

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2023.0034

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Prayer as a Form of Life, Life as a Form of Prayer

Zofia Rosińska interviewed by Mikołaj Sławkowski-Rode

MSR: Your book *Po śladach. Doświadczenie modlitewne w ujęciu filozofii kultury* has an unusual format for an academic work.¹ Apart from an overview and discussion of various conceptions and examples of prayer you have added an annex containing eight interviews with various people as well as five testimonials concerning the experience of prayer – some very intimate. What was the motivation for choosing such a format and how did you select the texts comprising the annex?

ZR: My book is not a cultural study or a work of theology, psychology, or psychiatry, although it touches the boundaries of all these disciplines. What I mean here is that it takes up topics and utilizes the categories specific to these fields.

My book is a book about the human being and it is written from the perspective of philosophy of culture.

1) Zofia Rosińska, *Po śladach. Doświadczenie modlitewne w ujęciu filozofii kultury* [After the Traces. The Experience of Prayer in the Perspective of Philosophy of Culture], (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2023).

You say that the format of my book is not typical for an academic work, because of the decision to include the annex containing conversations with people who pray and with others who reject it. This is true. However my book necessitates this minor structural difference.

The goal of the book was to discern and understand various forms of prayer present in our culture: from set prayers through poetry, painting and music to activities like work. I call this 'ontological prayer'. Unfortunately I could not include painting and music in this work.

MSR: In your approach to the experience of prayer you offer a kind of 'cultural archaeology'. The focus on looking for 'traces' of experience is a result of an apophatic understanding of both God and human beings – as we cannot say anything final about God or human beings, also the experience of prayer, which is supposed to bridge the gap between God and humans, is not directly available. But one might argue that, on the contrary, it is: at least when we pray ourselves. In the context of the traces of experience, which you analyze, what does your own experience of prayer testify to? This perspective is visibly absent. It is, of course, a very personal matter, but this is the dimension of the experience of prayer, which you seem to be particularly interested in, especially given your decision to include the testimonies gathered in the annex.

ZR: You are correct to say that the 'human being' is an apophatic category, that is, most simply, that it cannot be fully known. There are many disciplines, which study the human being. Human beings are examined and treated for illnesses, they work and are paid, human beings are artists and their works amaze or disgust, they are soldiers who defend their own borders and attack the borders of others, the human being can be a monk and pray. In sum: the human being discloses itself in culture. Without culture there are no human beings. And culture is everything that human beings do, who they are and who they become.

But not only monks pray. Those who are examined and being treated for an illness also pray, as do those who work and are paid, those who are artists and those who are soldiers. Prayer is the only human activity which is not confined to a given social group. Like breathing and growing, like a heartbeat.

It is a metaphysical reflex of the human being. A 'reflex' is a physiological category. It is the reaction of muscles, vessels, glands to an outside stimulus. The application of such a category to the inward life may raise concerns. There is an implicit conviction here that the outside stimulus is transcendence. And although between transcendence, between 'the One that is' and human beings, there exists an infinite metaphysical chasm, as Gilson wrote, this reflex is an expression of a longing to reach the other side of this chasm. It makes human existence more fuller. Fuller with the variety of experiences both happy and full of anxiety and doubt. Prayer, this metaphysical reflex, deepens the meaning of our life, giving it direction and inner power. It makes our existence more valuable.

You call by work a kind of 'cultural archaeology'. I assume that the word 'trace' was the intellectual signpost here. It leads, however, in a different direction than the archaeological one. Archaeology concerns itself with past things. The subject of my exploration is not what used to be, but what has survived to this day. In my understanding a trace leads in the anthropological direction, inside human beings. It is a sign of the human inward battles and inward longings, even those which are not fully conscious. It constitutes a permanent imprint, which exists in culture, and which is still alive in the twenty first century. This is why the annex was needed – to uncover the experiences of prayer being lived at the moment. Not only by seniors, but also by people in their prime, not only by women but also by men. I spoke with a soldier and a professor of philosophy, with a student of physics and a student of linguistics, but also with a gay person and a drug addict. Only a priest didn't want to talk to me about his own prayer.

These are not sociological or statistical studies, which imply clear criteria for choosing the studied subjects. I talked with many people about their experiences of prayer and I chose authorized accounts of those who agreed to this. They are simply examples. They do not compel but they attract. They attract those who want to

better understand humanity and shed light on their own existence. People speak about their own experience of prayer rarely and reluctantly. It is difficult to overcome a sense of intimacy.

You ask about my own experience of prayer. Most broadly I would describe this as a longing and a searching. Searching for an example, a trace, which would make it easier to understand the stage of my own inward development. The whole book is a kind of prayer.

MSR: Two questions are tempting here: firstly, is that which is used to be is not nonetheless important, or maybe even determines this deep meaning of humanity – culture is after all also what humanity used to be? Secondly, what do the examples contained in the annex tell us – what light do they shed on human existence?

ZR: You ask about the value of what “used to be”. It is impossible to deny that what has come to pass is important. The human being, you, everyone is submerged in the past. The past influences us but it does not determine. The past is not just defined by the categories of “time” and “memory”. The past is embodied. It is a tradition and thus a rooted past, meaning a past that influences me, moves me and motivates decisions. It motivates me to accept or reject those moments from the past, those tradition, with which I could identify.

Do you remember the myth about the beautiful Eurydice and Orpheus? Or about Lot’s wife from the Book of Genesis?

Why were Orpheus and Lot forbidden to turn around and look? “But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.”

There are various answers. We don’t know which one is true. But although it is a subject for a long academic discussion now it would be easiest for me to repeat what I have inherited from Gadamer: that my relationship with the past is a conversation. This means that I do not reject the past, but I do not allow it to consume me. I maintain my subjectivity. I ask current questions and I look for the correct answers also by turning towards tradition.

You ask if and how the examples contained in the annex shed light on our existence. This is more a question for Karl Jaspers. He would reply with a whole book. My intention was to show that currently, in the twenty first century, commonly referred to as the “secular age”, when temples have been turned into museums or discos and the profane became the sacred, there still exists a longing for escaping the profane. This longing is an integral part of humanity and all the generalizing statistics concerning our secularized time don’t fully convey our knowledge of humanity. I called this a “metaphysical reflex”. I use this expression metaphorically. Not everyone will feel the presence of this reflex in themselves. Not everyone wants or needs to pray. But it is enough that there are people who do. This reflex can be contagious.

MSR: You write that “the experience of prayer is individual and unique”. What about common prayer? You do not mention praying with someone or group prayer – like for example in church. Do we not, in these and similar situations, share the experience of prayer with others?

ZR: How can the “individual and unique” character of prayer be combined with common or group prayer? I do not talk about this in the book, however, I have been asked about this by several people. I still think that prayer is individual and therefore unique. It is the relation “God-me”. This relation “opens” to “that which is not me”, to the other person, other people, different places and countries through language, gestures and ritual, but also through purpose in petitionary prayers.

The most beautiful of the gospel prayers “Our Father” contains the word “our” and not they word “my”. However when saying this prayer I feel that “our” also means “my” and that becomes most important. Currently in group prayers behaviors and gestures like “Let us offer each other the sign of peace” can play an important social role, but they are not the prayer. I have to again emphasize that this is my personal view, which is not shared by many people.

MSR: What does it mean for a prayer to be answered? In your book you refer to traditional petitionary prayers rather critically. For believers, however, prayers very often have a particular goal – they are a pleading for help, not just metaphysical direction or inner power. If we assume that these pleadings – at least literally – are bound to remain frustrated, what would an answer to a prayer consist in?

ZR: What would it mean for a prayer to be answered? First I will justify my, as you say, “referring critical to traditional petitionary rather critically”. Petitionary prayer, despite appearances is not easily understood and interpreted. Often it seems to resemble magic, or the more common contemporary situations, namely the consumerist attitude: I ask – I pay – I get. It is, however, a complex multi-element structure: admiration-glory-thanksgiving-trust and uncertainly. It is a metaphysical directedness aimed at fulfilling the will of God, and not one’s own desire or need – although we ask for our prayer to be answered in earnest.

You say that our pleadings must remain frustrated in the literal sense. But in prayers there is no literal sense. Norwid understood this when he wrote: “Through everything you spoke to me – Lord!”²

MSR: It is true that perhaps the ultimate meaning of prayer eludes even those who pray if it is impossible to fully understand God’s will, but only to fully accept it. Nonetheless can we accept the divergence between God’s will and our own when we are praying for the health of our loved ones, or deliverance for those suffering unjustly? Does the futility of petitionary prayer not force Ivan Karamazov’s dilemma onto us: that is whether accepting God’s will in those situations is not so much impossible as it is immoral.

ZR: This is perhaps the most difficult of all questions. These are questions, which torment not only Ivan Karamazov but me as well. In order to capture the relationship between God’s will and the human existence even a little bit it is necessary to give up the vision of the human being in which a) he is able to discover and understand everything and b) his culture, namely everything he created from art through morality and science, everything that he values including his own life has the same meaning for God as it does for man. We don’t know this. We can only believe and hope that it can be so, but it doesn’t have to.

We pray and we beg but although the Gospel of St Matthew 7-8 tells us “For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” we do not know either when or how.

An example of the ways in which petitionary prayer may be answered are St Augustine’s *Confessions*. He describes his mother’s prayers for his conversion to Catholicism from Manicheanism and for his abandoning his dissolute way of life.

MSR: Writing about how one should pray you distinguish between individual prayer and set prayer and stress that individual prayer is “something wider and deeper”. Is this not an excessive undervaluation of set prayer? When you discuss the humility, which is needed in sincere prayer you invoke Karl Rahner and speak about the need to ‘break away from oneself’. Is this not the role of set prayer – of its repetitiveness and predescribed

2) This is a quote from Norwid’s poem “Modlitwa” (“Prayer”) from ca. 1850. The quoted passage reads as follows (in Polish):
Przez wszystko do mnie przemawiałeś – Panie;
Przez ciemność burzy, grom i przez świtanie,
Przez przyjacielską dłoń w zapasach z światem,
Pochwalał wreszcie-ach! - Nie Twoim kwiatem...
Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Wybór pism: Wiersze różne, Milczenie*, Prometidjon (Warszawa, 1936), 29–30.

A literal translation of this passage, which conveys the meaning but not the poetic artistry, would be as follows:

Through everything You spoke to me – Lord;
Through the darkness of the storm, the thunder and the dawn,
Through a friendly hand in my wrestling with the world,
Through a praise at last-ah! – Not Thy flower...

structure, which supersede our own words? If so then set prayer seems to be more than just an aid for those who are unable to find their own words to address God. Set prayer might perhaps play a converse role: it might release those who pray from the inadequacy of their own words?

ZR: This last remark concerns the ‘excessive undervaluation of set prayer’ in comparison with individual prayer, which is ‘something wider and deeper’. You say that set prayer through its repetitiveness and predescribed structure releases those who pray from their own words, which they are unable to find when addressing God. In this way set prayer would fulfil the criterion of sincere prayer postulated by Rahner to ‘break away from oneself’.

First and foremost set prayers are prayers. Indeed it can help, and is even sufficient for prayer not to become a superficial activity. At the same time, however, set prayer, or more precisely the saying of set prayers may make prayer superficial. After all it does not always ‘break us away from ourselves’. Even when saying The Lord’s Prayer we can be thinking and be emotionally engaged in our own, every day, mundane, professional and political worries. Language does not always break us away from ourselves.

For this reason I draw attention to the way we say set prayers. I emphasize the necessity of concentration on the contents of the set prayer as well as on the person it is directed to. That is when a set prayer becomes a deep and true prayer. In other cases it is a mere declamation delivered at a school assembly. This does not mean that ‘declamations’ do not have any value. On the contrary they have a great deal of meaning: they teach beautiful public speaking, they train memory, and often they lead to a deepened understanding of their content.

MSR: In that case I have a connected final question: when can we say that a prayer – either expressed in a set prayer, or not – is sincere?

ZR: And so we come to sincerity of prayer. We can only ween when it comes to the prayers of others. They cannot be judged. Neither can we always judge our own prayers. For what is ‘sincerity’? A provisional understanding suggests that sincere behavior is behavior that is in line with one’s intentions and mind-sets. In prayer we distinguish the act of praying and the contents of prayer. Already in the moment of making the decision that one has to pray discouraging doubts may arise: “what for? Will this in any way help? Despite these doubts, but with them I kneel to pray. Is this sincere? Doubts may arise with regard to the contents of the prayer too: “Do I have the right to ask God for what I am asking?” “Do I deserve to be heard?”

These kinds of doubts and uncertainties would force us to conclude that the category of “sincerity” has no application in the analysis and evaluation of prayer.

There is however an experience, which is difficult to describe, when the words of the Lord’s Prayer absorb or engross the whole personality of the praying person. All kinds of thoughts, all kinds of feelings and desires, including the doubtful and uncertain ones drown in the meaning of the concept. Categories such as “father” or “mother” have an archetypal character. They constitute benchmarks of both positive and negative human experience. A Father is the one we love as well as the one we hate, similarly as a mother. Kinds and degrees of love and hatred are variegated and we find out about them from literature, from court documents but also from our own experience. That is why they contain within them a meaning the power of which can absorb all of our personality. This is a state to which the category of sincerity could be applied.

Thank you very much for such an intellectually penetrating conversation which was also useful for me.

MSR: Thank you very much also both for your book as well as the fascinating interview.



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