

Prayer and symbolisation in an Irish Catholic community¹

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The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of prayer in the everyday life of an Irish Catholic community. Prayers are mental acts that need to be actualised following detailed instructions. This is so because prayers have to be “authentic”, which means that there has to be a correspondence between the act of praying and the mental state of believing. Due to the fact that mental states are by definition invisible, the argument of this paper is that that correspondence can only be symbolised by the very special characteristics of the act of praying. By stressing the symbolic nature of the act of praying, an alternative to recent cognitive approaches to the analysis of ritualisation is also suggested.

KEYWORDS: prayer, ritual, symbolism, cognition, Catholicism, Ireland.

“What a lot of things a man must do in order for us to say he *thinks!*”

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology I*

(1980 [1946-49])

“I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt [...] you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea’, and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

— Matthew 21: 21-22

IN THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT, AND SPECIFICALLY IN THE history of the arguments concerning God’s existence, Pascal’s famous wager deserves a special place. Pascal’s wager was meant to be an argument not for the existence of God but for the belief in that existence. Pascal thought that it was impossible to demonstrate by rational means God’s existence in the

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same way as it was impossible to demonstrate rationally God's non-existence, and yet it was possible to rationally demonstrate the need to *believe* in that existence. In other words, God's existence was not rational, or could not be rationally demonstrated, but the belief in that existence was. Why? To believe in God was, according to Pascal, the best bet. There is nothing to lose, there is everything to win. If you believe in God and it turns out that God doesn't exist, you lose nothing because the very same thing will happen to you anyway, whether you are a believer or an unbeliever. Similarly, if God does exist and you believe in Him then you win everything – Heaven, presumably. But if you don't and at the end it turns out that God does really exist (remember that neither the existence nor the non-existence of God can be rationally demonstrated, according to Pascal), then you lose everything – in all probability, by ending up in Hell. Thus, to repeat: there is nothing to lose in believing in God, and everything to win. That is Pascal's wager.

Still, Pascal was somehow aware that no matter how rational it is, or it appears to be, to believe in God, that is clearly not enough to actually make an unbeliever to start to believe. "Don't look for rational arguments because you will not find them, but behave yourself as if you were a believer and belief will eventually come to you". That was Pascal's recipe for the unbeliever who wants to become a believer. What does it mean "to behave as a believer"? Well, go to mass, take holy water, say your prayers every day. That is to say, perform the rituals that a believer is meant to perform. And even though at the beginning you will be doing things without actually believing in what you are doing, eventually you will end up believing in them, belief will come to you. Pascal's exact words were that the performance of all those rituals "vous abêtira", that is, you will "degrade yourself", you will make a fool of yourself, but a foolishness that is meant to be the first necessary step towards the final enlightenment or wisdom.²

The purpose of this paper is not to analyse Pascal's thought in any depth but to take as a starting point his somewhat odd injunction that one should behave as a believer in order to become a believer, even if that entails degrading oneself. The reason why we degrade ourselves by behaving as believers is because our behaviour is not honest, is not sincere, our thoughts are not attuned to our acts. But in what concerns religious behaviour, this is going to be just a temporary degradation since, according to Pascal, at some stage belief will come into existence. In other words, Pascal was drawing the distinction between belief and ritual, signified and signifier, and he was saying that by

2 The following stanza from Georges Brassens's song "Le mécréant" was directly inspired by Pascal's thought: "Mon voisin du dessus,/ un certain Blaise Pascal,/ m'a donné gentiment/ ce conseil amical:/ Mettez-vous à genoux,/ pleurez et implorez/ faites semblant de croire/ et bientôt vous croirez" (cited in Lluís Font 1996: 159).

performing the ritual, the signifier, belief, the signified, will eventually emerge, as if it emerged from the actual performance. By performing the ritual without actually believing in it you certainly make a fool of yourself, but it is only a transitory foolishness, so to speak. This is the question I would like to address in this paper. I wish to look at the relationships between belief and ritual, thought and behaviour, in one particular case: the act of praying in Roman Catholicism. My thesis is that while praying is an essentially mental activity coextensive with the very concept of belief itself, that mental act, that belief needs to be externalised in a certain way, by performing certain ritualised behaviour. Even though it is possible to pray only “in one’s mind” it is also very common for prayer to be actualised through some kind of behaviour that, in addition, needs to be performed in a rather meticulous way. The question is, if prayer takes place essentially in the mind, why must the externalisation of prayer be done following those relatively rigid and meticulous instructions?

THE PARADOX OF PRAYER: EXTERNAL ACTION VS INTERNAL BELIEF

This tension between behaviour and thought, (external) action and (internal) belief, is a fundamental question in the analysis of prayer. Prayer has been variously defined in the anthropological literature, but all definitions, I think, directly or indirectly, hark back to that basic and time-honoured and much criticised distinction drawn by Frazer (and many others) between prayer and spell, which happens to be roughly co-extensive to that between religion and magic – being prayer and spell the religious and magic ritual acts respectively by definition. The difference between prayer and spell, religion and magic, appears to be related to their efficacy. Thus it is argued that whereas the efficacy of spell lies entirely on its performance, that of prayer seems to depend crucially on what we could define as its *authenticity*: you need to believe in what you are doing/saying for it to be effective (otherwise you are making a fool of yourself). It is as if the final efficacy of prayer as an act, an external action, depended on a mental state (belief) that is meant to accompany, to correspond to that act. This is what some theologians define as “fundamental prayer”, which is meant to be a kind of state of being or state of the mind that leaves the soul open to the influence of the Holy Ghost. Whatever it is, it is clear that this mental state – which is, in simple terms, the state of believing – is, as all mental states, invisible. Thus, no matter how important the existence of this internal mental state is for giving authenticity to the external act of praying, that existence can only be inferred from the actual external acts upon which it confers authenticity. I take this to be the paradox of prayer.

In his failed attempt at writing a thesis on the subject, Marcel Mauss (2003 [1909]) was nevertheless perfectly aware of this fundamental feature of prayer. One of the aims of the bare two chapters (or “books”, as he called them) that

he managed to write was to address the issue of the social nature of prayer. “[W]hile it takes place in the mind of the individual”, he wrote, “prayer is above all a social reality outside the individual and in the sphere of ritual and religious convention” (Mauss 2003: 36). According to Mauss, what makes prayer a social fact or social institution is precisely its linguistic and ritual make-up, that is, the external side of prayer. And yet he also realised that prayer “takes place in the mind of the individual”, hence the “social nature” of prayer had to be, in his view, duly ascertained so that it could be amenable to the sort of sociological analysis characteristic of the Durkheimian school.

I have said that the efficacy of prayer is contingent upon its authenticity, upon the correspondence between action and thought. But this should be qualified. It means that an unauthentic prayer cannot have any efficacy, even though efficacy does not only derive from authenticity. All effective prayers are authentic but not all authentic prayers are effective. This is so because the final efficacy of prayer depends in the last instance not on the will of the person who prays, but on the will of the supernatural agency addressed thereby. Prayers are meant to be a supplication not an order or a demand. That is another way of looking at the distinction between prayer and spell.

Let me introduce at this juncture some ethnographic information concerning both the efficacy and the authenticity of prayer. The ethnography comes from fieldwork carried out in a rural parish of western Ireland, intermittently since 1990 – even though most of the data I will use in this paper was gathered between 1990 and 1991. As far as I could see, prayer was the most common and widespread religious act in the community. But somewhat different things were understood by prayer or praying. People are said to pray when they recite standard Christian prayers such as Our Father, Hail Mary or Creed with no other apparent purpose than the recitation itself, even though some specific requests can also be added to it. These recitations could take place daily, in the morning, in the evening or at night before going to bed, and they could be done individually or with other family members. For instance, at the Angelus time, around 6 p.m., the Irish TV would interrupt its program and broadcast for a few minutes a religious image accompanied with religious music. A man with whom I used to have tea at that time would stop eating (or whatever he was doing), he would cross his hands and lower his head and he remained in silence in that position for as long as the religious image was on the screen.

My friend’s pious demeanour was by no means unique. “I pray everyday”, a woman said to me, “and if for some reason I go to bed without praying I will wake up all of a sudden in the middle of the night. Something clicks to my mind: I have to say my prayers.” People could also pray on specific occasions or for specific purposes. Say if you witness a car accident but you can do nothing to save the life of the people involved you just say a prayer for their souls. Furthermore, praying was sometimes used as a synonym for the performance of

religious rituals such as going to mass, going on a pilgrimage, going to a retreat or doing penance. All that was also commonly defined as “praying”.

However, despite this apparent polysemy, the core meaning of prayer seemed to gravitate towards the idea of it being an act of communication with God or another supernatural entity (Holy Virgin, Holy Spirit, Saints, etc.) in which some kind of request was submitted. To pray was to ask for something. What kind of request would that be? What do people pray for? Good health was the most common answer to this question. You should not pray for money, people said, and you should not pray for impossible things. Furthermore, you need to be a good catholic if you want your prayers to have any effects, or to have any possibility of having any effects at all. “If you take care of God, God will take care of you”, I was told. On the other hand, not all prayers seem to be equally powerful. Priests’ prayers, and specifically the prayers of some particular priests, were supposed to have greater efficacy than the ordinary prayers uttered by ordinary people. And this was because of the special relationship they have with God, which presumably gives them a special power. Going back years, people told me, there was a priest in the parish who was supposed to possess the power of healing through prayers. But it seems that not everybody could be cured by that priest. Sometimes people with terminal cancer would come to the rectory, and he would tell them: “I cannot cure you but I can alleviate your pain.” And he did.

But in any case, you have to believe in your prayers; “it is in you”, I was told, which brings us to the question of authenticity. As I said before, for prayers to be authentic there has to be a correspondence between a mental state and the external act of praying. I call symbolisation the process through which internal mental states are transformed into external acts. As I will try to show, even though symbolisation in general is a characteristic of all communicative acts, in prayer it has a very particular and crucial significance.

The notion that prayer can be, essentially perhaps, an internal mental state, or act, was conveyed to me in different ways. On one occasion, while discussing this question with a husband and a wife I was surprised when the woman asked her husband “Do you pray before going to bed?”. When not even the wife knows whether her husband prays comes to show very clearly, it seems to me, how private, individual, even secretive, the act of prayer can be. Another woman was telling me once about how much she and her sisters used to pray, unlike her brothers, who never prayed. “How do you know that?”, I asked. “I know, they don’t”, she replied. She did not say “I’ve never seen them” or “I’ve never heard them”, she simply said “I know, they don’t”. It was as if the fact of not praying could not be inferred from the lack of any specific behaviour but could only be ascertained because of the deep knowledge that a sister is supposed to have of her brothers, as if she was saying “I know what goes on in their minds and, therefore, I know that they don’t pray”.

We will see later the different forms by which this mental act can be conveniently externalised or symbolised. But first I wish to emphasise a very important point: externalisation does not mean that these acts need to be notoriously “public” in any way. On the contrary, any form of ostentation in religious behaviour can be severely censured for being “unauthentic”, dishonest or for “showing off”. That religious behaviour, or specifically ritual behaviour, can be unauthentic, that is, behaviour done without the corresponding state of mind (without belief, or without the appropriate belief) is a conclusion easily drawn from several examples. The majority of the people in the community used to go to mass every week, either on Saturday evening or Sunday morning. Going to mass was for them a sort of communal ritual obligation for which no clear explanation was ever produced, or deemed to be necessary. “If I miss mass one week I feel bad, I have problems of conscience”, a man said to me. “If one of the lads doesn’t go to mass I want to know why”, a woman told me referring to her sons. Interestingly, however, nobody ever acknowledged in any way that the fact of going to mass every week makes churchgoers better people or more trustworthy in the eyes of the community. Far from it, whenever I asked questions such as “Would you trust a person who goes to mass more than someone who doesn’t go?”, I would always have the same reply, or very similar replies. “The person who does not go to mass could be the best person in the world”, a man said. According to another man, “If a neighbour does not go to mass the others would be talking away”. But then he added that he would trust more the one who does not go than the one who goes every week, since the one who goes probably does something out of the way the rest of the week. (His wife, who was present in the conversation, did not seem to agree with him.) Another man made the following observation: “Everybody goes to church in this parish. But they could be at your throat the following day.” “You have to watch the one who goes [to mass]. Going to mass is just a habit for a lot of people”, a man complained.

But the worse sin seems to be to go to mass “to show off”. “I’m going to buy a new suit for the Christmas mass: isn’t that ridiculous?”, a man said to me while trying to explain the meaning of “showing off” at mass. “What will you get from God if you wear a new suit? What will you get from the priest?”, he asked me rhetorically. People going to mass with very small children were also accused of showing off: the appropriate thing being for the husband and wife to take turns to go to church and to baby-sit. Even a couple without children would be equally criticised for showing off if they went to mass together when the two of them could drive – it was unclear to me why that should be seen as “showing off”.

In all these examples, we can see how ritual behaviour can become unauthentic, dishonest, a behaviour which is “just a habit”, or that is used for a totally different purpose from the one for which it was meant. Going to mass

“to show off” is going to mass without the appropriate state of mind, without the appropriate belief. And it is precisely the public ostentation of religious attitudes which is invariably seen as denoting lack or weakness of belief. And yet, despite the dangers of turning ostentation into a sign of unbelief instead of belief, the internal mental state which presumably identifies in the last instance the truly honest religious faith needs to be externalised all the same. This is particularly clear in the case of prayer. If we take now prayer in its more restricted sense, as meaning an act of communication with God or with another supernatural being, we can confidently state that for this act of communication to have any (potential) effects it has to be externalised, and it has to be externalised in a particular way. A rather subtle and delicate balance must be struck between externalisation and modesty or reserve if we do not want the process of symbolisation of prayer to be turned into its opposite – as we saw, the symbolisation of unbelief.

THE NEED FOR SYMBOLISATION

Let us have a look now at the forms of symbolisation of prayer. We shall be looking at three of these forms. A very popular way of conducting this symbolisation is by attending the novenas. These are special religious services held from time to time at the major churches and monasteries of the surrounding towns. What is a novena? A novena is a “religious blackmail”, a man said to me ironically while he was getting ready to attend one. A novena is a sort of collective prayer divided into nine sessions. When you go to a novena you are supposed to write down your petitions anonymously in a piece of paper provided by the church. Then you throw it into a box and go to the novena nine times. Each time attendants to the novena pray together for the petitions that they themselves have formulated in this way. Petitions are anonymous and are kept secret, only the priest will read them. If you are granted your request then you write it down in another piece of paper and throw it into another box. Nine more sessions of collective prayer have to be attended as thanksgiving. Novenas were well-liked in the community, practically everybody I talked to had been to at least one.

Another way of carrying out this externalisation is by publishing the prayer in the press. The most popular weekly papers in the community where I was conducting my research were the *Galway Advertiser* and the *Connacht Tribune*, both of them mainly concerned with local news. In their last pages, you could always find a cluster of anonymous thanksgiving prayers and the instructions for their recitation. These prayers are published by the people who have been granted the favour or request they asked for, that is why they are called “thanksgiving” prayers. Sometimes it is only the actual thanksgiving that is published. I will take a few examples from the *Galway Advertiser* of the 14th

June 1990. “Grateful thanks to St. Martin, Padre Pio, Sacred Heart and Our Lady for favours received”, signed “A. M.” or “Grateful thanks to Padre Pio and our Mother of Perpetual Help for favours received in the past and requesting my present need”, signed “M. W.”. But very often it is the whole prayer that is published. For instance:

Prayer to the Virgin Mary (never known to fail). O most beautiful flower of Mount Carmel, fruitful vine, splendour of Heaven, Blessed Mother of the Son of God. Immaculate Virgin assist me in this my necessity. O Star of the sea, help me and show me here you are my Mother. O Holy Mary Mother of God, Queen of Heaven and Earth, I humbly beseech you from the bottom of my heart to succour me in my necessity. There are none that can withstand your power. O show here you are my Mother. O Mary conceived without sin pray for us who have recourse [sic] to thee (3 times). Holy Mary I place this cause in your hands (3 times). Sweet Mother I place this cause in your hands (3 times). Thank you for your mercy to me and mine. Amen.

This prayer must be said for three days and after that the request will be granted and the prayer must be published. (signed “D. M. D.”)

Prayers to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Holy Spirit could also be found in the same page. These are standard Roman Catholic prayers that can be obtained from any prayer book (or, nowadays, downloaded from the internet). The interesting thing is the subtle way in which this form of externalisation combines the need for symbolisation with the need to avoid ostentation of belief, while at the same time allowing for the privacy of the act of praying itself by keeping secret both the identity of the person who uses the prayer (only the initials are published) and his or her requests. It is a way of making your prayers public without actually doing so. Equally remarkable is not only the somewhat embroidered language of the prayer but, specifically, the detailed instructions that need to be followed in the recitation. It is precisely on this attention to detail, verging on fastidiousness, that I would like to focus my attention in the remainder of this paper.

The third and final form of prayer, or of symbolisation of prayer, I shall analyse is the pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick. This is a holy mountain sited on the western shore of Ireland, in Co. Mayo, only a few miles to the north of my fieldwork site. Tradition has it that in the year 441 St. Patrick spent there the forty days of Lent in prayer and fasting. The pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick consists in climbing the mountain on certain special days, the most popular one being the last Sunday of July. On the top there is a little chapel where, on the days of pilgrimage, pilgrims can hear mass and take confession. I went twice to the pilgrimage, in 1990 and in 2002; and in both of them I could observe the huge crowds of people who gather, starting in the very early hours

in the morning, to do the climbing. The purpose of the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage was defined with these words by the Archbishop of Tuam (the archdiocese where I was doing my research): “It’s a basic recognition that prayer, penance and reconciliation are essential elements in spiritual growth. We pray with our feet, do penance in our exertions, leave our sins at the top and bring our resolutions to the bottom” (*Connacht Tribune*, 3rd August 1990). At the very bottom of the mountain, just before the beginning of the climbing, there is a poster that gives you detailed instructions as to how the pilgrimage must be done:

Croaghpatrick Pilgrimage: Every pilgrim who ascends the mountain on St. Patrick’s Day [17th of March] or within the octave, or any time within the months of June, July, August and September, and prays in or near the chapel for the intentions of our Holy Father the Pope may gain a plenary indulgence on condition of going to Confession and Holy Communion on the Summit or within the week.

The traditional Stations. There are three “stations” (1) At the base of the cone or Leacht Benain, (2) On the summit, (3) Roilig Muire, some distance down the Lecanvey side of the mountain.

1st Station – Leacht Benain. The pilgrim walks seven times around the mount of stones saying seven Our Fathers, seven Hail Marys and one Creed.

2nd Station – The Summit. (a) The pilgrim kneels and says 7 Our Fathers, 7 Hail Marys and one Creed. (b) The pilgrim prays near the chapel for the Pope’s Intentions. (c) The pilgrim walks 15 times around the chapel saying 15 Our Fathers, 15 Hail Mary’s and one Creed. (d) The pilgrim walks 7 times around Leaba Phadraig saying 7 Our Fathers, 7 Hail Mary’s and one Creed.

3rd Station – Roilig Muire. The pilgrim walks 7 times around each mount of stones saying 7 Our Fathers, 7 Hail Mary’s and one Creed at each and finally goes around the whole enclosure or Roilig Muire 7 times praying.

I do not know what percentage of pilgrims actually followed these instructions. Certainly, not everybody did. But on the two occasions that I went to Croagh Patrick, I could see a good few people at the Stations, walking patiently around the piles of stones, some of them with a rosary in their hands, others simply praying in silence or in a low voice, the most pious walking in their bare feet. What I found most noteworthy was the multitude waiting to take confession at the chapel of the summit. The little chapel had two corridors on each side, and the two corridors had a set of seven or eight confessional boxes with a priest in each of them. There was indeed a good turnout on both sides. But whatever the amount of people who decide to go through all this, it is the details of the whole procedure that I find significant.

A DETAILED PERFORMANCE

If prayer is, in essence, an internal mental act, why does one have to go through all these tribulations to carry it out? In actual fact, fastidiousness, meticulousity, care for details are all general features of religious rituals, especially those related to the externalisation or symbolisation of prayer, both in Roman Catholicism and in other religions – the example of Islam comes to mind immediately (cf. Keane 1997; Henkel 2005). Yet very few scholars, to my knowledge, have concerned themselves with the analysis of this important attribute of religious ritual. Freud was amongst the very first. In his insightful essay “Obsessive actions and religious practices” (1959 [1907]), he focused his attention on precisely this apparently irrational care for detail in order to fruitfully compare religious practices with the acts of obsessive neurotics. Freud thought, however, that “while the minutiae of religious ceremonial are full of significance and have a symbolic meaning, those of neurotics seem foolish and senseless” (1959: 119). The significance and symbolic meaning that Freud refers to is probably the message conveyed by ritual action according to theologians and exegetical tradition. But this message can be very different from the message or meaning that people have in their minds when they participate in the ritual. And this is the meaning that we, anthropologists, should be primarily interested in.

Freud also understood that despite the alleged abundance of (apparent) symbolic meaning to be found in ritual action, a somehow deeper level of significance could be uncovered from which a more substantive parallelism between ritual and obsessive behaviour could also be drawn. In both cases, we have a suppression or renunciation of certain instinctual impulses (Freud 1959: 123) that somehow, he hypothesised, would constitute that deeper, and common, meaning of both obsessive actions and religious ceremonial. Now I will not dwell on Freud’s views any further since I do not believe that the interpretation of religious or ritual behaviour he was proposing in that particular paper can shed much light on its cultural meaning. Yet it was important to allude to Freud’s views in this context precisely because they were predicated on this intriguing characteristic of religious ritual, namely this irrational, obsessive concern for the details in the performance of an action. Perhaps with the noticeable exception of Lévi-Strauss (1971: 601-603), none of the subsequent interpretations of ritual action which were to become highly influential in the anthropology of religion, particularly those attentive to the functions that ritual is supposed to fulfil (be these social, psychological, ecological functions, etc.), have showed a similar interest in this, to my mind very decisive, matter (e.g. Durkheim 1915; Gluckman 1963; Rappaport 1984 [1968]). I am certainly not denying the merits of the functional approach in the explanation of ritual, I am merely saying that it is insufficient as long as it leaves out important aspects of the behaviour it is meant to account for.

Some recent cognitive analyses of religion have somehow filled this conspicuous void in the study of ritual, but their results are, in my view, equally unsatisfactory. I will take as an example a recently published paper by Pascal Boyer and Pierre Liénard (2006). As is customarily the case in this kind of approaches, their strategy consists in identifying the cognitive system activated in the performance of ritual acts. Rituals are never seen as functional or adaptive in any way, but only the cognitive system from which they originate, or to which they correspond. Rituals (or any other cultural phenomenon for that matter) are explained not in functional or adaptive terms but in virtue of their correspondence to those cognitive systems, of which they are necessarily seen as a sort of contingent by-product or “cultural parasite”. As far as the object of this paper is concerned, the interesting thing about this approach is that, as we saw with Freud, care for detail in ritualised behaviour is given full consideration. Once again, it is the comparison of ritual with the behaviour of patients suffering from some mental disorders, such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, what enables cognitive scientists to identify this care for detail as the common ground shared both by religious and pathological actions.

What I have loosely defined here as fastidiousness or care for detail is named, in the somewhat abstruse jargon used by cognitive scientists, “low-level action parsing” and “goal demotion”. By this they mean that the minimal meaningful units into which a ritual act can be segmented become so relatively small that they are deprived of any specific goal. For instance, in the above-mentioned pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick, the purpose is not just climbing the mountain, or climbing the mountain and stopping at the stations, but one has to climb the mountain, stop at the stations, go around the stations so many times, saying so many prayers, etc. Boyer and Liénard believe that the fastidiousness of ritual performance is the result of the activation of a particular evolved cognitive structure called “precaution system”, geared to the detection and reaction of inferred threats to fitness. The output to this system is a behaviour able to counteract that threat and to reduce or to smother the state of anxiety that pervades the subject who has inferred its existence. The performance of a painstakingly detailed activity results in the overloading or swamping of working memory, in other words, people need to concentrate on the ritual and forget about everything else. Hence the intrusive thoughts responsible for that state of anxiety are pushed away from consciousness and the subject consequently experiences a pleasant sensation of relief – inversely proportional, we must assume, to the augmented anxiety felt by those who have not done the ritual or have not done it properly.

Even though it is true that some rituals, such as those related to pollution beliefs, are effectively performed to neutralise some perceived potential danger, according to Boyer and Liénard the existence of this perceived potential danger is not even a necessary condition for the performance of any ritual.

Their point is simply to state that those who participate in the ritual find it so compelling because they are acting under the effects, so to speak, of their precaution system; in other words, ritual behaviour becomes parasitic on that cognitive system, not a necessary consequence of it.

SYMBOLS, INDEXES AND FORMS OF MEANING

Whatever cognitive systems happen to be activated in ritual performance, the problem with this sort of explanation is that it blatantly disregards the symbolic nature of ritual acts. In a way, the shortcomings of cognitivist approaches constitute a sort of inverted image of those we could find in functionalism. Whereas functionalists managed to provide an explanation for ritual while overlooking its characteristics, cognitive scientists pay due attention to the characteristics of ritualised behaviour but without explaining ritual acts as such; as a result, they fail to differentiate it from other behaviours with the same or similar characteristics.³ Prayer can be taken as a case in point in this respect, if only because from a strictly cognitive perspective the fastidiousness involved in its externalisation could not be properly differentiated from other equally painstaking and “goal demoted” activities such as working out a crossword puzzle, jogging, interior decoration, amateur painting, etc. In all of them the performing subject is likely to push away from consciousness uncomfortable intrusive thoughts and he or she is also likely to fall into a state of anxiety when the activity has not taken place or has not been done properly. More relevant to our discussion, the cognitive perspective I have presented makes the symbolisation of prayer indistinguishable in any way from other ritual actions such as the uttering of a magical spell, where, as Mauss (1950 [1902-03]: 37-43) already pointed out, concern for details is also central.

Without a doubt, the performance of magic rituals is highly formalistic. But in this case, it is a feature intimately related to the efficacy of those rituals. In her analysis of ritual magic in contemporary England, Luhrmann (1989: 146) pointed out that the ineffectiveness of ritual is always attributed to a faulty technique; furthermore, “magicians set high standards for the performance of their ritual, and explain ritual failure as the failure *to live up to them*” (my emphasis, 1989: 147; cf. Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1949]). I believe this is a crucial point. Now if care for detail in magical spells is instrumental for their efficacy, some might think that prayers equally concerned with the detail of their performance could be seen in evolutionist terms as a “residue” of an antecedent

3 In all fairness to Boyer and Liénard, it must be said that they state quite explicitly that their purpose is not to study ritual as a cultural phenomenon but “ritualised behaviour”, even though they also argue that their conclusions should be relevant for the cultural analysis of ritual. See Liénard and Boyer (2006) for a more “social science-friendly” version of their cognitive approach.

magical act. Or inversely, as Rivers (1904: 180-181) interpreted the formulaic character of Toda prayers, it could be the result of their being in a “state of degeneration” such that the supplication to higher powers – a clear indication of the existence of religion, a superior form of worship in his view – had practically disappeared and thus, he thought, Toda prayers were in the process of becoming a sort of *mantra*: a form of words which are regarded as having a virtue in themselves.

None of these interpretations, it seems to me, hit the nail on the head. Evolutionist speculations of the sort we have just seen have long been discredited in social anthropology – even though this does not mean that they should be discarded in advance. But care for detail in prayer can be accounted for from a totally different perspective that I believe is more in accordance with its ultimate meaning, which is no other than an act of communication with God. The question is: why does this act of communication need to be carried out in this particular manner? If it has nothing to do with efficacy, might it not be the authenticity of prayer what we should be looking at instead? Remember that authenticity, in the way I have defined it here, refers to the relationship between an external act and an internal mental state.

I might be living according to the law of God, I do no harm to anybody, but my neighbour is having some trouble. I can pray for him, you see, but if I fast or do penance my prayers get more powerful, like. It is like everything else, you have to concentrate on what you are doing. If you are talking to me and then I go to watch the cattle you will think that I have very bad manners, that I am not listening to you. The same when I am talking to God... (quoted in Salazar 1996: 140-141)

These observations were made by one of my informants while talking about penance. Even though penance and the details in the externalisation of prayer are not exactly the same thing, I think my informant’s views are also valid for what concerns us here. Specifically, I want to argue, because both penance and care for details are ways of making the act of praying materially costly. My informant understood that in prayer, like in any other act of communication, “you have to concentrate on what your are doing”, in other words, you must really *mean* what you are saying. But, certainly, the very same thing applies to ordinary acts of communication (one must mean what one is saying), and yet we do not have to accompany ordinary acts of communication with penance, nor with the irrational care for detail characteristic of prayer – otherwise it would not have looked “irrational” to us. So what is so special about prayer? To answer this question, we need go back to what I have defined above as the “paradox of prayer”. The paradox of prayer was, as has been stated, that for prayers to be authentic there has to be a correspondence between the

external act of praying and the internal mental state of the praying subject, but since that mental state is obviously invisible that correspondence can only be inferred from the actual external acts upon which the invisible mental state confers authenticity. In other words, those external acts need to be able to *symbolise* the mental state, the state of believing, of the person who is uttering the prayer. Now a complicated performance, never mind if it goes together with some form of penance, can only be carried out by someone who really means it. The more materially costly is that performance, the more inconceivable that it is an inauthentic performance, that is to say, the more inconceivable it is that the performance is done without the proper state of mind (in order to “show off”, for instance).⁴

Care for detail, meticulousness, fastidiousness in the performance of prayer is symbolic of a particular mental state, in the same way as these same characteristics are indexical of certain effects in the case of magical spells. Stated otherwise, whereas the quality of the performance or utterance is indexical of its efficacy in the case of magical spell, these same characteristics are symbolic of its authenticity in the case of prayer.⁵

CONCLUSION

Prayer has been defined in this paper as an act of communication with God that can be approached from two different angles, that of its efficacy and that of its authenticity. The efficacy of prayer refers to its power or capacity to produce certain effects. Unlike magical spells, in prayer the efficacy is not contingent on its performance but on the almighty will of the supernatural entity whom the prayer addresses. Prayer is above all a moral act, and it is a moral act in a double sense: it is an obligation for the faithful and it is an act whose effects are also meaningful in moral terms for the faithful's life. But this does not mean that the accurate performance of prayer is any less important. Prayers need to be actualised following detailed instructions that are not instrumental to their effectiveness but symbolic of their authenticity. An authentic prayer

4 The fact that the performance of prayer turns out to be materially costly does not discard other possible explanations for penitential acts such as self-sacrifice of the sinful body, re-enactment of a founding event – that of Christ's passion, etc. Notice that in all of them action could not be performed without the appropriate *intention* (i.e. belief), which is precisely what makes it materially costly. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this important point.

5 I am certainly aware that in the anthropological tradition magical spells have been equally defined as symbolic language (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1949]; Tambiah 1968) and ritual religious communication as indexical (Rappaport 1999). But setting terminological-conceptual controversies apart as regards what should be defined as “index” or “symbol”, my point is that in any case the crucial aspect of spells continues to be their efficacy, i.e. the connection between ritual act and its alleged effects, and not their authenticity, the relationship between a ritual act and a particular mental state, which I believe is specific of prayer (at least of the sort of prayer we have been looking at in this paper).

is that in which there is a correspondence between the external act of praying and an internal mental state of believing. Due to the fact that internal mental states are by definition invisible, that correspondence can only be ascertained by the very special characteristics of the act of praying itself.

The symbolisation of an internal mental state is made possible in prayer by the painstaking concern for the details of its performance. With this interpretation of a particular and very noticeable characteristic of prayer, I have attempted to provide an alternative (complementary at best) analysis of a particular form of ritualised behaviour to recent cognitive approaches to cultural phenomena. Unlike their functionalist antecedents or competitors, cognitive scientists are on the whole attentive, and rightly so, to the specific characteristics of ritual performance; but their unconcealed disregard for the meaningful and symbolic aspects of human action makes these approaches somewhat unsatisfactory from a more general anthropological perspective.

One last point perhaps needs further notice concerning my distinction between prayer and spell. Several scholars (e.g. Tambiah 1968) have questioned this time-honoured distinction on the grounds that it is not ethnographically suitable in specific cultural settings. In this paper, I have used these two concepts as ideal-type extremes that define the moral-pragmatic limits of symbolic action. Prayer falls closer to the moral limit for its pragmatic aspect appears clearly subordinated to its overall definition as a moral act: the effects of prayer are clearly contingent on the moral standing of the subject – in correspondence to God’s absolute judgement. Whatever happens to be nearer the opposite side of the spectrum will be systematically understood as spell, where the relationship between its moral and pragmatic components appears inverted.

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Oração e simbolização numa comunidade católica irlandesa ♦ Carles Salazar ♦ Universitat de Lleida ♦ salazar@hahs.udl.cat

O objectivo deste texto é o de apresentar uma análise da oração na vida quotidiana de uma comunidade católica irlandesa. A oração é um acto mental que necessita de actualização de acordo com instruções detalhadas. Tal acontece porque as orações devem ser “autênticas”, isto é, deve haver uma correspondência entre o acto da oração e o estado mental de “crença”. Tendo em conta que os estados mentais são, por definição, invisíveis, o argumento deste artigo será que essa correspondência apenas pode ser simbolizada através das características particulares do acto de oração. Ao chamar a atenção para a natureza simbólica do acto de oração, sugere-se em consequência uma alternativa para as recentes propostas cognitivas de análise sobre ritualização.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: oração, ritual, simbolismo, cognição, catolicismo, Irlanda.