

Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski. *Prayer: A History*.

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Reviewed by Patrick Q. Mason

When Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, Latter-day Saints believe, they built an altar and offered sacrifice to the Lord (see Moses 5:4–5). In other words, they prayed. This may have been the first time that humans truly prayed, at least according to the biblical tradition. Before that, man and woman walked and talked with God in the cool of the evening garden. As mortality settled upon them, they turned immediately to prayer to recapture, distantly but genuinely and powerfully, something of the sacred among the thorns and thistles of their newly profane world. Whether taking the form of a child's simple bedside pleading for God "my soul to keep" or the intricate rites performed at temples to maintain balance in the cosmos and guarantee providential favor, prayer is the sacred link between earth and heaven. Or, as Philip and Carol Zaleski define it in their book *Prayer: A History*, "Prayer is action that communicates between human and divine realms" (5).

The title of the book, or more specifically the subtitle, is somewhat misleading. *Prayer: A History* is less a conventional chronological history than a historically informed examination of the multiple modes of human interaction with the numinous. Although they do begin with Neanderthals and early modern humans of the Upper Paleolithic in the first chapter before moving on to the contemporary period, the authors' intention is not necessarily to proceed from the beginning to the end of human history and hit all points in between in more or less linear fashion. Rather, the Zaleskis seek to develop "a *theory* of prayer that uses to advantage the realities of prayer as manifested in the lives of individual human beings and human cultures" (32, my emphasis). Human history is therefore not so much the subject of the book as the stage upon which it is set, and the true object of study is prayer itself.

This approach differs from that of previous observers of human prayer life, particularly late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social

scientists such as Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, Sir James George Frazer, and Sigmund Freud, whose theories about the evolution of religious experience are considered in *Prayer's* first chapter. These intellectual luminaries created a secularist consensus that the rationale for prayer, which for them was culture's appendix and an outlived and unnecessary vestige of the ancient world, would shrivel as science bloomed and took mystery out of the world.

The Zaleskis are not content with such reductionist arguments. Their view is that while social science has its place, "only an empathetic study of prayer," taken largely from those who actually participate in and experience it, "can reveal prayer's secret life" (28). Their analysis is more in line with William James in his tour de force *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which he argues that prayer actually bears fruit in bringing about positive change in the modern world and therefore should be taken seriously. The Zaleskis' fundamental plea—and methodology—is for us to "listen to those who pray" (30). The chapters are thus stocked with real-life examples of prayer, along with depictions of and advice regarding prayer from those who experienced its power in their lives.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine, respectively, two different models of prayer, those of the magician and of the priest. While both skeptics and believers usually consider magic to be a lower form of religion, the authors assert that magic has always been, and continues to be, an essential ingredient in prayer. Looking at examples from the Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian worlds, the Zaleskis show that "prayer without any hint of magic in it, without any sense that there is a power residing in its words and actions . . . would be a sterile and lifeless thing." On the other hand, if prayer devolves into a "mechanical technique" for manipulating the cosmos to achieve selfish ends, it lacks "the vital spirit of humility and dependency on divine grace." In short, "prayer must have a magical dimension, or it falls flat; but prayer must keep the magical dimension in check" (39). While the onslaught of secular modernity has done much to reduce the magical dimension of religion,<sup>1</sup> the book's acknowledgment of the magical essence of prayer in the Judeo-Christian tradition is an important and welcome reminder for modern readers who think that magic is somehow foreign to their spiritual heritage. For LDS readers, this chapter may help provide a broader historical and theoretical context for the sometimes nettlesome issue of Joseph Smith's and other early Mormons' participation in folk magic alongside more traditional Christian practice.

A deeper kind of magic occurs when prayer becomes sacrificial in nature, when the primary sentiment is surrender rather than self-centeredness: "Magical prayer asks for results, but sacrificial prayer asks for grace,

relinquishing the fruits” (74). Where magic seeks self-actualization, sacrificial prayer seeks self-transformation and transcendence. Sacrifice, whether substitutionary or actual, has multiple effects: “It communicates with the gods, discharges guilt, binds together the community, and forges communion between heaven and earth” (64). So central is sacrifice that Hindus believe that the world began through the fire sacrifice, the monotheistic traditions trace their beginnings to Abraham’s intended sacrifice of his son, and Christians place an act of sacrificial prayer—Jesus Christ’s Atonement—at the center of all history and salvation. Sacrificial prayer reaches its ritualistic height in temples where heaven and earth meet, but believers everywhere may also access the sacred by having their prayers assume the same sacrificial quality that characterizes temple worship.

Elements of magic and sacrifice intertwine in four archetypes of prayer laid out in part 2 of the book: the refugee, devotee, ecstatic, and contemplative. This is the heart of the book, exploring the multiple modes and dynamics of prayer through the voices and experiences of those who pray. The prayer of the refugee, the most common form, is “the prayer of those who seek shelter in God, flying to him for assistance, succor, or salvation” (97). Examples include virtually anyone who has ever looked heavenward and cried, “Help!” The authors focus their analysis with an eclectic set of case studies ranging from Robinson Crusoe to Samuel Johnson to Oscar Wilde to Bill Wilson (founder of Alcoholics Anonymous). The prayer of the devotee is “cyclical, regular, and routine, reiterated at set intervals throughout the day, week, or year.” Through it worshippers “quit profane time” and “enter sacred time,” stepping “from earth to heaven and back again” on a regular basis (129). Most religions have a form of this kind of prayer, such as the Christian Angelus or Muslim *salat*. Ecstatic prayer is incomprehensible, unpredictable, inexplicable, and overwhelming, yet still functional. Its exemplars include Sri Ramakrishna, the Hindu guru for whom the slightest catalyst would send him into a sometimes days-long rapture, and Saint Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century nun whose visions led her to write what became official Vatican policy for discriminating between heaven-sent visions and those produced by demons or self-deception. From its emergence in the twentieth century as the world’s fastest-growing religious phenomenon, Pentecostalism has taken ecstatic prayer to massive proportions. Contemplative prayer is the avenue to tasting ultimate reality, either in a full realization of this world or a transcendence of it. Less an event than a way of life, contemplation can range from the spiritual warfare of Saint Antony of the Desert, the third- and fourth-century ascetic who lived in perfect isolation in an empty fortress for twenty years, to the introspective and reverential haiku mastered by Basho.

The first half of the book is by far the more rewarding. The six chapters of the second half read more like a series of loosely connected vignettes when compared with the sustained and well-developed arguments of the earlier chapters. The tone becomes less analytical and more like the op-ed page, with the authors frequently inserting their own opinions and preferences. The three chapters of part 3, especially, are choppy, uneven, imprecise, and lacking in focus. The entire book concentrates too much on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, but the second half is particularly egregious in its modern, Judeo-Christian, and Anglo-American imbalance. Eastern religions, including Buddhism and especially Hinduism, are prominent in the first half but then generally drop out. The book's most egregious shortcoming is its complete inattention to the world south of the equator. While the relative availability of written sources understandably moves the authors toward a fuller examination of the modern West, to completely neglect Latin America, Africa, and the South Pacific is inexplicable and inexcusable.

Despite its faults, *Prayer* is a valuable offering that provides a richer understanding of one of the central facets of human history and culture. Readers already given to prayer will undoubtedly be inspired by the many exemplars whose prayer lives are detailed in the book; although Latter-day Saints are never mentioned in the book, it nevertheless has great relevance for believers from any tradition who seek greater efficacy in accessing the divine. Skeptics will be forced to reckon with a phenomenon that, when properly seen, refuses to be reduced or marginalized by secular modernity. In the end, prayer can be truly known only through direct experience, and so any written evaluation of it is bound to come up short. As the authors acknowledge, "We can describe the visible world of prayer in sumptuous detail . . . but the most intimate dance between God and the soul occurs at a level beyond human perception" (354). The simultaneous accessibility and mystery of prayer means that even our best descriptions will be only approximations.

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1. See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).