http://dx.doi.org/10.7213/2175-1838.09.001.DS10

ISSN 2175-1838

Toward A Tri-partite Psychological Model of Prayer

Rumo a um Modelo Psicológico Tri-partite de Oração

Kevin L. Ladd *

Indiana University South Bend, IN, USA

Abstract

While empirical research concerning the psychology of prayer has increased significantly in the last decade, the development of theory has lagged behind observation. In this paper, we expand on our previous work conceptualizing prayer as consisting of perceived inward, outward, and upward connections (IOU) with aspects in both physical and supraphysical domains. Using a three-dimensional triangular model, we demonstrate the dynamic states associated with the act of praying as it unfolds across time and in response to specific events or contexts. The utility of the proposed model is that it offers a framework of prayer that accounts for intrapersonal variation. This can be useful in clinical contexts, where graphic portrayals of internal experiences can enhance understanding and facilitate desired change. In addition, the model can suggest the extent to which the individual embraces prayer in its most transparent connectional modes or

* KLL: Phd Social Psychologist, e-mail: kladd@iusb.edu

displays a tendency to “mix and match” ways of praying in a personally construed pattern of relevance. All of these features suggest that this model can provide substantial material for self-reflection and development.

Keywords: Prayer. Psychology of Religion. Tri-partite Model. Connection. Love.

Resumo

Embora a pesquisa empírica sobre Psicologia da Oração tenha aumentado significativamente na última década, o mesmo não aconteceu com o desenvolvimento da reflexão teórica. Neste artigo, vamos ampliar nossa conceituação anterior sobre oração como consistindo de conexões voltadas para dentro, para fora e para cima com aspectos nos domínios tanto físicos quanto suprafísicos. Usando um modelo triangular/tridimensional, vamos demonstrar os estados dinâmicos associados ao ato de orar, que se desdobra ao longo do tempo e em resposta a eventos ou contextos específicos. A utilidade do modelo proposto é que ele oferece uma estrutura de oração que considera a variação intrapessoal. Isso pode ser útil em contextos clínicos, onde representações gráficas de experiências internas podem melhorar a compreensão e facilitar a mudança desejada. Além disso, o modelo pode sugerir em qual medida o indivíduo acolhe a oração em seus modos de conexão mais transparentes, ou mostra uma tendência a "misturar e combinar" modos de orar dentro de um padrão de relevância pessoalmente construído. Todas estas características sugerem que este modelo pode fornecer material substancial para a auto-reflexão e o desenvolvimento.

***Palavras-chave**: Oração. Psicologia da Oração. Modelo Tri-partite. Conexão. Amor.*

Introduction

Prayer is an elusive topic within the scientific study of religious beliefs and practices. The challenge is linked to the fact that prayer consists of a personal, physical act performed in accord with an underlying set of metaphysical assumptions and expectations. In some important ways, it is neither possible nor desirable to separate these facets. Yet operating

from a scientific perspective requires an attempt to specify the characteristics of our object of interest. For instance, it is easy for prayer research to arise from a personal devotional motivation. As scientists, we must be careful to collect and analyze data rather than advocating for a position.

One compelling reason to study prayer is precisely because the motivation to pray simultaneously places a person in these worlds of the self and the world of "other"; the physical world and the metaphysical world. The practice of prayer happens at the boundary of these worlds. As we have learned from other sciences such as biology and physics, the boundaries are where growth occurs; the boundaries are where the action is.

At the same time, we must recognize that prayer is first and foremost a theological practice. Most people do not pray simply because a scientist told them to pray. People pray for theological reasons and those reasons are rarely related to scientific tests. We must remember that prayer is not like a drug that we can choose to give, withhold, or otherwise manipulate at our will.

Self and others: West and East

We also have to remain aware that our goal is to understand the psychological factors related to prayer. We need to link our work to principles that are relevant to the topic of psychology. In the case of prayer, we find two psychological ideas that are close to the heart of prayer.

First is the idea of the self. Much of Western psychology is built on how we think about ourselves. Understanding the individual is a central goal of psychology.

Second is the idea of everything that is NOT the self. In order to know who we are as individuals, we must be able to compare ourselves to many other things that are NOT part of us. These "not-self" aspects may be either tangible (other person / substance) or intangible (other characteristics / ineffable qualities) in nature.

Using the psychological principles of "self" and "other" to explore the practice of prayer immediately raises some questions because those notions are not necessarily hallmarks of all forms of psychology. If we

want our theory to be useful beyond Western contexts, we must address the question of theism.

The ideas "self" and "other" work very nicely in most Western religious traditions. In these traditions, it is generally true that humans, all other physical materials, and God are understood as separate; creation and Creator are distinct.

This is not the case in a minority of Western or the majority of Eastern traditions (LADD; LADD; SAHAI, under review). The emphasis in these belief systems tends toward exploring the unity of all things. In many of these cases, "self" and "other" are ultimately not usefully distinguished.

As demonstrated in a plethora of recent research (BULLIVANT; RUSE, 2014), there is also a need to consider the position of atheists. As unusual as it may seem, a significant number of atheists claim that they pray on a regular basis (COOPERMAN, et al., 2015).

Clearly, we cannot assume that all prayer employs the concepts of "self" and "other" in the same fashion if we wish to speak of theistic and non-theistic forms of prayer. We even have to ask if the word "prayer" is flexible enough to describe all these practices.

Modeling prayer as connection

There are two major ways that theorists have tried to address this challenge. One is to think about prayer as a form of communication (BAESLER; 2003. This approach works nicely in theistic traditions. Prayer is often described as a conversation between a person and God. But as soon as we think about Eastern or atheist positions, the idea of communication is less applicable because the person praying has no empirically verifiable conversation partner (LADD et al., 2012).

Having wrestled with this issue elsewhere (SPILKA; LADD, 2013), for the purposes of this paper prayer is conceptualized broadly as an act of connecting. This approach can include communication, but does not require the presence of conversation partners. In this way, it is possible to speak of

connecting in both theistic and non-theistic contexts and the concept has more utility.

What it means to "connect" is not without its own set of issues. As Girard (2007) has noted, connections with other people come at a price. Anyone who has been in any sort of relationship (e.g., employment, romance, etc.) can attest to the fact that connections can be both a supreme joy and an absolute nightmare. Yet, there are a plethora of reasons to argue that humans are fundamentally oriented toward forming connections, whether physical or metaphysical. This basic human orientation is part of the theoretical understanding of who people are and how they tend to engage in the practice of prayer (ESPERANDIO; LADD, 2015; LADD, 2015).

Such a baseline function is quite necessary under conditions with severe challenges to survival, whether individual or group oriented. In those cases, strident individualism is not an effective strategy to adopt; adhering to the convention of a connection-laden life has clear benefits. As survival challenges lessen, so, too, does the inherent necessity of maintaining connections in traditional ways. The extent to which individual choice increases, we hypothesize, is linked to the extent to which prayers deviate from the commonly seen practices, such as described below. Similarly this deviation from the norm is also hypothesized to be more present in contexts where "religion" is eschewed in favor of "spirituality" given the current definition of the former as more organizationally based and the latter as more individually crafted.

When thinking about the spiritual discipline of prayer as "connective," it is pedagogically useful to consider three dimensions that span many different belief orientations (LADD; SPILKA, 2006). An inward type of connection encountered during prayer helps a person reflect on her or his current and potential future spiritual condition. An outward prayer focus emphasizes how a person relates to physical surroundings, including people and the environment. Prayers with an upward sensibility highlight belief commitments made by individuals with regard to supraphysical concerns, moving beyond the purely tangible realm of connection.

These inward, outward, and upward elements can be place on the vertices of a triangle. In this configuration (FIGURE 1, A), the centroid of an equilateral triangle is the location of a perfectly balanced prayer that

contains equal parts of each type of prayer. To demonstrate the dynamic states associated with prayer, the vertices can move in two dimensions: toward (or away from) the center and toward (or away from) each other (i.e., the surface area of the triangle will decrease or increase). Movement toward the centroid indicates greater intensity and a more highly focused prayer concern that involves all facets of praying. The rays that connect the vertices become longer or shorter depending on the extent to which the points are coterminous. In this model, the center point represents a prayer that is perfectly focused with no distractions.

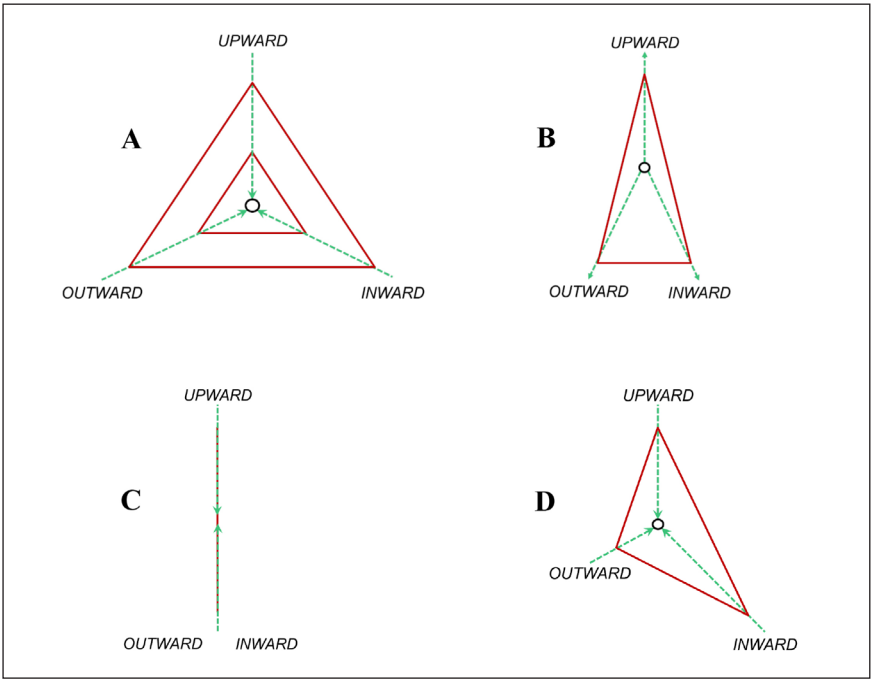

Figure 1 - Two dimensional representation of prayer focus and intensity.

Of course, in actuality a perfectly balanced, perfectly focused prayer is quite rare. People often have specific important topics about which they pray. It is more likely that at any particular moment, a person's prayer life will emphasize one facet over another. Perhaps they are praying about

something they did that they think was wrong; perhaps they are praying about a happy, new relationship; perhaps they are angry at God. In each instance the shape of the triangle changes to demonstrate the different emphases.

For instance, we can represent a way of praying that highlights the relation between inward and outward praying. Prayers for the self and others are strongly equivalent; the concerns of self and physical others is a primary focus, while concerns for non-physical others is more limited. In this situation the distance between the inward and outward points would be relatively small, increasing their angles of connection with the outward point (FIGURE 1, B). If, in fact, the inward and outward were perfectly similar, the triangle fundamentally would collapse into a straight line with inward/outward as one point and upward as the other point (FIGURE 1, C).

It is possible to show many different patterns of prayer with this simple model. As another example, if the outward variety of prayer is quite strong, while the inward and upward prayer experience are less strong. Under those conditions, the vertex of outward will move in toward the center while the inward and upward vertices move away from the center (FIGURE 1, D).

Conceptually, the psychological idea of the "self" links to the theological idea of "inward" prayers. These prayers are very personal. They demonstrate how a person reflects on his or her individual spiritual condition, both positive and negative aspects. The psychological idea of the "other" with its physical and non-physical dimensions includes all of the tangible things for which people pray (other people, the environment) as well as the intangible objects of prayer (peace, love, praise of God).

Modeling prayer-as-practiced

As with any model, there are caveats. While the ideas of "self" and "others" as represented by inward, outward, and upward prayers are seen in the sacred writings of traditions around the world, the people who follow these traditions are "messy." In other words, they do not follow the writings precisely as they are written. It is one thing to write a nice text

with well-defined guidelines. It is quite another thing to get people to follow the instructions. Anyone who has ever worked with children, students, or other humans is very well acquainted with this problem. Life is not neat and orderly and neither is prayer. In reality, people often combine the inward, outward, and upward elements of prayer. When they do, other unique emphases are seen.

These mixtures can take on a wide variety of forms and often show distinct differences across different cultures and traditions. In other words, while the psychological concepts of the physical "self," the physical "other" and the non-physical "other" remain critical for describing the essential elements of prayers, the way these elements are combined is quite flexible across groups of people. We anticipate that in different contexts (e.g., life stages, cultures, etc.) discrete practical manners of praying will emerge. We further expect that this malleable practical nature of prayer will be observable at both individual and group levels of analysis (BRESLIN; LEWIS; SHEVLIN, 2010).

The obvious challenge in the present context is to align the theoretical structure of prayer with the structure of prayer-as-practiced. One way to incorporate this reality into the present model is to consider the edges of the structure as opposed to the vertices. In this manner, various "blends" of the theoretical features of praying can be indicated (FIGURE 2, A).

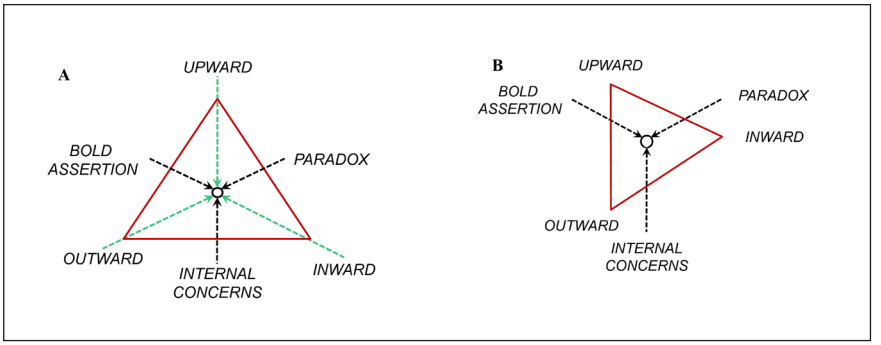

Figure 2 - Two dimensional representation of prayer focus and intensity, incorporating "as-practiced" features.

For instance, a combination of inward and outward prayers may represent a concern characterized as dealing with the "internal concerns" of the self and others. Combining outward and upward approaches to praying suggests a strong sense of the "other" in prayer; here the person frequently is emphasizing her or his own self against the "other" in both physical and non-physical senses. In U.S. samples (LADD; SPILKA, 2006), we have observed a combination of upward and inward prayers that suggest a sense of "paradox" at the heart of the experience (i.e., "already, but not yet"). In addition, upward and outward prayer content expresses a "bold assertion" of one's personal desires and will.

As with the previous explanation, the orientations among these variables fluctuates (FIGURE 2, B). The rotation of the model around its centroid provides a manner in which to demonstrate how the vertices and edges stand in relation to each other at any given moment.

Capturing dynamics of praying

Although useful with regard to both pedagogy and certain research questions, the above sketched two-dimensional model reflects only cross--sectional information. People do not simply pray at one moment in time, in one single fashion. Prayers unfold dynamically at any given moment and across the entire lifespan of practice. While unwieldy to portray in the present format, the model recognizes the constant ebb and flow inherent in the process of prayer. To that end, it is possible to think of the two-dimensional figures shown thus far as having a vertical aspect reflecting the passage of time that moves above or below the flat plane of the printed page. This verticality represents key moments (or even successive mundane moments) in a person's prayer experience.

Recording and reporting of the prayer practice across a span of time, whether for an individual prayer or across a longer period, will result in a discrete "profile" of prayer that will graphically represent the person's prayer experiences. Since prayers occur at corporate as well as individual levels (BAESLER; LADD, 2009), this three-dimensional approach could also be employed to characterize the nature of group prayer practices.

With real-time data streaming and sufficient computing power, this modeling practice could provide valuable information concerning the immediate nature of prayer experiences.

Model applications

In the midst of the flexibility introduced by the specific situations in which people live, the stability of the psychological ideas of "self" and "other" suggest broad classifications of how people pray in real life (FIGURE 3). When people emphasize the connection between inward and outward, regardless of the particular mixture, the common theme might be called "secular." In this instance, what is being highlighted is prayer in a physical sense: physical self and physical other are at the center of the prayers. This orientation might show us what a purely non-theistic prayer looks like by removing all non-physical elements.

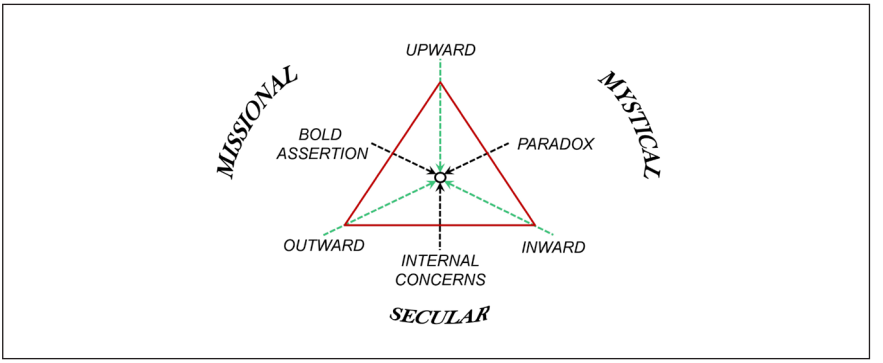

Figure 3 - Two dimensional representation of prayer focus and intensity, incorporating "as-practiced" features.

By combining outward and upward ways of praying, the primary emphasis rests on a sense of praying with regard for "other" in both physical and non-physical senses. This can be termed a "missional" approach to prayer where the object of prayer is placed everywhere but on the self.

The third possible emphasis is on the upward and inward prayers. This combination suggests a deep seeking of the unity between the physical self and the non-physical other; this sort of activity is a hallmark of mysticism.

We have seen thus far how the psychological idea of connecting with self and other can provide guidance for thinking about the various ways in which people pray. This guidance remains strong whether people follow Western or Eastern models, whether they embrace or reject theism, and whether or not they adhere to the "rules" of their preferred path.

The utility in the proposed visual model is that it converts the often abstract notion of prayer into a more tangible state. This can be useful in clinical contexts, where graphic portrayals of internal experiences can enhance understanding and facilitate desired change. Using the simple two dimensional approach can offer insight into the current state of an individual's prayer practice and employing the three dimensional tool allows the individual to explore her or his long-term involvement (or dis-involvement) with prayer as a spiritual discipline. In addition, the model can suggest the extent to which the individual embraces prayer in its most transparent connectional modes or instead displays a tendency to "mix and match" ways of praying in a personally construed pattern of relevance. All of these features suggest that this model can provide substantial material for self-reflection and development.

Linking prayer to love

In addition to the above mentioned theoretical opportunities, this model of prayer provides points of contact for the psychology of religion with mainstream psychological frameworks. While this sort of merger is not necessarily the "gold standard" for understanding and in some cases may even impede the development of ideas, watching for intellectual commonalities can be a fruitful exercise. For example, in the present instance using psychological ideas of connectivity, self, and other to describe

a psychology of prayer has strong ties to another well-developed area of research: love.

Developed by Sternberg (1988; FIGURE 4), one relevant model of love has three primary elements. The first element is intimacy. This includes a feeling of closeness to another person along with a deep emotional openness that can be frightening. A second aspect centers on passion. This way of loving emphasizes the purely physical, sexual behaviors associated with relationships. The third facet of loving highlights commitment. As an intentional decision, this long-term feature of love emphasizes a thoughtful, reflective approach to relationships. According to Sternberg (1988), when these three ways of loving combine in a balanced fashion, the depth of love is maximized.

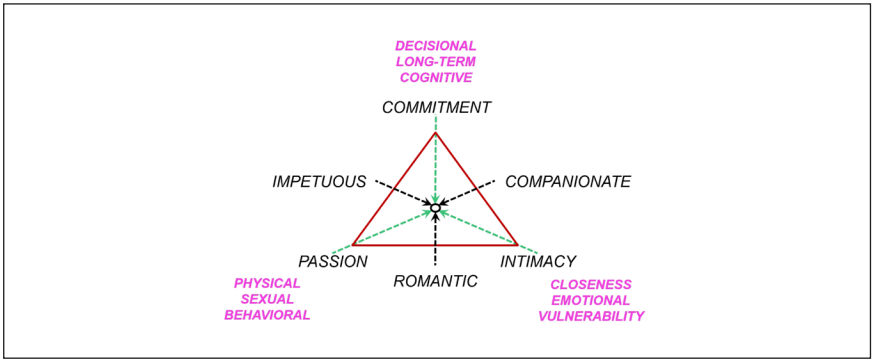

Figure 4 - Two dimensional representation of Sternberg's (1988) model of love.

This is an effective way of describing the experience of love as an emotional, physical, and mental experience. Yet, in love, people are messy and love is messy. People tend to have love lives that mix and match these elements. Sometimes they combine intimacy and passion in a mixture commonly termed romance. Books and movies aplenty regale with tales of this type of love via late night conversations and deep gazing into the lover's eyes/soul.

Alternatively, couples find joy in blending passion and commitment. The long-lasting relationship retains powerful physical components. An

English colloquialism phrases it this way: There may be snow on the mountain but there's still a fire in the furnace.

Still other people combine commitment and intimacy, without any prime role for physical passion. In this situation, love is a firm, steady companionship that brings deep satisfaction.

With that brief description of Sternberg's theory of love, associations with the notions advanced regarding a tri-partite theory of prayer invoking connectivity, self, and other are nearly self-evident. The conceptual points of contact span both the practice and the phenomenological features of both prayer and love. Likewise, the breadth of the concepts has great promise for cross-cultural investigations.

To make some of the similarities explicit (FIGURE 5), an inward prayer, with an emphasis on the self, is quite analogous to a love based on intimacy. Intimate love is primarily about the self and choosing to engage in emotional risk-taking. Likewise, inward prayer includes the personal risk of spiritual self-evaluation.

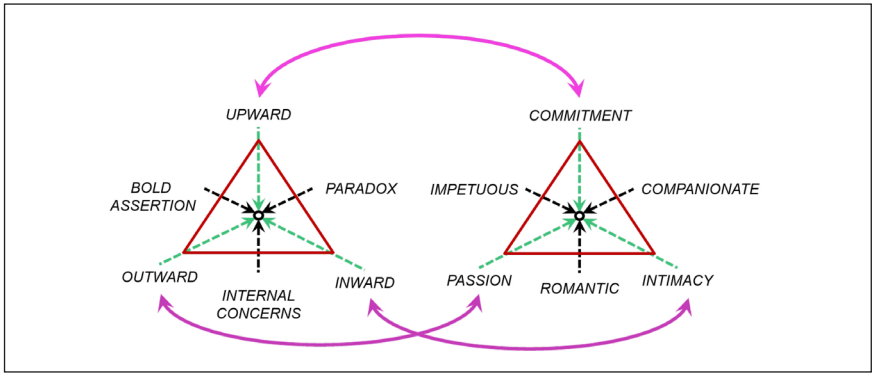

Figure 5 - Combined models of prayer and love.

Outward prayer, with the focus on physical others, resonates with a passion oriented love. The strong desire to be with another and to physically engage the other requires much energy. In both cases of prayer and of love, it is hard to sustain.

The description of upward prayers shares much in common with the long-term, decision based, committed approach to love. The emphasis

here is not on ephemeral emotions or physicality. Instead, this reflects a rational, intentional choice.

Though space does not permit in this format, it is possible to outline how the similarities between these models of prayer and love continue and deepen when you look at how people actually engage them in real life. Following the work of Fincham, Beach, and Kemp-Fincham (1997), exploring how this model unfolds as a process is one avenue for future work. The more recent work of Fincham and colleagues (FINCHAM et al., 2010, 2015) that explicitly incorporates the notion of prayer into spousal relationships is a step in this direction.

Conclusion

At the onset, we argued that the study of prayer is uniquely compelling because it is practiced on the boundaries of the self and the other, on the boundaries of the physical and the spiritual worlds. Using the psychological ideas of connectivity, self, and other, we have described how those boundaries are both stable and flexible. We also outlined how these ideas parallel each other in the psychological studies of prayer and love. As Sternberg (1988) proposed that a tight focus of all three characteristics of love resulted in the strongest form of love, so, too, we posit this same feature with regard to the various facets of prayer.

In overwhelming proportion, writings in theology about prayer and writings in literature about love, describe the rare moments of perfection as moments when senses merge, language fails, meaning evaporates, and only pure experience remains. This event clearly has facets similar to mystical experiences as described by Hood (2001). It seems, however, that the events involved may be even more closely related to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notion of flow, or a moment when the typical boundary of experience is crossed and all facets of life are in harmony. It is our hope that the present model will provide a scientific framework within which to continue to explore these and other similarly intriguing questions regarding the widespread practice of prayer.

References

BAESLER, E. J. *Theoretical explorations and empirical investigations of communication and prayer.* Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.

BAESLER, E. J.; LADD, K. L. Exploring prayer contexts and health outcomes: from the chair to the pew. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, v. 32, p. 347-374, 2009.

BRESLIN, M. J.; LEWIS, C. A.; SHEVLIN, M. A psychometric evaluation of Poloma and Pendelton's (1991) and Ladd and Spilka's (2002, 2006) measures of prayer. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, v. 49, n. 4, p. 710-723, 2010.

BULLIVANT, S.; RUSE. M. (Eds). *The Oxford handbook of atheism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

COOPERMAN, A., et al. U.S. public becoming less religious. *Pew Research Center.* Available in: <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/11/201.11.03_RLS_II_full_report.pdf>. Acess in: nov. 2015.

CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, M. *Flow*: the psychology of optimal experience. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

ESPERANDIO, M. R. G.; LADD, K. L. **"**I heard the voice. I felt the presence": prayer, health and implications for clinical practice. *Religions*, v. 6, p. 670-685, 2015.

FINCHAM, F. D.; BEACH, S. R. H.; KEMP-FINCHAM, S. I. Marital quality: a new theoretical perspective. In: Sternberg, R. J.; Hojjat, M. (Eds.), *Satisfaction in close relationships*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1997. p. 275-304.

FINCHAM, F. D.; BEACH, S. R. H.; LAMBERT, N.; STILLMAN, T.; BRAITHWAITE, S. R. Spiritual behaviors and relationship satisfaction: A critical analysis of the role of prayer. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, v. 27, n. 4**,** p. 362-388, 2008.

FINCHAM, F. D.; LAMBERT, N. M.; BEACH, S. R. H. Faith and unfaithfulness: Can praying for your partner reduce infidelity? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, v. 99, n. 4, p. 649-659, 2010.

GIRARD, R.; et al., *Evolution and conversion*: dialogues on the origins of culture**.** New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2007.

HOOD, R. W. JR. *Dimensions of mystical experiences*: empirical studies and psychological links. Amersterdam: Rodopi, 2001.

LADD, K. L.; LADD, M. L.; SAHAI, N. Conceptualizing prayer for an East-West dialogue and beyond. (Under review).

LADD, K. L. A fé na(s) face(s) da morte: a matriz das relações e teoria da oração mimética corporificada. In: Aquino, T. A.; de Freitas, M. H.; de Paiva, J. G. (Eds.), *Morte, psicologia e religião*. João Pessoa, Brazil, Nova Fonte. Published simultaneously in English as: Faith in the face(s) of death: a matrix of relations and theory of embodied mimetic prayer. In: Grzymała-Moszczyńska, H.; Motak, D. *Religia, religijność, duchowość*. Jagiellonian University Press: Cracow, Poland, p. 169-178, 2015**.**

LADD, K. L., et al. Interpersonal conversations and prayers: differences of content and attachment functions. *Journal of Communication and Religion,* v. 35, n. 3, p. 295-311, 2012.

LADD, K. L.; SPILKA, B. Inward, outward, upward prayer: scale reliability and validation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* v. 45, n. 2, p. 233-251, 2006.

SPILKA, B.; LADD, K. L. *The psychology of prayer:* a scientific approach. New

York: Guilford, 2013.

STERNBERG, R. J. *The triangle theory of love*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.

Recebido: 03/11/2016
Received: 11/03/2016

Aprovado: 21/12/2016
Approved: 12/21/2016