

The Power(lessness) of Prayer

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

People are always talking about the supposed power of prayer. People pray for themselves, their loved ones, their favorite sports teams, their political leaders and people they don't even know. However, relatively few people stop to ask whether prayer even works, let alone perform tests to see if it has efficacy.

The televangelist Pat Robertson once claimed that he prayed a hurricane away. However, a few years ago, he tried to pray away a major storm in the Virginia area, to no avail. Yet, in the minds of many theists, this did not constitute evidence that prayer simply does not work against the forces of nature.

There are always numerous instances in which prayer clearly fails. For example, when the late Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X, was severely burned in a fire set by her grandson, many ministers gathered to pray that God would save her. However, sadly, she died. No doubt, many theists maintained that God moves in mysterious ways. This all brings to mind the following limerick:

Our God, some contend, is immutable,
And their faith is, indeed, irrefutable,
When He does what he should,
Its because He is good,
When He doesn't His ways are inscrutable.

How convenient! God gets all of the credit and none of the blame. Who else has it so good?

What is especially ridiculous is when people make statements such as, "we pray that no one was hurt or killed in the accident...." If someone was hurt or killed, how is praying that they are not hurt or killed going to change the fact that they were hurt or killed? It would make more sense to say, "we pray that if anyone has been injured or killed in the accident, God will heal them or bring them back to life."

What is especially cruel is when self-centered theists claim that God saved them from death when others were killed in similar circumstances. For example, after every natural disaster, act of terrorism, etc., there are religious morons proclaiming that God kept them alive while others were dying all around them. Piling on with the cruelty, many people claim that those that died simply were not good theists, as though they could possibly know any or all of those that perished.

During the Middle Passage, Africans prayed that their gods and ancestors would save them. Again, sadly, their prayers went unanswered. Some theists would argue that they were praying to false gods. However, praying Black Christians and Muslims in dire circumstances have fared no better than so-called pagan Africans.

People that pray are more often than not guilty of committing the common logical fallacy known as *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (or after this, therefore because of this.) The error in these cases is assuming that because one prays for a desired outcome, the prayer must necessarily be the cause of the desired outcome, when there could be one or more other causes. It brings to mind the saying, “Before one prays for rain, it would be a good idea to check the weather forecast.”

If God answered prayers, Black people would be the healthiest people on the planet. Indeed, no people pray more fervently than do Blacks. Yet Blacks die sooner than their less religious counterparts, are more likely to suffer from diabetes, hypertension, to be in need of organ transplants, etc.

There have been numerous prayer studies on the supposed efficacy of prayer. Perhaps the most famous study was the Columbia study in 2004 in which the authors claimed that Christians that prayed for women trying to conceive children doubled the rate of conception of women being treated via *in vitro* fertilization. The study had numerous flaws and it was reported that cheating was involved/ The lead author claimed that he was unaware of the study until 6-12 months after its completion. The authors avoided answering questions that challenged the study. Columbia eventually distanced itself from the study.

In 2003, the largest study in the world on the relationship between prayer and health was conducted by the Duke University Medical Center. The MANTRA study looked at 750 patients. According to a story on the BBC Website:

“Before their operations, they were randomly split into two groups, and half were prayed for by Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Muslims. However, checks revealed they had fared no better than those not prayed for. The results of the controversial study contradict earlier findings from the same team which suggested a drop of a quarter or more in ‘adverse outcomes’ - including death, heart failure or heart attack. However, that trial involved only 150 patients, and the more extensive research, completed [in 2003], found no evidence of any benefits.” (‘No health benefit’ from prayer, October 16, 2003, <http://news.bbc.uk/2/hi/health/3193902.stm>)

In the fall 1997 issue of *Free Inquiry*, biblical scholar Hector Avalos wrote, “If one measures health status by longevity, then it is clear that pre-modern societies, which largely relied on religious and faith systems, had much shorter life-spans.” (Is Faith Good for You? Examining whether unjustified beliefs are really the best medicine, p. 44.”)

Indeed, during the Dark Ages, when the plague was wiping out one-fourth of Europe’s population, theologians advised people to gather in churches to pray to keep the disease at bay. However, the contagious disease spread like wildfire and millions died.

Prayer is not completely useless. It can help to lower one’s blood pressure and bring forth other health benefits. However, people can get the same benefits through meditation and other relaxation techniques. There is simply no strong evidence that there is a God that heals people. There is a religious saying that goes “God heals, but the doctor collects the fee.” A better saying would be, “Nature and doctors heal, but God gets the credit.”

Theists continue to believe that God answers prayers. However, they would be wise to remember the words of Robert Ingersoll: “Hands that help are better far than lips that pray.”