

PSYCHOLOGY OF PRAYER¹

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Abstract

Practice of prayer has negative or positive psychological effects depending on the extent of frankness put in the prayer. Prayer, for which is characteristic instrumentation of God for own needs, brings in the end negative effects. Prayer might be filled by fetishistic and autistic intentions, might become an escape from real problems.

The prayer related to God who is value himself leads to positive effect in its consequences: openness, trust and expression of will to change play important roles here. This process results in psycho-hygienic relevant development of regularity and order in everyday practice, clarification of values and differentiation between important and secondary things. Encounter with oneself, which is part of the prayer, challenges the worshipper to become willing to admit own mistakes, accept them and become able to bear the truth about own self. Similar process occurs in psychotherapy, where the person develops his positive aspects, recovers his abilities, lives a more authentic and fulfilling life. One doesn't become a faultless man all of a sudden, but he „clarifies“ his personality, behavior as well as relationships. He becomes more and more integrated and authentic.

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Introduction

I am going to write here about a prayer as a realization of relationship between God and Man, the desire to be with Him/God and pure focus on God. This focus, activity (behavioral, mental, emotional) directed towards God is showing effect, this might be – depending on the extent of implicit sincerity – positive or negative. I'm presenting conclusions from my theoretical diploma thesis (Čumplová, 2003) based on research of literature and mainly on work on my own experience with praying – using an introspective method.

God as a „Provider of Sense“ or God as a „Provider of Happiness“.

My introspection and conclusions of more experienced researchers attests that the goal of the prayer with positive effects is God himself, the goal of the prayer with no or negative effects is on the other hand God as a tool, a mean to gain something else. The shift from

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the positive psychological effects and the negative ones lies between the idea of God as a „Provider of Sense“, and God as a „Provider of Happiness“.

God addressed in a prayer as „Provider of Sense“ is in situations of long-term anxiety, loneliness or pain bringing relief and encouragement, as He is taken into account and considered as a basic life value. Due to the living relationship to God there arises a space of true significance in mind of the believer, a space which is regularly updated and in which is God a source of internal values. On the other hand the understanding of God as “a provider of happiness” does not have the same effect in such situations.

The negative effects of prayer

To the negative effects of prayer belongs an illusive relief - when the prayer accents the focus on believer him/herself and attempts to fulfill his/her own ideas; example “*My Lord, I ask You for > what I want ...*”, instead of: “*My Lord, I ask you to get the possibility to understand what You have prepared for me, what You ask from me at this moment ...*”. Another negative effect has a prayer as a form of escape; at time of failure and worries where instead of: “*My Lord, give me the strength to get over it, let this suffering to lead me towards You ...*”, the prayer goes “*My Lord, please change it!*”, where we can notice an attempt to suppress the disenchantment. Another negative effect we can notice in a prayer where a believer might attempt to get rid of his or her responsibility. For example - if there is a challenge, test, difficult exam or uncomfortable situation and the prayer goes: “*Let the problem disappear, let the problem skip me ...*”, instead of: “*My Lord, if only I pass the test for You, let me accept Your will...*”. In the first case we see the incapability to face up the problem and reluctance to accept what is coming.

God is in this twisted way of prayer just a mean to something else, He is being used, reduced to someone we can demand something from.

Wrong interpretation of God

I'm not, understandably, able to detail qualities and give right description of God, but it is not difficult to notice, what is wrong interpretation of God's being.

As T. Halík (1993) writes, God is in wrong interpretation mentioned above considered to be (and used as) a slot-machine, in which you insert a prayer and you get an audience and help for it; psychologically - God is here just a projection of human wishes into the metaphysical world. But God is not some kind of human wishes satisfying machine, this approach takes away the God's freedom and aliveness and takes away as well the believer's freedom and responsibility to co-create his own life through his own decisions. The believer is thus losing the possibility to perceive and understand the world and all events as God's challenges, which suppose to be answered.

God might be in this twisted approach to praying considered to be – and used as – a garbage box, if the prayer is just a formal handover of particular worries or errands, without any willingness to intensify the frankness and honesty and draw the conclusions for one-self. The mutual relationship between God and Man is fading.

The praying person relies on grace and forgiveness as if he would not take into account the God's freedom. He uses God as a robot.

The praying person wants to be redeemed, but not saved from his sins; wants to be redeemed, but not for price too high and the way he imagines. The self-centric egoism of the believer is growing and he or she gets trapped in illusion of him self.

When the understanding of prayer is twisted this way, man is actually deviate from self-discovery and growth, there is neither positive development of his personality or increased quality of his social relationships.

The positive effects of prayer

I discovered in my introspection two kinds of positive effects of prayer. I call the first psycho-hygienic and the second psychotherapeutic effects. I call psycho-hygienic those effects of prayer, where the believer progress himself by means of his will and intentional change of his behavior. The psychotherapeutic are those effects, which result from the relationship realized by prayer, thus through the necessary presence of a “therapist”.

The psycho-hygienic positive effects of prayer

To psycho-hygienic positive effects belongs the moment of standstill; for one own reflection in front of God there is a need to allocate time for this activity – a need to find privacy and space for appeasement and also a need to allow oneself and the matter considered important at the moment, to escape the continuous stream of worries and obligations. Another positive psycho-hygienic effect is a system or frame; the practice of prayer is adding a frame, is adding a system into the everyday life, gives it a clear structure and adds awareness of spirituality in one’s life. Down-to-earth self-analysis in the evening and clear inner goal-setting in the morning could help to ease the understanding of everyday life as a „God’s gift and blessing”, not a chaotic sequence of events. Potential failures are then not considered as unbearably heavy and potential achievements do not have to lead to unhealthy pride.

As the next positive psycho-hygienic effect I found a diligence. Diligence best proves through readiness to return to the previous discipline immediately after the end of a period of its necessary interruption. Diligence is being cultivated in prayer as an engagement to regularity, rules and system, and as a general ability could be used in all the aspects of everyday life.

The fundamental positive effect of prayer is involvement of will. For regular practice of prayer there is not enough to involve just own spontaneity, it is necessary to base the prayer on discipline and will, which are an expression of human authenticity and autonomy. During the cultivation of relationship to God, man has to force himself someway. There is a need to devote own time (to sacrifice another activity to prayer), show devotion (with awareness of the engagement) and get over obstacles such as laziness, distraction, tiredness, so shortly, one has to involve own will (Lachmanová, 2000). The acedia – Christian notion for the after-midday tiredness – might be such an obstacle (it is the spiritual paralysis of the powers of the soul. It is the state during which there is total indifference to prayer and fasting. Since man is a psychophysical being, spiritual slothfulness is reflected in the body too. It is a psychophysical weakness and slackness). If one wants to pray, he/she has to often fight the frustration, lack of interest, tiredness and

unwillingness to devote him/herself to the given task. There are two forms of acedia in spiritual life. On one hand there is slothfulness as we commonly understand it, laziness to pray at all, to find a time for a prayer, laziness to spend at least some energy on prayer. Saint Teresa of Ávila compares this situation to care for garden (Terezie z Avily, 1991): If the believer does not pray for this reason, his path to prayer is more and more overgrown with thorn-bushes – if he does not make effort to pray regularly and does not raise the interest and diligence, his practice of prayer would be as a garden overgrown with nettles and other weed. When one visits the garden once in the time, he has a hard work to get rid of the weed just to come again in half a year and find the garden in even worse shape. On the other hand the acedia could in spiritual life manifest itself through extreme activity, continuous search for “substitute employment”. The same way as laziness to do anything also the laziness to stop doing something and lack of discipline of all kind, which has something to do with laziness to organize own time regarding the real priorities, could prevent the positive progress in prayer practice. Excess of different interests and a need to be occupied by some activity is usually just a compensation of inner emptiness and unwillingness to stop and give attention to anticipated inner fretfulness and dissatisfaction. The illusion of meaningful life represented by busy schedule weakens the necessary human ability to tolerate and live with oneself. The one who develops necessary self-denial and invest into the practice of prayer the effort needed to overcome the acedia, will gain the ability to endure, keep the discipline, the ability to fix the distracted outer attention into inner focus, and last but not least also the ability to cope with oneself.

The involvement of will during the practice of prayer is as well bringing the sense of adequacy. If the prayer should have this psycho-hygienic function, flabbiness has to be prevented as otherwise the prayer would not take a deep effect and immoderateness has to be prevented as well as otherwise there would be focus on achievement and quantity. It has a close link to not overestimating oneself and own capabilities. The necessity to stop everything for prayer can dispute the importance of everyday duties and lead to their reevaluation. It shows us that not every challenge is a challenge meant exactly for us.

Psychotherapeutic gains - positive effects

To „the fruits of the prayer“, to its positive effects, belongs the reunion with ourselves: to be able to meet God, we have to be able to meet ourselves first, to reunite with ourselves. The believer is in attempt to be honest and frank in front of God going through own illusions and wrong projections about him/herself progressing to his/her real identity, to the core of his/her own personality. Those imaginations and illusions about oneself are important in some way, but it is crucial that the illusions and ideals are not dominating the personality, but the person is in control of them and through them controls him/herself. It is plain enough that if those illusions should not dominate the personality, they have to be well known and mastered. The meeting and reunion with oneself through the practice of prayer is calling for willingness to recognize own mistakes and accept own personality with those mistakes. It appeals to be strong enough to sustain the truth of ourselves and revalue the self-perception.

There are different answers coming on question „Who am I?“ which the believer puts in his/her prayer. He/she identifies with own work, status, with the way he/she is perceived by others. But not even the identification with own feelings and thoughts could fully expose

the real Self. When searching for own inner essence one is confronted with the idealized self-image. Everyone has essential need of coherence and consistency of self-understanding with which the frank and honest prayer is conflicting. The prayer helps the self-discovery, throws light upon unconscious strategies defending the idealized self-image and points out the deficits and wrong perceptions.

It is untenable to live in lie in front of omniscient God for longer time. The believer either abandons the practice of prayer, or surrenders and goes through the liberating confession. First the exact declaration of own mistake or sin, without any glozing and understatement evokes full realization of the mistake and its mental recognition and acceptance of its seriousness. The confession in the practice of prayer works with the simple principle of therapeutic method called inquiry. God is the silently listening partner, who lets the believer to affect him/herself through own confession, partner who lets the own realization and regret take effect.

In the elevated atmosphere of prayer, during sincere self-reflection, the believer could experience emotive abreaction and gain new insight into a traumatizing situation of own failure. The catharsis caused by this effect of getting again over past experiences is the therapeutic tool how to involve emotions into the process of releasing of inner tensions. The emotive experience of prayer, when the believer releases his/her suffering and worries in front of God brings as well the healing power of grief. The grief has the ability to link to the past experiences and together with regret could revise and solve the late situation and/or original problem/issue (Frankl, 1990).

The man is despite the declaration of his own independence and freedom living in illusion of equalitarianism and privileged position. The declared freedom is but an illusion. The person is ruled and dominated by unconscious and suppressed strains, social and natural forces. He or she is disintegrated and alienated although he or she lives in illusion of personal freedom. The accepted conformity is a way to make own life easier, but it is limiting the independency of his or her decisions and makes the person to try to be and to pretend to be someone else. Even his own wishes and desires are consequently turned against himself, as he is - without full reflection of matters related to their achieving – pushed into situations, which would not be chosen voluntarily. The practice of prayer creates a specific space for meditation and re-thinking oneself and own life, a space to go through what needs and impulses are influencing it, what goals one follows, what are the personal preferences, what acting is usually leading to unwanted situations or into repetitive conflicts. The recognition of one's own determination and its understanding through the practice of prayer returns the self-control and self-constitution into one's own hands. The recognition of one's own determination could be liberating – we can start to decide anew, sensibly, responsibly and ethically.

Another benefit to mention is change of priorities and values. Things, situation and people as well are objects of internally ascribed values. Common life matters impacting each from us have an actual importance for us. By our attempts to fulfill our idea of coping those important matters, we often find ourselves in situations which we would not chose voluntarily. The prayer is a space and possibility for re-organizing and re-distribution of the ascribed importance – as in the confrontation with such an authority as God is for a believer, it is possible to revalue the importance of things we consider so crucial. The priorities can be reconsidered and we can start again and anew without those burdens. Not groundlessly is being used this expression: "you are that, what you want".

Everyday goals and concerns are in prayer in contact with ultimate strivings – and “spiritual strivings tend to be located at a higher level of the self-regulatory system than are other goals, and according to control theory regulating one’s behavior with regard to higher-order abstract principles leads to greater consistency” (Emmons, 2003, 130). A prayer is not understood an activity comparable to any other. It is (as the prayers understand) a choice to turn ourselves to God – a possibility to place God before everything else, to set Him as a scale, a measurement for everything (in our life). The authenticity brought by the prayer starts where we accept influences of outer and inner reality; at the moment where we deliberately chose to accept or refuse those influences. In acceptance of the fact, that in front of God we have a value of who we are and exactly how we are, is the key to self-understanding and healthy relationship to ourselves, which we can find exactly through the practice of prayer.

Conclusion

Fortunately, the psychology is not competent to declare statements such as “God exist”. What does belongs to the competence of psychology is the investigation how the faith influence the believer (Vergote, 1993). The investigation of the prayer and its effects seems to be good way haw to understand personality of religious man.

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