

A book of common prayers

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In times of economic distress and plenty, ninety percent of Americans pray, more than half of us once a day or more. We pray for big things—to stay healthy, to keep our jobs, and to strengthen our relationships. And we pray for small things—to find parking spaces and missing items. Some of us are sure God exists and others pray simply to cover the bases.

A novel Brandeis study published in the current issue of *Poetics* analyzed 683 prayers written in a public prayer book placed in the rotunda of the Johns Hopkins University Hospital between 1999 and 2005. The study found that prayer writers seek general strength, support, and blessing from their prayers, rather than explicit solutions to life's difficult situations, and, more often than not, frame their prayers broadly enough to allow multiple outcomes to be interpreted as evidence of their prayers being answered.

Lead author Wendy Cadge, a sociologist, found that the prayers fell into one of three categories: about 28 percent of the prayers were requests of God, while 28 percent were prayers to both thank and petition God, while another 22 percent of the prayers thanked God.

The study sheds light on the psychology of the people behind the prayers. Most writers anthropomorphized God, addressing God as they would a relative, friend, or parent, preferring familiarity over deference. "Most prayer writers imagine a God who is accessible, listening, and a source of emotional and psychological support, who at least sometimes answers back," says Cadge.

"Prayer writers also tend to frame their prayers broadly, in abstract psychological language, and this allowed them to make many interpretations of the results of their prayers," she said, explaining that the study found that prayer provides a means through which people can reflect on and reframe difficult events in an effort to understand those events in the context of their beliefs.

The study complements other recent research that focuses on whether prayer has any measurable influence on health. Most of these studies have focused on how often people pray, and whether those who pray have fewer serious health problems, recover faster from surgery, or are healthier overall than others.

"If researchers studying religion and health take seriously even the possibility that prayer may influence health, they need to learn more about what people pray for, how they pray, and what they hope will result from their prayers," says Cadge. "The information in this study serves as general background and informs the mechanisms through which religion may influence health."

Source: Brandeis University

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