip off to their passion if unchecked, they fail their exams if they refuse to prepare well. Praying ladies do not find love if they are asocial and do not enhance their feminine appeal, businesses of praying people fail if they do not work hard, criminals attack them if the society is bad, epidemics visit both the praying and the non-praying ones if they are not vaccinated, they divorce in their marriages if they refuse to work on their relationships, they go childless if they are impotent, they die in childbirth if the pregnant women refuse to follow doctor's advice and so on. What difference then does prayer make?

What Francis Galton did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was modeled by Templeton Foundation in 2005 as reported by (McGee 67) when it funded a study by providing \$2.4 million to see how large scale praying might affect patients recovering from heart surgery. About 1,800 patients at six different hospitals were divided into three groups at each hospital. Two of these groups did not know whether they were going to be prayed for or not. One of these two in fact did not receive prayers, the other did. A third group was told they were indeed going to be prayed for as they were. Three large religious groups, two of the Catholic and one protestant were enlisted to pray for 14 days for two of the three groups totaling 1,200 patients, 600 of whom knew the prayers were being offered for them. At the end of the two weeks, the relative health of the members of each group was evaluated by teams that did not know who was to have received prayers and who did not. When the numbers were all properly crunched, the outcome was rather unimpressive. Those who were prayed for fared no better than those who were not. One odd result as (Barnes 117) noted those who had been told explicitly that they were going to be object of prayers did slightly worse than the others. Perhaps hearing that a massive number of prayers were to be made on their behalf, some have speculated, made these patients more fearful that they were in the direst need of prayer, which in turn made them more pessimistic about their health.

It is yet difficult to establish that praying for something has an effect on its specific outcome, whether it be for health, prosperity etc. Most times prayers are blatantly not answered, even the ones from the most beloved of God. Any honest person who prays will attest to this. There are many very religious people who are extremely poor which is a complete anti thesis to their wishes and prayers; many of such who are childless or who want certain sex of children - boy or girl - who cannot get it. Many survivors of auto crashes or air crashes have shared their stories of the amount of prayers made as the accidents were about to happen and yet they happened. God most times seems to be absent when he is most called upon in prayers. When prayers are not answered, as is most times the case, we philosophize: God knows the best; who knows what would have been the case if...', we did not have enough faith, we are not tithing enough, we prayed in sin and so

on. Yet all around us we see those who do not care about God and consequently who do not pray enjoy most of the goodies of life sought in prayer: 'sinful' prayerless couples having children as they want, and the sex they want, non-tithing people getting richer just by observing simple financial rules. Certainly, there are claims of prayers being answered or miracles happening, but as Hume and others would say, these may be mere coincidences, claims that would disappear when subjected to critical scientific analysis.

However, one benefit that has been attributed to prayer from experience, as some studies suggest, is psychological health benefits, even if momentary. Prayer appears to have health implications on the psyche. Empirical studies suggest that mindfully reading and reciting the Psalms (from scripture) can help a person calm down and focus. Three main pathways to explain this trend have been offered: placebo effect, focus and attitude adjustment, and activation of healing processes. When people pray with focus they become more centered and gain better view of the world and the prevailing situations. This makes them feel calmer and in some people it lowers their blood pressure, makes them feel better, feel hope or feel loved as it calms the brain by increasing frontal lobe activity, focus and intentionality. The feeling of release that comes with prayer is articulated below:

He who supplicates God at the time of difficulty and distress and seeks the resolution of his difficulties from Him achieves satisfaction . . . from God Almighty provided he carries his supplication to its limit. Even if he does not achieve the purpose of his supplication, he is bestowed some other kind of satisfaction and contentment by God. (McGee, 67)

However the argument that prayer plays an important psycho-therapeutic role, gives assurance, calmness and serenity of mind which helps the praying person not to surrender in the face of the distressing circumstances of life can still be challenged because there are also other ways one can get the same calming or 'opiate' effect kudos to Karl Marx. Drug, yoga, committed sexual intercourse, meditation, good human relationship, counseling and so on can produce the same effect even though momentary just as the calmness that prayers brings is also momentary. The American psychologist James H. Leuba (1868–1946), in *A Psychological Study of Religion*, accounts for mystical experience psychologically and physiologically, pointing out certain drug-induced calming experiences. William James was also interested in mystical experiences from a drug-induced perspective, leading him to make some experiments with nitrous oxide and even peyote.

One component of prayer that brings calmness and hope, that requires further comment, is the meditative component. Meditative prayer causes momentary shifting of attention away from habitual or customary modes of thinking and perception, in order to permit experiencing in a different way. Meditation can induce an altered state of consciousness characterized by a loss of awareness of extraneous stimuli, one-pointed attention to the meditation object to the exclusion of all other thoughts, and feelings of bliss. But since there are also drugs, as noted earlier, that can bring the same calming effect, then it is not the exclusive reserve of meditation. A recent study by *Medical News Today* found that religion activates the same reward-processing brain circuits as sex, drugs, and other

addictive activities. It is not necessary therefore, following the principle of parsimony of William of Ockham therefore, to invoke extra ordinary solutions, such as prayers for what has natural solutions.

### **Conclusion**

The philosophical problems of prayer is that it is difficult to explain how God answers prayers without losing his nature; without passing from one state to another state acquiring or losing some reality. If God hears my petition for instance, it simply means he does not possess it (the knowledge of what I told him) already and acquires the information by means of change from ignorance to knowledge. Hence if God could acquire some reality, He would of necessity, have to be mutable which is a contradiction to his nature is. Since he is immutable, he cannot acquire any knowledge hence he cannot hear prayer, nonetheless answer it. The same consequence follows from the infinite perfection of God. If God could acquire reality by means of change, he would not be infinitely perfect before the change; He would certainly be more perfect if He did not acquire it but possessed it already. This same argument holds with the necessity of God's immensity. His presence is not to be conceived as a potentiality of some sort, but as the fullness of the divine being required. This negates in every sense, the practice of calling the attention of God to a situation, say to heal, to help and so on. The mysterious nature of his presence everywhere and in every being says this. Again, it has also been argued that the practice of prayer shifts responsibility as those who pray tend to be existentially irresponsible as they expect help from God. Even though it has been acknowledged that prayer calms me down, gives some sense of spiritual anchor, a sense of hope yet it is also argued that there are other ways of inducing such feelings. To wrap up while this paper does not discourage prayer as such, yet it calls for more reflections on the content, types and modes of prayers. The work should generally elicit modifications of the words and content of religious prayers in order to straighten things out in the relationship between rational self and believing self.

### **Works Cited**

Aloysius Ndiukwu, *Authenticity of Belief in African (Igbo) Traditional Religion: A Critical Appraisal in the Light of Christian Faith*, Wurzburg: European University Studies, 2012.

*Ayyam-us-Sulh, RuhaniKhaza'in*, vol. 14, Eng. Trans in *Essence of Islam*, Vol.2

Clive Staples Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: Scribner, 1952

Daniel Anele, "How Religion Underdeveloped Nigeria". Retrieved from <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/12/religion-underdeveloped-nigeria-1/>

Elenore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 2 (April 1979): 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/20009745> (accessed 15 April 2012).

Glenn McGee and Arthur Kaplan, "Playing with God: Prayer is Not a Prescription"  
The American Journal of Bioethics. 2007

*Catechism of the Christian Doctrine*, no.

Martin Buber, *Thoughts on God*, London. Oxford, 1945.

Michael Horace Barnes, *Understanding Religion and Science*, New York: Continuum,  
2010

Paige Haas, "A Philosophical Analysis of Petitionary Prayer" Unpublished Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Religious Studies, Baylor University in Partial  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Honors Program

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Rome. UUP, 1975.

Robert Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and  
Behaviors*, Chicago: university of Chicago, 1987.

.....*The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* Vol. 16, No. 1 January, 1992.

Poloma Pendleton, *Psychology of Religion*, New York: Urwin, 1999