

**Human Problems and Prayer: A Sociological Approach.**  
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**Abstract**

The objective of this article is to examine the functional role of prayer as a sociological variable in tackling human problems in the society. This involves a critical examination of prayer, human problems and sociological approach to the challenges facing religious adherents in a pluralistic society. This paper shall analyze the forms, features, functions and dysfunctional view of prayer in solving human problems. This thesis appreciates and appropriates the insight offered by theologians and social thinkers into human problems and the need for collaborative social, religious, moral, psychological and economic efforts in stemming the tide of human problems in the society.

**The concept of Prayer**

Prayer is difficult to define because of the various background, traditions and world views of those who have attempted a definition of prayer. Some scholars such as Douglas (1963), Hornby (2001), Mairi (1998) and Ferguson (1991) have associated prayer with supplication, meditation and worship. The unresolved riddle is what is prayer? Bounds (1984) is of the view that prayer has to do with the entire man or his whole being, mind, soul and body. It takes the whole man to pray and prayer affects the entire man in its gracious results. It seems that Bounds is interested in giving testimonies aimed at encouraging more people to take to prayer. Kajere (1989) says prayer is a link of two spirits, the spirit of God and that of man in that hour of communication of man's spirit with that of God, the divine power is poured into the man to dwell with him. Lindsay (1970) posits that it is a process of asking for things not in God's will, many things asked of God are in harmony with his revealed will. Lea (1996) views prayer as a strong feeling of communication.

Ofoegbu (1994) says prayer is fight against the power of darkness hindering ones progress in life. It is believed that prayer goes beyond this power of darkness. Duetel (1986) explains that through prayer, you can accompany any missionary to remote beaches of the earth. Through prayer, you can walk through crowded bazaars; minister in steaming jungles, feed millions of starving men, women and children, hungry for bread for their bodies and for the bread of life. Ferguson (1991) sees prayer as communication with God in worship. It is the living breath of Christ Church. By prayer, the Church resists the assaults of Satan, receives fresh gifts of grace, seeks deliverance, healing and restoration for the saints, and supports the witness of the gospel: seeks the return of the Lord and worship him of whom, through whom and unto who are all things. The *New Encyclopedia Britannica* (1970) defines prayer as a petition or other address by human being to God in the word or thought, found in all religions through out history. Raheem (1992) looks at prayer as a second duty observed in devotional prayers five times daily. It is the

worship of Allah in total submission to his will. Whoever abandons prayer has left the fold.

From the above definitions of prayer, we could observe that it has equipped religious adherents' spiritual revolution. Douglas (1963) says prayer includes all the attitudes of human spirit in its approach to God. Religious adherents worship God especially when they adore, confess, praise and supplicate him in prayer.

Prayer is also seen as a positive command which religious adherents are positively challenged to include in their daily religious or spiritual life. Cho (1988) attributes the growth in the church membership to the seriousness about their prayer life.

### **Classification of Prayer**

Notable among prayers said by religious adherents in finding solutions to their problems in life include: personal prayer, public prayer, liturgical prayer, seasoned prayers, prayer to saints, vocal, meditative, contemplative, physical, positive, charismatic prayer. In the new Testament for example, the emphasis on prayer is emphasized as it relates to forgiveness (Mk 4:25-26) the lord's prayer, the magnificent (Lk. 1:46-55), the Benedictus (Lk 1:68-79), Jesus' prayer to the one true God (John 17), exclamations such as "Praise be to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:3-14) the believers' prayer (Acts 4:23-31), may this cup be taken from me" Mtt. 26:36-44), pray that you will not fall into temptation" (LK 22:39-46), St. Stephen's prayer (Acts 7: 59-60), Simon Maqus' prayer (Acts 8:24), "pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men" 2 Thessalonians 3: 1-2 and Maranatha (1 Corinthians 16:22).

Personal prayer followed typical format due to the problem that Christian adherents face. The ability to maintain a disciplined approach to challenges of the day explains the same enthusiasm.

Prayer to saints has remained a tradition. Prayers of petition may be addressed to saints, in the belief that they answer such prayers by means of their prayers to God on behalf of the petitioner. The Protestants reject the notion of prayer to Saints which may be unbiblical and may lead to polytheism.

Prayers for the dead are said to be efficacious, especially among some religions such as African Traditional Religion and religious denominations of a family or church like Roman Catholics. This explains the reason requiem Masses are offered for the repose of the departed members. God is asked to have mercy upon the departed. This is common among Roman Catholics. Christians who have died remain part of the church and as such are both able to pray and to receive the benefits of prayer for them.

Vocal prayer is made with the lips, though not always out loud. Practices of vocal prayer vary across denominations, but may include renouncing distractions often by closing the eyes, presenting oneself by bowing the head, placing hands together, or making the sign of the cross, making a request or give praise for grace, enlightenment, assistance or just praising and thanking God, invoking the name, glory, or life of Jesus, closing often with 'Amen'. Real prayer may be a

prayer of petition in which a person beseeches God for a need to be fulfilled. It involves prayer of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, intercession and communion. The prayer is supposed to receive the full mental and spiritual effort of those involved; even if a standard wording is used, mechanical recitations are discouraged.

Scholars have identified categories of prayer different from the above.

Notable among types of prayer include meditative, contemplative and charismatic prayers. Meditative Prayer is more of the mind than vocal prayer. It is intended to obtain some knowledge and love of God. As a quest, meditation helps the mind seek to understand the why and how of the religious or spiritual life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking. The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain. Adherents of religion may be helped by books such as the sacred scriptures, writings of the spiritual fathers, works of spirituality etc. They meditate on the conditions of man or on the life or mysteries of Jesus Christ.

In contemplative Prayer, it is believed that the soul enters into contemplation. It is believed by mystics that in this form of prayer, God conducts the soul. It is noted that physical gestures such as making sign of the cross, kneeling, bowing and prostrating often accompany prayer.

Charismatic Prayer is another type of prayer defined as "the ecstatic utterance of emotionally agitated religious persons, consisting of a jumble of disjointed and largely unintelligible sounds. They are moved directly by a divine spirit and their utterance is therefore, quite spontaneous and unpremeditated. It is characterized by religious ecstasy, unable to understand the words that come out.

### **Characteristic Features of Prayer**

A number of features mark prayer among adherents of religion in every human society. The first feature comes under approaches to prayer which depends to a large extent on the nature of human problems being tabled before God. Most prominent among the approaches include direct petition to God which for centuries remain the common form of prayer which directly is an appeal to God to grant one's requests. It is the simplest form of prayer described by observers as social approach to prayer. Adherents directly enter into God's rest, ask for their needs to be fulfilled. God listens to the prayer, chooses either to answer or not in the way they ask of him. This is the primary prayer found in most religions. Educational prayer is not a conversation; rather, it inculcates certain attitudes in the one who prays. It should not influence Rationalist approach to prayer but feels that the ultimate goal of prayer is to help train a person to focus on divinity through philosophy and intellectual contemplation.

Prayer has the feature of not inciting people to revolution, hatred, rancor and violence but pleads the cause of the poor before the prayer, man lead to agitation for freedom. Heiler (1966) says that prayer is found in all religions either as personal or communal act utilizing various forms and techniques. It is also a significant and

universal aspect of religion that expresses the deep and broad range of religious feelings and attitudes that command man's relations with his object of worship.

Bloesch (1980) believes that prayer could be effective or weak depending on the approach, attitude and purity of heart of the supplicator. It expresses man's desire and when it is anchored in God's promises leads to better results and testimonies. But sin, wrath, bitterness, lack of faith, anger and wickedness hinder prayer. Munroe (2000) sees prayer as not just opening of mouth, this was probably the reason the disciples of Jesus asked Christ to teach them how to pray. Prayer is learned in order to master its principles, uncover the secrets, and knowing the rudiments of prayer is the secret behind triumphing prayers.

Palmer (1981) is of the view that prayer is of social significance and universal aspect of religion expresses thanksgiving praise, and other broad range of religious feelings and attitudes that command adherents of religion's relations with the object of worship. It provides people, individual and communal faith and the practical application of this faith based on individual or communal experience of the supernatural beings. The content and form of prayer are more often than not bound on the living experience of a people, their economic, social, political, educational and medical development available to the people. A deep reflection on the contents of these prayers provides us with what we can call the Theology of African Traditional Religion and the bedrock of any African Theology or African Christian Theology.

Prayer is the very expression of living religion. It distinguishes the idea of religion from those that approach it or resemble it, such as religions and aesthetic feelings. Prayer is the purest in expressing the essential element of a religion. The Quran is regarded as a book of prayers and the book of Psalms of the Bible is viewed as a meditation on biblical history turned into prayer. Prayer involves the whole personality of the supplicant as he expresses his emotions and whole heart by different postures like kneeling, standing, stooping etc.

Prayer expresses a desire on the part of men to enter into contact with the sacred. Prayer expresses a strong feeling of presence which is neither an abstract conviction nor an instinctive intuition but rather a volitional movement conscious of realizing its highest end. Gbenda (2006) posits that in prayer, man ceases all outward activity and centers into immediate relation to God. This makes the essence of religion comes to its purest expression.

Prayer is described as meditation about God, a step, a going out of one's self. It has, therefore, a personal and experiential character that goes beyond critical analysis. The feeling that God guides and directs all that happens in their life helps believers cleave to God in prayers.

Prayer takes the fixed pattern which includes benedictions, litanies, repetition or formular prayers, hymns, doxologies etc. The various types of prayer are connected and permit a flow from one type to

another. It is possible to distinguish several, even if more on the basis of psychology.

### **Understanding Human Problems**

Conceptual clarification is needed to drive home the understanding of human problems being investigated. Two words are coined to form human problems. Human according to Mairi (1998) refers or belongs to, showing the better qualities and limitations of people especially the weakness as opposed to God. Hornby (2001) defines human as having the same feelings and emotions as most ordinary people. Afejuku (1977) is of the view that a problem means a matter proposed for solution or a puzzle, something uncertain, and unsatisfactory situation. Hornby (2001) says it is a thing that is difficult to deal with or to understand. Mairi (1998) posits that it is a situation or matter that is difficult to understand or deal with.

Human problems could be seen, therefore, as difficulties, challenges and predicaments associated with human association, situation and existence. Odoemene (2007) posits that human beings through the use of their free will are responsible for most of the sufferings and problems of humanity. Human problems may seem difficult to man, but not impossible to God. Human problems pose serious danger to man, institutions and relationships in the society.

### **Types of Human Problems**

Human problems are classified into four groups namely; religious, social, economic and political predicaments of man in the society. Religious problems refer to contemporary challenges affecting beliefs, practices, norms and values relating man to God and to his neighbour. Central among religious problems are religious crises, conflict, fanaticism, intolerance, indoctrination, religious propaganda, ignorance, priest craft, dogmatism, pluralism, derogatory labels, accessive claims, 'holier-than thou attitude', abstract theology, and lack of compassionate love for mankind. Others include witchcraft, sorcerer, obnoxious cultural practices and lack of commitment to the struggle for liberation of the oppressed masses. The nature of these problems illustrate the inability of religious adherents to come together, speak with one voice, in tackling other calamities facing adherents of religion as they co-exist in a pluralistic society. These religious problems have made critics speak ill or dysfunctional role of religion which promoted exploitation, marginalization of the poor, the oppressed and the underprivileged in the society.

Social problems point to the difficulties which arise from disputes over ownership, need to live in harmony under some rules, laws or regulations, social relationships. Haralambos (2008) describes the social questions affecting human beings as coming under social situations man finds himself. Such social problems include illiteracy, armed robbery, inter-class exploitation, gambling, lack of shelter, oppression, drunkenness, drug abuse, etc. They do not promote solidarity, social cohesion, and sustainable development among human beings in the society.

Moral problems are considered to include abortion, capital punishment, battering, intercepting into one's privacy through satellite relayed e-mail, phone calls and computer files. Others include ritual killing, murder, trafficking in human persons, genital mutilations, polygamy, incest, kidnapping and war.

Political problems have their toll on human problems. They are political challenges emanating from political crises, abuse of power, thuggery, political killing, rigging, lack of rule of law, ethnic conflict, Niger Delta crisis, ethnic militia, nepotism, godfatherism, lack of political will, youth resilience, and lack of good governance, authority and exercise of power. Others include cruel torture, human rights violations and gender related offences. They have compounded sound and articulate visionary leadership qualities and leadership by example expected to impart positively on people, institution and relationships in human beings.

Economic problems have taken the deserved share in human problems. They refer to the various woes affecting the production, distribution and management of human, material and natural resources by man. Economic problems are illustrated by the unsatisfactory situations man finds himself. They are unemployment, poverty, diseases, starvation, fraud, corruption, poor economic planning, lack of implementation and ineffective monitoring, bribery, bunkering, misplaced priority, and inflation. The above challenges explain one of the reasons for budget deficit, poor income per capita.

From the conditions described above, adherents of religion are characterized by inhuman conditions of life scale oppression, exploitation, deprivation and domination. The functional place of prayer in solving human problems is sociologically approached below.

#### **Prayer: A Sociological Approach to Human Problems**

Odoemene (2007) suggests that through prayer, one requests God to interfere in the course of events, to maintain or to bring backup harmony. Prayer helps to remedy human situations as discussed below.

Religion brings religious faithfuls closer to God. Prayer according to James 4:2 can bring about reduced blessings in life due to a failure to pray. It is recorded as the first moments of the church regarded by apostles as their life.

Religious adherents see prayer as a group activity associated with heightened emotion and excitement. It is a means of achieving union with God, a means of raising the mind as well as the heart of God. Prayer is an uplifting of the heart, a glance toward heaven, a day of gratitude and of love in times of sorrow as well as of joy". Prayer can take place as part of an organized event such as the mass, burial, foundation laying ceremony, wedding etc.

One can grow spiritual through the life of prayer. Prayer helps to normalize or restore relationships to God. God is still interested in the plight of man and remains central to the ordinary consciousness. Prayer has a mutually validating relationship to knowledge.

It is observed that adherents of religion have joined hands to rise against the exploitation in the society which the poor, the oppressed and the under privileged groups prayed fervently against such vices as apartheid system, racism and other social discriminations which promoted social dichotomy. In this way, prayer became a cementing socio-religious factor used in championing the course of the oppressed, the weak and the poor in the society. Intercessory prayer helps to witness to man's misery and strongly calls for justice between the powerful and the oppressed. Powerful testimonies in churches and revivals tend to support the results of scientific studies and research that prayer has positive therapeutic effects on the health of the people. If prayer promotes a healthy people, it promotes also a healthy society. Prayer as a mystical exercise is believed to be real because God answers prayers. Religious mystical experience is not irrational exuberance but rather a profoundly rational experience with consequences for the structure of knowledge. One dimension of this influence on knowledge is the extent to which the purgative process rectifies man's relationship with God.

Another importance of prayer is based on experiential approach which enables the praying adherent to gain a direct experience of the recipient of the prayer. Prayer is important in faith healing. This is the attempt to use spiritual means such as prayer to prevent human problems such as illness, cure disease or improve security. Prayer is used to heal and those who attempt to heal mental practices, spiritual insights or other techniques say they can summon divine or supernatural intervention on behalf of the ill. Faith healing may be used according to one's belief to afford gradual relief from pain, sickness, bring about a sudden "miracle cure" and for alleviating or curing diseases.

Patients who have knowledge of receiving prayer have slightly higher instances of complications than those who do not receive prayer. It is believed that prayer aids in recovery due to divine influence, psychological and physical benefits. Prayer uplifts, increases moral and aids recovery. Similarly, prayer can reduce physical stress, anxiety and regardless of the object of worship prayer promotes more positive outlook and strengthens the will to live.

Prayer is important as a practice to awaken man's inherent inner capacities of strength, compassion and wisdom rather than to petition external focus based on fear, idolizing and worldly gains. In various ways, prayer is a form of meditation, practice of inner reconditioning and replacement of the negative vices in order to gain the virtuous and blessings of life.

In spite of the prevailing challenges of the day, failure in the face of evil and monumental fraud, poverty and illiteracy, prayer expresses an aspiration to pull something into one's life. Believing in prayer we will become what we believe. The ability to be touched richly remains evidence of the working of great compassion within man.

Prayer functions as a form of self-talking or self therapy in which one mentally talks through a problem. Through talking aloud in the hope that some new insight will come or a better decision can be made, prayer has the function of being part of a decision-making process.

Based on the above discussion, prayer transforms the ordinary and mundane into the path of awakening and enriching human lives with deep spiritual connection. It makes every situation special by manifesting pure and sustainable development.

The communicative media of prayer which are involved in sacrifice, worship, ceremonies, rites, and forms of fellowship cut across cultures and act as a unifying factor. Prayer remains the key to solving human problems. It has a sociological approach especially if one considers the fact that people, institutions and relationships are involved. Every religious founder or spiritual leader prayed to God in unbroken communion. Their followers were encouraged to pray in solitude before dawn which marked the turning points of their life with periods of prayer. Religious founders have remained role models whom their followers emulate in prayer, submitting to God's will and praying for their members.

The social implications of the above background include that prayer helps man to know the plan by which God will make all things to work together for the good of man. It makes us know the best way to pray according to that plan of God. The book of Romans (8:26-28) makes Christians observe that the spirit aids human weakness. Many believers are drawn to God in religiosity and spirituality because God intervenes in human history. These answers to prayer are based on the promises and will of God (1 John 5:14, 15). Religious adherents make God's word the guide for our prayers and seek God's revealed will in organic faith and believing in God's power to answer in his creative universe. Prayer is part of God's design, will and promises to bring man together by changing human problems. Man's awareness of divine presence does not only shape man's response to prayer, but it makes man turn to God in individual and corporate prayer (Matthew 18:19).

The communion of prayer deepens faith and love for God, not only when we draw near to him, but as we reach out in intercession for fellow believers and for the lost world. The kingdom of righteousness is entered by faith and in the communion of prayer man expresses his love for God and offers to him the tribute of our lives. Believers' awareness of God's love and our understanding of his purpose draw us to pray with fervent urgency for the spread of the Good news.

Prayer seeks the return of the Lord (Rev. 22:20) like the activities in the upper room, it pulls believers together to worship him of whom, through whom and unto whom are all things Ferguson (1991).

Prayer as a petition demands confession of sins, invites supplication for pardon, and seeks God's will as we bring our petitions for



guidance, provision, deliverance and vindication. Religious adherents are made new creatures by reordering their social priorities, discipline their emotions and show restraints in their daily activities in life. The human frail seems overwhelming but prayer according to Ogunbowale (1998) is the secret of Christian success. If it is established that a prayerful life is a victorious life, it shows that religious adherents need to follow the examples of their leaders who remain role models through fervent prayers. Exemplary life of these religious leaders call for emulation by their members.

Prayer enables believers to resist the assaults of Satan, the darts, the wiles and spiritual wickedness in high places. There are strong social indicators that it makes people receive fresh gifts of divine grace and seek deliverance, healing and restoration for the saints.

Prayer uses the language of the Psalms as communicative modes to fixed forms to pray in unison. In Christianity for instance, the richly indwelling word of Christ has produced a concert of prayer over the ages. What Jews, Muslims, Hindus, traditionalists observe with either certainty or the reverse must be of sociological significance to the society. Prayer designates the first global product of religion and in spite of the diverse religions of mankind; it remains a common ritual and practice most people embrace as religion's neutralizer. Human problems are many and testimonies abound showing that there is no mountain that is above God. Man is reminded to return to his creator. God's character, word and integrity show that he cannot be blamed for human problems rather man's unsuccessful prayer lives, lack of direction, and lack of intimacy and not applying the truths and principles of prayer underscore the effectiveness of prayer. These views are significant for break through in our spiritual approach to human problems which require collaborative, spiritual, scientific and moral commitment.

### **Challenges to the Sociology of Prayer**

In spite of the cumulative force of prayer as a sociological approach to human problems, there are observed inherent challenges to the sociology of prayer. Prayer is therefore, criticized for having no effect on the frequency or severity of complications in patients who are prayed for. Although it is argued that science cannot illuminate questions of faith, faith healing has been criticized on the grounds that those who use it may delay seeking potentially curative conventional medical care. In situations where coronary artery by pass, graft surgery took place, the criticism on these grounds that were severe methodological problems. *The American Heart Journal* (2006) feels Christian's intercessory prayer is found to have no effect on the recovery of heart surgery patients.

Prayer may be imposed on worshippers as a measure to their problems. This affects the psychology of the person having the problem and about to offer the prayer. The concept of conducting

prayer experiments reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose of prayer. Forms of prayer may be abused as a vain repetition by man (Mk 6:7). Similarly, an opposite danger is formless and wordless prayer that seeks mystical absorption into deity rather than a living and personal fellowship.

Another dimension to the challenges of the sociology of prayer is viewed from the perspective of the consequences of unanswered prayer which could be frustrating, confusing and devastating. It leads to inner conflict, crises, sorrow, despair, bitterness, and could undermine the foundation of our faith. This could push religious adherents into rebellion, isolated from God, questioning God's care about man's problems doubting, his character and integrity. The question that comes to mind is; does God answer prayer? Is he indifferent to man's problems, and can man rely on him? It is human to have these negative thoughts leading to premature conclusion about our prayer. People may doubt that prayer works and even less believe it is necessary based on the spiritual and emotional pain of unanswered prayer which can be deep and devastating. The effect of the foregoing is that religious adherents may be discouraged from prayer as a ritual, an obligation, a communion and communication that ought to touch God's heart. In this way, the social cohesion, group solidarity, harmonious and integrative values of prayer seem to be losing ground to some adherents of religion. It has taken scholars, theologians and religious adherents time to re-establish prayer one of the most exciting aspects of a life of faith, power transforming life, change circumstances, and give peace and perseverance in the midst of trial. The weight of the above challenges to prayer as a sociological approach to human problems shows an increased spiritual leakage, lack of a life of true faith, little victory over sin, poor spiritual progress, a weak witnessing power and poverty.

### **Conclusion**

Prayer is universal and has a long history of practice and development. It is based on the belief that there exists a Supreme Being and capable of influencing all spheres of life. The meaning of prayer, types, characteristic features, understanding human problems, nature and prayer as a sociological approach have been adopted and discussed. Human problems are both man made and spiritual and need multi-dimensional approach. As a global synergy, prayer helps individuals and groups gain organic faith which affects the course of history, gain knowledge, strength and improve human and spiritual relations which are essential elements to social integration, harmony and true humanity.

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