2017

Prayer In Context: A Micro-Sociological Analysis Of Religious Practice In A Catholic And An Islamic Devotional Movement

Christopher Stawski
University of Pennsylvania, chris.stawski@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations

Part of the Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2592

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2592
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Prayer In Context: A Micro-Sociological Analysis Of Religious Practice In A Catholic And An Islamic Devotional Movement

Abstract
This project aims to advance the study of prayer by analyzing it as a social interaction – on a human-divine as well as a human-human level - utilizing Randall Collins’s interaction ritual theory within a comparative framework articulated by Ann Taves to investigate religious experiences. Cases are presented to compare prayer practices in two contemporary devotional movements respectively inspired by Padre Pio (Padre Pio Prayer Groups) and Said Nursi (Nur Movement) that seek to develop the faith of their adherents as they negotiate living in secular contexts. Based on historical research, textual analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the United States, this project addresses how ritual context and habitual entrainment affect the prayer experiences and conceptions of adherents within these two movements while also offering generalizable knowledge about prayer applicable to other contexts. As an outcome of the comparison, three propositions are put forward: (1) Prayer practices enact communicative relationships between the human person and an ascribed divine which can result in an “embodied confidence” in the reality of those relationships; (2) Prayer and worship practices can enact relationships between and among human persons of a shared tradition, which results in the formation of communal bonds and a forum for testifying to the power of an ascribed divine; and (3) Prayer and worship practices can constitute a form of training that is intended to prepare and protect religious practitioners in spiritual battles that are fought within the human person and among human persons throughout one’s life in order to sustain and strengthen relationships with an ascribed divine. The process of habituation for attaining “embodied confidence” is termed the “vernacularization of charisma”, as prayer practices are socially learned, adopted in form, and appropriated at the individual level, while being creatively translated as a mode of relating to an ascribed divine whereby the person owns and draws strength from the practices across different situations. This project provides a new perspective for understanding prayer that extends current methodological and theoretical discourses related to research on “lived religion” and “disciplinary practices” and offers grounds for hypothesis formation to advance the scientific study of religion.

Degree Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Graduate Group
Religious Studies

First Advisor
Randall Collins

Keywords
disciplinary practices, interaction ritual, lived religion, Padre Pio, prayer, Said Nursi

This dissertation is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2592
PRAYER IN CONTEXT: A MICRO-SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN A CATHOLIC AND AN ISLAMIC DEVOTIONAL MOVEMENT

Christopher Stawski

A DISSERTATION
in
Religious Studies

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania
in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2017

**Supervisor of Dissertation**  
Randall Collins, Ph.D.  
Dorothy Swaine Thomas  
Professor of Sociology

**Graduate Group Chairperson**  
Anthea Butler, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Religious Studies

**Dissertation Committee**  
Anthea Butler, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Religious Studies

Jamal Elias, Ph.D.  
Walter H. Annenberg Professor in the Humanities  
Professor of Religious Studies and South Asia Studies
To Angie and my Mom, with love
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The journey to completing this dissertation has been filled with a number of people to whom I must express deep gratitude. First, I would like to thank Randy Collins, my dissertation supervisor, without whom the inspiration for this project would not have occurred. The dissertation greatly benefitted from Randy’s critical guidance and his advice to demonstrate through empirical research the theoretical and methodological issues I wanted to address in the study of religion. In addition, his encouragement to constructively push through the writing process when I was besieged with delays in bringing the dissertation to completion was invaluable. I am grateful to Randy for his patience, as well as for modeling how creative theorizing and intellectual rigor can be brought together to push good ideas forward.

I would like to thank my dissertation committee members, Anthea Butler and Jamal Elias, who have each played important roles throughout the years of the doctoral process in supporting my candidacy and dissertation, both on an intellectual as well as an administrative level. I am grateful for their guidance and support. Steve Dunning, my initial supervisor, and Guy Welbon were instrumental in the early years of the doctoral process, encouraging me to join the Department of Religious Studies as a doctoral student, nurturing my development through their courses and advice, and helping to create an arrangement such that I could pursue a PhD while also having work responsibilities elsewhere. I am grateful to Ernestine Williams, who helped me to navigate a number of the issues that arose in the process of embarking on this unique arrangement.
My doctoral studies competed for my time and energy with the professional responsibilities I had with the John Templeton Foundation. The situation required creativity and accommodation on all sides in order for me to productively pursue both paths at the same time. I am grateful to the Graduate Division of Penn’s School of Arts and Sciences, the Department of Religious Studies, and the John Templeton Foundation for helping to make the impossible possible. At Templeton, I am thankful for having had the support of Barnaby Marsh, Kimon Sargeant, Arthur Schwartz, and Jack Templeton as I pursued this daunting balancing act, and I am thankful to Marlene Ryan for her support and editorial assistance in the dissertation process.

Templeton proved to be a rich home from which I could further develop the ideas contained in this dissertation, providing a platform for me to delve broadly and deeply into research across the humanities and social sciences. I had the good fortune and privilege to work with and meet a number of scholars and researchers working in these areas. I am grateful for all of the advice, conversations, and experiences while engaging within this extended network over the years that has enriched and informed my capacities and perspectives to carry out the dissertation. Among this group, I would like to thank James Arthur, Mark Berner, Alon Goshen-Gottstein, William Grassie, Greg Hansell, David Hufford, Byron Johnson, Serene Jones, Sol Katz, Dacher Keltner, Joan Koss-Chioino, Kevin Ladd, Rich Lerner, Tanya Luhrmann, Mike McCullough, Don Miller, Howard Nusbaum, Ken Oliff, James Pawelski, Stephen Post, Martin Seligman, William Schweiker, Christian Smith, Ann Taves, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Miroslav Volf, Robert Woodberry, Robert Wright, and Robert Wuthnow. I am also grateful to Steve Hopkins
and Mark Wallace, who helped to light the flame inside of me to study religion while an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, and to David Lamberth and David Little, who helped to keep that light burning while I was at Harvard Divinity School.

I am grateful to the people in the Padre Pio Prayer Group and Nur communities who welcomed me into their groups, shared with me their thoughts and reflections on prayer and matters of faith, and allowed me to learn from their practices and traditions. This project would not be possible without their gracious hospitality, friendliness, and openness to my presence as a researcher. I must also express thanks to the staff of the International Headquarters of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups in San Giovanni Rotondo, who gave me precious English-language resources on Padre Pio and the history of the movement when I visited Italy in 2011, and to the staff of the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, with whom I spent a short but concentrated time to learn about Nursi and the Nur movement during my visit to Turkey in 2015.

I have been blessed with a wonderful family. To my Mom and Dad, who modeled independence of thought and the courage to follow a road less travelled. I am tremendously lucky to have parents who created the space and support for my educational and life aspirations to be nurtured. They instilled in me a strong sense of spirit, good humor, and a commitment to live a life of integrity filled with love.

To my wife, Angie, who has been present for all of the sleepless nights, difficulties, and successes that have arisen in the process. I am forever in her debt as the balancing act often resulted in a distracted, half-awake husband and father to our children. I am grateful for her understanding, support, love, and forgiveness. My oldest
daughter, Gabrielle, was only a baby at the beginning of this journey, and now we have two more children, Julia and Noah, whom we have welcomed along the way. The bonds that I share with my wife and children inspire me to do my best work and to be the best person I can in service to them and others.
ABSTRACT

PRAYER IN CONTEXT: A MICRO-SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN A CATHOLIC AND AN ISLAMIC DEVOTIONAL MOVEMENT

Christopher Stawski
Randall Collins

This project aims to advance the study of prayer by analyzing it as a social interaction – on a human-divine as well as a human-human level - utilizing Randall Collins’s interaction ritual theory within a comparative framework articulated by Ann Taves to investigate religious experiences. Cases are presented to compare prayer practices in two contemporary devotional movements respectively inspired by Padre Pio (Padre Pio Prayer Groups) and Said Nursi (Nur Movement) that seek to develop the faith of their adherents as they negotiate living in secular contexts. Based on historical research, textual analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the United States, this project addresses how ritual context and habitual entrainment affect the prayer experiences and conceptions of adherents within these two movements while also offering generalizable knowledge about prayer applicable to other contexts. As an outcome of the comparison, three propositions are put forward: (1) Prayer practices enact communicative relationships between the human person and an ascribed divine which can result in an “embodied confidence” in the reality of those relationships; (2) Prayer and worship
practices can enact relationships between and among human persons of a shared tradition, which results in the formation of communal bonds and a forum for testifying to the power of an ascribed divine; and (3) Prayer and worship practices can constitute a form of training that is intended to prepare and protect religious practitioners in spiritual battles that are fought within the human person and among human persons throughout one’s life in order to sustain and strengthen relationships with an ascribed divine. The process of habituation for attaining “embodied confidence” is termed the “vernacularization of charisma”, as prayer practices are socially learned, adopted in form, and appropriated at the individual level, while being creatively translated as a mode of relating to an ascribed divine whereby the person owns and draws strength from the practices across different situations. This project provides a new perspective for understanding prayer that extends current methodological and theoretical discourses related to research on “lived religion” and “disciplinary practices” and offers grounds for hypothesis formation to advance the scientific study of religion.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>VIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: PRAYER AS A SOCIAL INTERACTION: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: PADRE PIO: THE POWER OF DILEMMA AND DEVOTION</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: EXPERIENCING PADRE PIO PRAYER GROUPS</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: SAID NURSI AND THE NUR MOVEMENT: BATTLING FOR BELIEF</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: READING NURSI</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6: THE VERNACULARIZATION OF CHARISMA: TOWARD A THEORY OF PRAYER AS AN INTERACTION RITUAL</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

Prayer as a Social Interaction: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

It is fair to say that, historically, researchers have not adequately addressed the role of prayer as a social phenomenon. Stretching as far back as Marcel Mauss’s never completed dissertation on prayer, only sections of which were published in 1909, many years passed without serious attention by sociologists. William Swatos indicates that the few sociologists who have addressed prayer throughout the twentieth century tend to suggest that the “positivistic origins of sociology have created a bias against granting any empirical credence to prayer at all”, casting prayer as an “irrational act” unworthy of attention by scholars focused on the social world (Swatos 153-154). Swatos notes the oddity of this claim, since “human face-to-face interaction is the model, in fact, for virtually all prayer: a talking or listening to someone” (154).

Psychologists have historically paid more attention to prayer as a component of religious life, especially given William James’s understanding that prayer is the “very soul and essence of religion” (James 505), but the vibrant discussions of prayer in the early twentieth century have not carried through. In fact, an inspection of the annotated bibliography on the psychology of prayer put together by Emma Shacke and L.B. Brown published in The Human Side of Prayer, yields a dearth of references from the 1920s through the 1960s, with prayer only beginning to make a real resurgence in the field in
the 1980s and 1990s (Brown 257-281). More recent scholarship has highlighted prayer’s relation to well-being and coping\(^1\), but much of that research has tended to use single-item survey measures of prayer frequency and correlated them with other measures to understand the effect of prayer practice, rather than shed light on what people do while praying.

While attention has been paid to the multidimensional nature of prayer by a handful of scholars (for example, Brown, 1994; Poloma and Pendleton, 1989; Ladd and Spilka, 2002; Zaleski and Zaleski, 2005; among others), these efforts have largely focused on developing typologies of prayer which posit the relational differences between the pray-er and the being to whom prayer is directed. Constructing comparative typologies can be a useful and important methodological tool for understanding the varieties of prayer, but Armin Geertz, in an essay written in honor of Jonathan Z. Smith, expresses skepticism about many of the typologies of prayer that have been developed throughout the history of the study of religion based on the complexities and difficulties of comparative classification for this phenomenon. While weighing previous typologies of prayer outlined by such scholars as Friedrich Heiler, Geo Widengren, Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, and Sam Gill, Geertz states that “no analytically satisfactory typology…of prayer has been produced in the 150-year history of the comparative study of religion”

---

\(^1\) See Spilka, Bernard and Kevin L. Ladd. *The Psychology of Prayer: A Scientific Approach*. Guilford Press, 2013. The authors review a wide range of scientific literature on prayer in psychology and other social sciences, treating prayer as a “complex” phenomenon and paying attention to research that takes cognitive, motivational, neuropsychological, social psychological, and developmental approaches to understanding prayer and its role in coping, well-being, and health. The recognition of prayer as a coping strategy is one of the main findings from a variety of trajectories of research: “That prayer helps one better cope and adjust to life’s challenges has become increasingly evident over time” (Spilka and Ladd 22).
(Geertz 121). Geertz is in favor of the creation of analytical typologies, but criticizes previous attempts due to the prevalence of conceptual category mistakes and confused levels of comparison between linguistic/communicative and behavioral/ritual aspects of prayer. Thus, Geertz prefers to base a science of religion on “clear theories” whereby scholars can “develop analytical definitions that then become the basis of analytical typologies” (120). Geertz argues for a humanistic, anthropological theory of religion based on the idea that the individual is constituted in a dynamic field of three relationships - the cognitive, the social, and the pragmatic – where the biological aspects of the human are not lost amidst social, cultural, and psychological factors. What is important for Geertz is that, as we think through our analytical categories, we should not forget that “we are what we are as bodies situated in particular locales” (125).

As scholars within sociology and anthropology have begun to pay more attention to prayer as a social psychological phenomenon, the largely humanistic academic study of religion has evolved. Tanya Luhrmann has explored the social psychological effects of imaginatively rich, kataphatic prayer practices for developing a relationship with the divine within a community of evangelical Christians in *When God Talks Back*. See Luhrmann, T.M. *When God Talks Back*. Alfred A. Knopf. Random House, 2012. Shane Sharp has explicitly called to recognize prayer as a social psychological phenomenon amenable to investigation for three reasons: “(1) prayer is a legitimate social interaction that shares many characteristics with and involves many of the same psychological and interactional processes as human–human interactions, (2) social factors influence the frequency and content of prayer, and (3) prayer influences social action through psychological and interactional mechanisms” (Sharp, “Social Psychology” 573). See Sharp, Shane. “For a Social Psychology of Prayer.” *Sociology Compass*, 6/7, 2012, pp. 570-580. Sharp has authored several articles on prayer as a social psychological phenomenon, including Sharp, Shane. “How Does Prayer Help Manage Emotions?” *Social Psychological Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 4, December 2010, pp. 417-437; Sharp, Shane. “When Prayers Go Unanswered.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-16; and Sharp, Shane. “How to Do Things with Prayer Utterances.” *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2013, pp. 159-176. More broadly, an initiative of the Social Science Research Council, New Directions in the Study of Prayer, has supported a plethora of research projects across the humanities and social sciences to understand prayer as a social and psychological practice which will result in a number of publications. See Reverberations, the blog for the
of religion has continued to incorporate social and anthropological theory and empirical approaches into its methodological toolkit to understand different religious traditions, most notably opening a pathway for ethnographic and historical examination of popular devotional practices such as prayer via a call to focus on ‘lived religion’ and, separately, an examination of the power dynamics of religious practices and institutions – ‘disciplinary practices’ - as inspired by Michel Foucault and Talal Asad. While these newer trajectories within the study of religion have been helpful to reconceive religious piety as a form of social practice that is amenable to investigation, the scholarship on lived religion and on disciplinary practices lacks an adequate model of human interaction on the micro-level, a “clear theory” per Geertz, that explores the emotional and symbolic dynamics of ritual activity.

As a means of advancing social scientific knowledge on prayer, this project offers a comparative, ethnographic investigation of the micro-level dynamics of prayer practices in the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement and the Nur movement, conducting field work in the United States within these communities to learn more about the movements and articulating them as specific cases for comparison. I will analyze and compare the cognitive and emotional dimensions of prayer practices, using Randall Collins’s interaction ritual theory as a central analytical fulcrum, in order to understand whether and how particular modes of ritual context and habitual entrainment affect the prayer experiences and conceptions of adherents within these two movements. This project

initiative, which shares a number of different perspectives on the phenomena of prayer across different traditions, time periods, geographical contexts, and approaches for its study: http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/.
aims to contribute to the humanistic study of religion by broadening the scope of
theoretical discourse and methodological practice, encouraging greater critical attention
to and interaction with empirical social science.

In this opening chapter, I will provide an overview of the theoretical and
methodological orientations informing this project, such as Robert Orsi’s approach to
studying lived religion, including his call for a radical empiricism that can conceive of
investigating relationships between the human and the divine realm; the critical back and
forth over the years between Wayne Proudfoot and D.Z. Phillips on issues related to
reductionism and religious language, including its implications for the role that God-
concepts play in our descriptions and explanations of religious experience; the connected
lineage between Foucault’s move toward articulating a “hermeneutics of the self” and
“disciplinary power” and Talal Asad’s description of disciplinary practices; an
introduction to Randall Collins’s interaction ritual theory, which is arguably a candidate
for an approach that adequately responds to Talal Asad’s call, inspired by Marcel
Mauss’s desire to study the “socio-psycho-biological” techniques of religious experience,
for informing ethnographies of the human body, providing the main theoretical approach
for orienting the comparison between the two religious movements; and the articulation
of a comparative approach informed by the criticisms of Jonathan Z. Smith on modes of
comparison, in favor of a constructive re-envisioning through the recommendations of
William Paden for enacting greater rules and attention to both similarities and differences
in the comparative enterprise and of Ann Taves for positing a “stipulated point of
analogy” around which a comparison can be constructed, explaining in further detail the
selection of the Padre Pio Prayer Group and the Nur movements as cases for comparison. In bringing these theoretical and methodological approaches to bear on the topic of prayer, Chapters 2 through 5 will frame the data for the comparison, with two chapters each dedicated to the historical background and ethnographic studies I have conducted on the Padre Pio Prayer Group and Nur movements. While an interaction ritual theoretic analysis will take place in the respective chapters discussing the ethnographic work done on the two movements (Chapter 3 and Chapter 5) to elucidate its application within a single context, Chapter 6 will serve as the overarching conclusion to the project, bringing to bear the introductory discussions on lived religion and disciplinary practices in light of interaction ritual theory to show how this comparative endeavor can help us to understand the dynamics within each of these movements, contribute to more general knowledge of prayer as an interactional, social psychological phenomenon, and critically elaborate upon interaction ritual theory.

**Lived Religion, Reductionism, and the Role of “God” Language**

“Prayer is a good example of a religious practice that is misidentified as private and so therefore assumed not to have a history or a politics. But people at prayer are intimately engaged and implicated in their social worlds – prayer is a switching point between the social world and the imagination. In circumstances of great urgency, distress, anxiety, and pain, the taken-for-granted quality of reality is dissolved and humans encounter the fictive nature of what they call real, in the sense that they apprehend the radical contingency of their worlds. This provokes in turn new uses of religious ritual, story, and metaphor, and new configurations of the real. Prayer is often the language spoken in these ruptures and to these ruptures” (Orsi, “Plenary Address” 173).
The above quote from Robert Orsi in his presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion aptly speaks to the practice of prayer as a complex site, a “switching point between the social world and the imagination”, where one’s mind and behavior are involved in a crossroads that recognizes the “radical contingency” of the “taken-for-granted” world, “dissolved” in favor of “new configurations of the real” that creates a “language” which speaks in and to these “ruptures”, thus giving them a “history” and a “politics” that has been hitherto unrecognized. This characterization of prayer seems at home for describing prayer as ostensibly engaged during difficult times – “circumstances of great urgency, distress, anxiety, and pain” – but it can just as easily be used to characterize everyday circumstances of prayer that are habituated and routinized, which can no less be understood as “ruptures” from the perspective of the investigator that challenge the “taken-for-granted” nature of “reality” in its “fictive” interaction with the divine. Recognizing the phenomenon of prayer as such a “switching point” provides a window for the investigator to bring it out of the “private” realm, articulating a scholarly modality for speaking to the discursive and social dimensions of prayer.

Orsi’s description of prayer is indicative of a turn in the academic study of religion to the concept of practice, encapsulated by the phrase “lived religion”, that argues against a sui generis approach to see all religious activity as practice embedded in everyday life. As one of the leaders of this approach, Orsi expresses four things that are “necessary” for understanding religious practice:

“(1) a sense of the range of idiomatic possibility and limitation in a culture – the limits of what can be desired, fantasized, imagined, and felt; (2) an understanding
of the knowledges of the body in the culture, a clear sense of what has been embodied in the corporeality of the people who participate in religious practices, what their tongues, skin, ears, “know”; (3) an understanding of the structures of social experience – marriage and kinship patterns, moral and juridical responsibilities and expectations, the allocation of valued resources, and so on; and (4) a sense of what sorts of characteristic tensions erupt within these particular structures” (Orsi, “Everyday Miracles” 7).

These things bring a focus on understanding and articulating modes of idiomatic expression, embodiment, and the dynamics of social structure within a given context. Orsi calls this approach “radically or phenomenologically empiricist” with a focus on “how particular people, in particular places and times, live in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them in culture” (ibid.). Orsi’s manner of thinking is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus”, understanding religious persons as culturally constituted by idioms that “shape and discipline thought as well as to give rise to religious creativity and improvisation” (16). Orsi rethinks the approach to understanding religion through Bourdieu’s frame as a form of “cultural work” that sees religion as “religion-in-action, religion-in-relationships between people, between the ways the world is and the way people imagine or want it to be” that “directs attention to institutions and persons, texts and rituals, practice and theology, things and ideas – all as media of making and unmaking worlds” to focus on what people do and how they are shaped by what they do. (Orsi, “Plenary Address” 172). While utilizing Bourdieu to envision religion as a form of cultural work, the “radical”, phenomenological side of Orsi seeks to go beyond Bourdieu to try and get at the “visible/invisible real”, where the investigator aims to “describe how the real finds presence, existence, and power, how it
becomes as real as guns and stones and bread”, that can “conceptualize the intersection of realities that historicist analysis otherwise constructs as dichotomies, such as self/other, past/present, the imaginary/the real” (Orsi, “2 + 2” 119). Expanding his label to call it “abundant empiricism” (120), Orsi wants to push the boundaries of what is empirically possible to understand the everyday experiences of practitioners through a cultural approach to religion.

In his book *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, Orsi offers an example of this kind of non-reductionist approach to the study of religion that focuses on the networks of relationships between humans and divine beings, elucidating the historical and contextual aspects of American Catholic religious practice and experience that problematizes the biases toward seeing belief and morality as the constitutive features of a religious tradition, opting for a mode that takes seriously the “presence” of the divine to practitioners:

“Of all aspects of religion, the one that has been clearly most out of place in the modernizing world – the one that has proven least tolerable in modern societies – has been the radical presence of the gods to practitioners. The modern world has assiduously and systematically disciplined the senses not to experience sacred presence; the imaginations of moderns are trained toward sacred absence” (*Heaven and Earth* 12).

Reflecting on his position as an academic studying these practices, as well as on the critiques leveled by evangelical and postcolonialist scholars against the prejudices inherent in the secular liberal foundations of religious studies, Orsi articulates a methodological position for the researcher that he calls an “in-between orientation” at the
boundary between self and other, where the researcher develops a “posture of disciplined
attentiveness” that involves a “suspension of the impulse to locate the other” (198). This
approach implores the researcher to engage with an openness to the lives of those being
studied, but it hedges against utilizing the gamut of explanatory tools available to
understand religious experience and practice.

Ann Taves, in an essay commenting on *Between Heaven and Earth*, notes that
Orsi’s “suspension” seems to share a “broad commitment” to the practice of *epoché* as
enacted by classical phenomenologists who used such a position to argue for a sui generis
understanding of religion (Taves, “Interior Disciplines” 103). Taves takes a diplomatic
position, recognizing that Orsi’s approach “provides a way to conceive of an interior
discipline that, while never achieving complete objectivity, might indeed foster
detachment and increase the scholar’s ability to understand both alien and all too familiar
practices in a deeper way” (104). Similar to Taves’s observation regarding Orsi’s
phenomenological tendencies, Wayne Proudfoot might characterize Orsi’s non-
reductionist methodological orientation as a “protective strategy” which seeks to insulate
the experiences and practices of the other from the explanatory tools available to the
researcher. In *Religious Experience*, Wayne Proudfoot attempts to clarify the use of the
term “reductionism” which is often cited as a “derogatory epithet” by those who dismiss
the plausibility of reducing religious experience to “a cluster of phenomena that can be
explained in historical, psychological, or sociological terms” (Proudfoot 190). Like Orsi,
Proudfoot rejects a focus on belief and sui generis definitions and approaches to religion
that place a priority on the investigator for understanding the “autonomous moment of
human experience” (228) that is “immediate and intentional” (xvii) and separate from culture, but Proudfoot does so due to how such approaches protect religious phenomena from full scrutiny, rather than Orsi’s desire not to locate the other.

Proudfoot argues in favor of a two-step approach to investigating religious experience that delineates reductionism into the categories of descriptive and explanatory: “Descriptive reduction is the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it” (196) and “Explanatory reduction consists in offering an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his approval” (197). For Proudfoot, the former is to be avoided whereas the latter is justifiable and “normal procedure” (ibid.) for the analyst. The first step of avoiding descriptive reductionism is to adequately describe the phenomena of a religious experience that utilizes the terms of the subject. This is an important hermeneutical step because it enables a generative process of descriptively understanding the phenomenon under investigation. The investigator, in looking forward to possible explanations of the phenomenon, may frame the descriptions of the experience in such a way as to set up the directionality of the explanatory discourse to follow (218), but the description itself must still abide by the terms of the subject. When this is complete, the investigator should then seek to explain the phenomenon using any of the appropriate analytical tools available to the investigator, which do not involve the terms of the subject. It is the investigator’s responsibility to pragmatically appropriate naturalistic explanation in service of understanding the phenomenon. These explanations by definition are involved in a
reductionist endeavor because they logically separate and resituate the terms of the subject into a different discourse. As Proudfoot identifies the procedure for explanatory reduction as “normal” for the investigator, the discursive function of reductionism as a “derogatory epithet” (190) is confused because it does not appropriately delineate the positive and inevitable explanatory reduction from the descriptive reduction that is to be avoided.

If one is to follow Proudfoot’s rejoinder in *Religious Experience* to avoid descriptive reduction but be free to engage in explanatory reduction, would it be necessary to include the particular character of a spiritual being in a description of an experience or practice, since “the explanation stands or falls according to how well it can account for all of the available evidence” (Proudfoot 197)? If we are to take seriously Orsi’s call to account for the presence of the divine to practitioners, this leaves open the problem of whether a description of prayer that did not include the particular character of the spiritual being addressed would be adequate. While Proudfoot wants to create a space for naturalistic, explanatory discourse on religious experience, his treatment of mysticism would seem to indicate that it would be necessary to include the particular character of the spiritual being addressed in prayer in some way because of the “formative influence of religious language” (119). Since all experiences, not just religious experiences, are “shaped by a complex pattern of concepts, commitments, and expectations” (121), consistent with Orsi’s focus on cultural idioms, one would need to understand as best as possible the God-concept operating as a “grammatical rule” (127) within the language of the practitioners. The analyst in search of explanation would not
attribute causal force to the spiritual being, but one would need to understand that the assumptions built into the character of the spiritual being, including rules related to how one names, approaches, and relates to the spiritual being, are not just descriptive, but also “prescriptive” (ibid.) – there are implied explanatory claims that accompany the practitioner’s perspective. This fact accounts for why Proudfoot bristles at the “placeholder function” (ibid.) for words like God, YHWH, Tao, Brahman, etc. – these words serve a “special logical function” that “serves to maintain, and perhaps even create, a sense of mystery” in such a way as to deny them a “representational role” (128-129). The consequence of this placeholder function for God-concepts is that it does not allow the description of religious experiences to be adequately explained in historical, sociological, or psychological terms.

While Proudfoot’s analysis is couched within the larger problem of the ineffability of mystical experience, the implications of his statements are relevant for an explanation of prayer as a “switching point”, per Orsi. It would seem logical that an explanation of prayer, per Proudfoot, would want to try to gain a better understanding of the nature of the spiritual being addressed in prayer in one’s description of the religious practice and pay attention to the linguistic constructions that relate to the placeholder, especially those that indicate the being’s perceived personality, location, and agency by the practitioner to inform the explanation. Proudfoot makes clear that he seeks to employ Quine’s principle of charity in a responsible manner, constructing plausible descriptions and explanations and adjusting each in relation to each other until he reaches “reflective equilibrium” (219). What he expressly tries to avoid is using the principle of charity in
service of a protective strategy that confuses descriptive and explanatory reduction and necessitates using the language of the believer in the analyst’s explanation. Thus, it would be relevant in utilizing Proudfoot’s strategy to understand whether a practitioner expects or attributes a prayer being answered by a spiritual being and to describe how the practitioner understands a given prayer to have been answered by a spiritual being, but the explanatory analyst would then need to exclude the possibility that the prayer was actually answered by a spiritual being.

D.Z. Phillips is an interesting interlocutor for this discussion because not only has he had critical disagreements with Proudfoot over these issues, but his first and one of his most important works was *The Concept of Prayer*, published in 1965. Phillips argues that “the meaningfulness of religious concepts are to be found within religion itself, and that failure to observe this leads to misunderstanding” (Phillips, *Concept of Prayer* 12). Phillips elaborates on this issue with specific reference to prayer: “If one believes that religion rests on a mistake, and that the mistake consists in thinking that ‘God exists’ is meaningful, one would have to hold that there is no subject to which the person who prays can be positively related. The consequences for an investigation of prayer are obvious: whatever it is, prayer cannot be talking to God, since there is no God” (ibid.). For Phillips, the investigator needs to be able to account for the particular being to which prayer is directed, especially when considering prayer in different religious traditions or within different denominational settings in order to correctly understand the language being used. He states: “to say what is meant by belief in God, one must take account of what God means to religious believers; one must have some feeling for the game. We
must ask what worshipping an eternal God means in the way of life in which it has its life” (83). For Phillips, the key is to understand how it is being used in the particular context so that he can “say what people are doing when they pray” (28).

For those who might want to contend that prayer is a form of talking with oneself, Phillips would disagree: “Talking to another cannot be reduced to talking to oneself simply because the person addressed is absent” (31). As Phillips stresses that all forms of prayer, no matter how private, are connected with religious beliefs and traditions, he states that “to understand prayer is to understand what it means to talk to God” (38). With reference to whether it is legitimate to consider God as a person to whom one is talking, Phillips refers to the nature of the context in which the question is being posed: “the important issue is whether one’s personal relationships with God bear the same logical implications as one’s personal relationships with other people. I think the way ahead is made clearer if one considers first the following question: Is God a participant in language?” (45). While posing this question, Phillips goes on to state that because God is not a participant in language in the same way as a person, “prayer is not a conversation” (50).

In trying to offer a perspicuous description of what prayer is, Phillips states that prayer is “talk addressed to God” (64). Since prayer is talk addressed to God, and given that prayer cannot be understood as talking to oneself, Phillips goes on to argue “against the suggestion that the knowledge of oneself which one comes to in prayer is the same as self-knowledge arrived at in other contexts” (80). One of his main examples here is that
if the person praying believes that one is dependent on God, then that is a necessary belief to understand the kind of knowledge gained in prayer which would be different than self-knowledge. For instance, dependence is closely connected with thanking God for one’s existence, confessing sins, and asking forgiveness. The notion of dependence, which is a “readiness to accept the will of God” (122), also affects how Phillips conceives of petitionary prayer, since praying for something is not necessarily asking God to make something happen directly like magic, but is “in a way telling Him of the strength of our desires” (121). Likewise, if dependence on God is not an operative concept in the prayerful relationship, then “dependence on the prayer” (124) changes the understanding of the act as one closer to magic.

Phillips’s approach to prayer is one that necessitates understanding the particular language game, including the character of the spiritual being addressed in prayer, and context of the language usage by a believer in order to adequately explain what the prayer is doing. Proudfoot addresses the problem surrounding the endorsement of the subject’s claims by invoking what he believes is D.Z Phillips’s confused appropriation of Quine’s “principle of charity” (Proudfoot 206). Proudfoot expresses the principle in this fashion, “We ought so to assign meanings to the sentences of an alien language that we ascribe to the speakers of that language beliefs that, in the main, accord with our own. At some point, it becomes more plausible to assume we have mistranslated than to ascribe to other speakers beliefs that seem widely off the mark” (ibid.). Proudfoot criticizes Phillips’s protective, non-reductionist appropriation of this principle because, from his perspective, Phillips believes religious beliefs are always to be construed in such a way that they
accord with the beliefs we hold to be true – Proudfoot calls this “charity with a vengeance” (ibid.). By doing this, Phillips shields those expressing themselves in alien languages to be stating false beliefs that might conflict with our ordinary, scientific beliefs. Although Phillips rejects Schleiermacher’s thesis regarding the identification of an experience as independent of concepts, Proudfoot believes that Phillips, “contrives to exclude explanation as an illegitimate move belonging to another form of life with practices foreign to the religious life.” (233), thus precluding any conflict between a scientific explanation and a believer’s explanation, which arrives at the same functional endpoint as Schleiermacher.

Instead, Proudfoot argues for a more appropriate understanding of Quine’s principle that calls for the investigator’s “total account, with its descriptive and explanatory components, to be the most plausible of the available alternatives. I adjust each until I reach a reflective equilibrium” (219). Proudfoot admits an “optimism” in employing the principle of charity to describing religious experience because the concepts and beliefs that constitute the experience are “public evidence about linguistic forms and practices” that is “in principle, accessible to us” (ibid.), even when we are reconstructing the experiences of those in alien or past cultures. For Proudfoot, “what we want is a historical or cultural explanation” of religious experience that does not endorse the subject’s explanation, seeks to answer why the subject employed those particular concepts and beliefs to explain their experience, and why those concepts were available to the subject (223). Thus, Proudfoot’s emphasis for the historical and cultural work of
explanatory reduction is linguistic in nature, seeking to naturalistically get at the rules that govern the logic of the experience for the religious symbol system of the subject.

D.Z. Phillips, in *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, criticizes Proudfoot’s approach in *Religious Experience* and directly responds to Proudfoot’s criticism of his perspective. Phillips contends that Proudfoot confuses ‘concepts’ and ‘interpretations’ – for Proudfoot, since interpretations are contestable, concepts are likewise contestable. The consequence of this position is what Phillips calls a “false choice between interpretative concepts and unmediated experience” (Phillips, *Hermeneutics of Contemplation* 11). Phillips states that “reflective interpretations are dependent on concepts which are not further interpretations, and which are invoked in the course of the interpretations offered. To reject concepts in these non-interpretative contexts would not be to reject an interpretation, but to show that one did not understand the concepts in question” (ibid.). For Phillips, the consequence of this confusion is that the terms of descriptive and explanatory reduction necessarily dichotomize the potential veracity of the concepts used by believers when describing an experience when one moves to engage in explanatory reduction. In Proudfoot’s framework, the explanations implied by the concepts used by religious believers are not hypotheses that potentially could be true, but they are necessarily false (14). Hence, Proudfoot, rather than offering a framework for the investigator to engage in a fair evaluation of a believer’s explanation, automatically treats the believer’s explanation as categorically engaging in a protective strategy. In offering his own version of the interpretation of religious experience is the aforementioned hermeneutics of contemplation: “The hermeneutics of contemplation
would endeavor to give perspicuous representations of Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and ancestor worship beliefs and practices, including, no doubt, their mixed character, together with equal representations of legitimate and confused examples of explanatory reductionism” (16). For Phillips, his option offers a way to get at “the reality of concepts in our lives or, better, with the life our concepts have” (17), which pave the way for a contemplative form of understanding that wrestles with complexity but doesn’t seek a general, overarching explanation. Instead, certain aspects of an experience may lend themselves to the kinds of explanatory reduction that Proudfoot defends, whereas other aspects of an experience may go unexplained or even fall within the domain of the believer’s explanation. Phillips has a more differentiated view regarding religious experience that does not necessitate thinking about experience monolithically, not presuming as Proudfoot does that an experience should have a reductive explanation that is entirely separate from the believer’s.

Phillips’s position allows him the ability to selectively criticize the veracity of an experience where the investigator deems appropriate. Phillips’s approach to prayer, much like we see in his critical back and forth with Proudfoot, is one that necessitates understanding the particular language game and context of the language usage by a believer in order to adequately explain what the prayer is doing. The kind of explanation that Phillips engages is not the same as the phenomenologists, as they take on the normative character of the spiritual being to more generally describe its relation to the being of the human person. Phillips sounds a lot like a phenomenologist until this point, though Phillips could only make that move if the particular prayer was within a specific
religious context for which that linguistic statement has meaning. Phillips does not take a stand and sticks to describing the language of the prayer relation within that game, but the character of the spiritual being involved is crucial to an accurate explanation of the prayer.

For the purposes of this dissertation, Phillips’s hermeneutics of contemplation, which takes seriously the conceptual “life” of terms utilized by religious practitioners, including the descriptions and implied explanations embedded in those concepts, can be applied fruitfully in tandem with a “lived religion” approach, per Orsi’s “disciplined attentiveness” to understand the cultural idioms of religious expression, when it comes to describing and explaining religious practices such as prayer. The hermeneutics of contemplation also need not conflict with Proudfoot’s two step move of avoiding descriptive reduction, which Phillips’ and Orsi’s approach bolsters, and freely engaging in explanatory reduction in order to avoid the interpretation of those practices as engaging in a “protective strategy”. One can potentially alleviate this problem, and come closer to Orsi’s radical empiricism, if one doesn’t envision the interpretive movement of the investigator in rigid terms, instead seriously taking into account the “God” language that is embedded in the idioms of a given religio-cultural expression and, simultaneously, giving the investigator freedom to engage in explanatory reduction. In Ann Taves’s article commenting on Orsi’s *Between Heaven and Earth*, echoing Tom Tweed’s
perspective about Orsi’s “in-between place” as “too static”, she diplomatically creates a space where the investigator can appropriate both Proudfoot and Orsi:

“Adopting Proudfoot’s distinction between descriptive and explanatory reduction allows us to move between the sort of ascetic posture Orsi advocates and a more engaged posture in which we do in fact “locate the other in relation to one’s own cosmos,” whether religious or secular. In the former posture, our concern is with what others think about religion; in the latter, our concern is with what we think about religion, whether we do our thinking in theological or secular terms or both” (Taves, “Interior Disciplines” 105).

**Disciplinary Practices and the Body**

The previous section delved into some of the problems and concerns for attempting to describe and explain the cultural idioms of a religious practice from within a “lived religion” framework – “the limits of what can be desired, fantasized, imagined, and felt” – by looking at the role of descriptive and explanatory reduction when conceiving of the role of supernatural beings in the form of reality constructed by prayer practices. But this only deals with the first of the four “necessary” things for understanding religious practice. In order to attend to the second – “an understanding of the knowledges of the body in the culture, a clear sense of what has been embodied in the corporeality of the people who participate in religious practices, what their tongues, skin, ears, ‘know’” – it is instructive to turn our attention to the trajectory of scholarly work on

---

4 Tweed has more fully developed his theory of religion in *Crossing and Dwelling*, where he advocates that scholars “move back and forth between inside and outside” since they are “not permanently or fully inside or outside” of religion (Tweed 252n14). See Tweed, Thomas. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Harvard UP, 2006.
the body\textsuperscript{5}, specifically that of Michel Foucault and Talal Asad on disciplinary practices and power to view this work’s relevance to an understanding of prayer.

In his Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Stanford University in 1979 entitled ‘Omnes et singulatum [Everyone together and each individually]: towards a criticism of political reason’, Foucault speaks about the origin of “power techniques” over individuals that are “intended to rule them in a continuous and permanent way” (Foucault 136). He wants to understand how rationalization and political power combine to operate against the individual so as to support and maintain a centralizing political structure, such as a bureaucracy. He calls such techniques “pastorship”, or the “pastoral modality of power” (ibid.) which operatively conceive of a “shepherd of men” (137). The shepherd is an apt metaphor for describing the kind of ‘power over’ that pastorship implies in the Hebrew concept of God. The shepherd “wields power over a flock rather than over land”, “gathers together, guides and leads his flock”, “ensures the salvation of his flock”, and he wields power as a duty, where kindness and devotion to the flock are the outward expressions of the shepherd’s goodness (137-138). The shepherd knows the needs of each individual within the flock and the shepherd watches over each individual and aids in nourishing each individual. For Foucault, the ‘pastoral technology’ (139) that has been operating in many instances in many times throughout Western history has allowed for a

few shepherds to maintain and care for the flock, which is the large majority of human persons.

Within Christianity, the role of pastoral power has played a central role and can be clearly illustrated within the monastic life. Though this role continues within the monastic life of today, Foucault speaks specifically of the monastic life of early Christianity as indicated in monastic literature. The Hebrew themes of the shepherd are attenuated in the Christian setting of the monastery in several important ways. First, the shepherd has a much fuller account of each sheep – not only does the shepherd have to note the presence of the sheep, but the shepherd knows all that happens to them and knows each one in their soul (142-143). This knowledge entails a more directed relationship between shepherd and sheep, where sin and merit is circulated within the personal relationship. Second, this change in relationship means that the sheep is not just subject to the law of the shepherd, but that the two are dependent on each other for the relationship to be maintained. The character of the relationship means that the sheep submits to a personal shepherd that both knows and limits the actions of the sheep. Foucault points to St. Benedict, who says that “monks do not live according to their own free will; their wish is to be under the abbot’s command” (142). The monastic activities referred to in the pastoral technique of power through the shepherd metaphor in Christianity – obedience, guidance, examination, confession – all have the same aim: “to get individuals to work at their own ‘mortification’ in this world” (143). The Christian self-identity is one that operates on the renunciation of this world in favor of an otherworldly possibility, an “everyday death” (ibid.) that prefers the soul to a this-worldly
body. The relationship that develops between the shepherd and the sheep, and the sheep within the sheep’s self, is a constant reflective process, a hermeneutic that both establishes the tension of a humanly existence and procures the individual meaning of the self within a larger cosmology of morality.

Foucault’s attention to the dialectic between ‘shepherd’ and ‘sheep’ via pastoral modalities of power in the context of the medieval Christian monastery is illustrative for beginning to understand the relationship that develops between the human and divine within prayer practices. Foucault explores further a genealogy of the self in lectures that he gave at Dartmouth College and at Berkeley in 1980 entitled “About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self”, exploring a special kind of social technique of domination: “techniques or technology of the self” (162). These techniques allow individuals to affect their own bodies, souls, actions, and thoughts in such a way as to transform themselves, to modify their self so as to attain perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power, etc. (ibid.). In the context of this lecture, Foucault wants to show that power consists in complex relations of rational techniques that are effective due to a “subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies” (163). The public production of the truth of oneself through the examination of conscience and the act of confession, which began with the Christian era, has become more proliferated throughout modern society. This technique of public knowledge of the individual is what Foucault calls the “hermeneutics of the self” (ibid.).
For the Christian, the self is not constructed by the discovery of true knowledge as accessed through action, but it is a deciphering of “what is hidden inside the self” (168). It is this hermeneutics of the self that Foucault believes has been critical to the development of the modern self and embodied in the Christian conception of the soul. The Christian must always confess the faith by witnessing to the inner truth by saying and doing in conformance to that truth. But there are two technologies simultaneously at work in the Christian: access to the light of the soul and making truth inside oneself (170). Thus, the Christian, by making the individual an interpreter of the self to access that light and make truth inside oneself, creates a hermeneutical circle where thought is at once verbalized and verified and the body is bereft of a privileged place in the continuous confession of truth. For Foucault, the development of a hermeneutics of the self in Christianity is the shadow of the type of disciplinary power that we see in today’s modern society. The double bind of being regulated by a structural technology - the sovereign/pastoral power of the church and the church’s representatives - and a personal technology - the disciplinary, hermeneutical power of contemplation and confession over the self - is the prototype for a modern ethos.

In Genealogies of Religion, Talal Asad critically engages Foucault’s work in the chapter “Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual”. While Asad lauds Foucault’s analysis of medieval Christian monasticism, and he sees the value in Foucault’s analyses for understanding the body as inscribed in the process of an “economy of truth” (Asad, Genealogies 110), he has an important criticism for how Foucault imagines the technology of the self within the monastic context. In Christian monasticism, humility
and obedience were key virtues to be formed in spiritual development in order to more properly align oneself with the will of God. The way to identify humility and obedience was not through the process of self-examination and confession, but was through relations with others. In employing the idea of a technology of the self that Foucault is attempting to genealogically trace from Christian monasticism to the modern world, Asad believes Foucault has left out the role of the monastic community in the process.

Asad states that, “the technology of the self, which lies at the heart of the combat of chastity, is itself dependent on the institutional resources of organized community life” (112). Asad more fully develops this criticism to underscore that the relations between monks are “intrinsic to the development of the ascetic technology of the self” (113). The importance of this criticism is that the body, which Foucault had conceived individualistically in his analysis of chastity and in what is discussed above in the sheep-shepherd relationship and the process of self-examination, should more accurately be understood as a wider monastic body: “In this area, there is no longer a single point of surveillance from which the self examines itself, but an entire network of functions through which watching, testing, learning, teaching, can take place” (ibid.). The extension out to a larger monastic body undercuts another aspect of Foucault’s thought, which is that the technology of the self is understood as a disciplinary form of repression. For Asad, this is incorrect – instead of repression, the monastic community and its inhabitants were engaged in developing a different kind of self, one that seeks to achieve alignment with the will of God (114). According to Asad, “the monk’s truthful self was the continuous work of a structured community” (115).
Asad continues to be engaged with Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power, but with the significant caveat of including a focus on the role of the community, in the chapter “Discipline and Humility in Christian Monasticism”. Rather than use Foucault’s concept of the technology of the self, Asad prefers the term disciplinary practices, by which he means: “the multiple ways in which religious discourses regulate, inform, and construct religious selves. Such an approach seems to me to require an examination of two kinds of power process: formations of the self and manipulations of (or resistances to) others” (125). Here, Asad principally focuses on the conditions for the creation of obedient wills and offers a nuanced historical analysis of the life of later medieval monastic communities to understand both processes of power. Asad wants to resituate the understanding of a monastery as a place where the monk is engaged in a deliberate process of one’s own virtue cultivation in relation to others in the community, rather than as a Goffmanian ‘total institution’, such as a prison or hospital, with which monasteries are sometimes classified (126). The monastery stands in contrast to most modern institutions because monastic rituals govern the “economy of desire…The central principle on which these rites were based assumed that virtuous desire had first to be created before a virtuous choice could be made” (ibid.). Thus, the monastery consists of a program of disciplinary practices that “aimed to construct and reorganize distinctive emotions…on which the central virtue of obedience to God depended” (134). In order to do this, formal ritual performance was of the utmost importance. According to Asad, those who were not as adept were placed under the authority of those who had greater competence. The leader of the monastery, the abbot, was not involved in directly
coercing or negotiating with monks to cultivate virtue, but had a “complex role in the self-restructuring” of the monks’ behavior and virtue (135).

Asad proceeds to describe the monastic program of Bernard of Clairvaux, which was a particular program for forming virtuous desire in relation to the changing pattern of monastic recruitment that took place during Bernard’s lifetime from one of children being raised to become monks to one of adults, usually from the noble or knightly classes who had lived life, choosing to join the monastery. Bernard employed novel interpretations of Biblical texts in a way that utilized sensual desires that had already been developed within the monastic recruits through their previous life. In conjunction with daily liturgical practices, such as reading scriptures out loud, Bernard sets up a “dialogical process”, what Asad calls “ritual dialogue” that aims at re-forming the self in a new context. Asad states that, “the sermons that give authoritative exegesis of biblical texts provide a new vocabulary by which the monks themselves can redescribe, and therefore in effect construct, their memories in relation to the demands of a new way life” (ibid.). This process of redescription of memory is both a long and complex process and depends on teachings, confession, and interaction amongst the monks to reinforce those teachings, and the reformulation of both the religious and the secular self within the monk (ibid.). Since Bernard was appropriating sensual desire, the monks effectively became “lovers” (145) of God as a result of these changes.

In focusing on disciplinary practices, Asad has critically extended Foucault’s idea of the technology of the self in a way that retains Foucault’s emphasis on the dialogical
and corrective mechanisms of power that rule one in a particular way, while broadening the conceptual frame of that process to more holistically account for the communal and discursive factors involved. In addition, by disagreeing with Foucault’s emphasis on repression, Asad has opted for an understanding of self that is involved in social processes of power that both intentionally and unintentionally form the self. Thus, the self is not repressed in Christian monasticism for Asad, as it is for Foucault. Instead, the Christian self is remade through bodily practice.

In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood offers her take on Islamic disciplinary practices, what she calls the “architecture of the self” that is explicitly influenced by Pierre Hadot’s “spiritual exercises” and Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’: “my investigation treats the empirical character of bodily practices as the terrain upon which the topography of a subject comes to be mapped, and I elaborate the architecture of the self through the immanent form bodily practices take” (Mahmood 121-122). In the chapter, “Positive Ethics and Ritual Conventions”, her analysis of ritual weeping during the course of Islamic prayer for generating fear and reverence toward God focuses on how disciplinary habituation of weeping with proper intention reorients one’s motivations, desires, and emotions in a process of self-formation for the development of ethical capacities to accord with specific norms of piety (129-131). The core of this chapter centers upon the statements of Mona, a member of a women’s movement in Egypt who has very specific ideas about how prayer cultivates an ethical self. In admonishing a young woman for not getting up regularly to conduct morning prayers, Mona says to this woman that this must be an indication of carelessness (*ghafla*), such
that one’s mind and behavior is not appropriately focused on God in one’s daily life (124). The young woman asks Mona what she means. Here is Mona’s reply:

“It means what your day-to-day deeds are. For example, what do you look at in the day? Do you look at things that are prohibited to us by God, such as immodest images of women and men? What do you say to people in the day? Do you insult people when you get angry and use abusive language? How do you feel when you see someone committing a sin or does it not affect you? These are the things that have an effect on your heart, and they hinder or impede your ability to get up and say the morning prayer. [The constant] guarding against disobedience and sins wakes you up for the morning prayer. Salat is not just what you say with your mouth and what you do with your limbs. It is a state of your heart. So when you do things in a day for God and avoid other things because of Him, it means you’re thinking about Him, and therefore it becomes easy for you to strive for Him against yourself and your desires. If you correct these issues, you will be able to rise up for the morning prayer as well” (125).

Mahmood comments that Mona’s response does not constitute a customary answer for failing to do the morning prayer, which would likely be fear of God’s retribution. For Mahmood, Mona’s answer to the young woman reflects a particular “economy of discipline” such that “the practical chores of daily living, all mundane activities…become a place for securing and honing particular moral capacities (126). Mahmood continues to say that what is significant in Mona’s answer is that she “does not assume that the desire to pray is natural, but that it must be created through a set of disciplinary acts. That is to say, desire in this model is not the antecedent to, or cause of, moral action, but its product” (ibid.). Thus, “the repeated practice of orienting all acts toward securing God’s pleasure is a cumulative process, the net result of which is, on one level, the ability to pray regularly and, on another level, the creation of a pious self” (ibid.). Just as in Asad’s analyses of Christian monasticism, Mahmood is applying the
concept of disciplinary power to show how continuous observation and correction serve as techniques for creating a self, attuned to the spiritual values of the God being worshipped. Though, Asad, in commenting on Mahmood’s work, complexifies the degree to which one must see learned ritual practice as imposed from the outside by an external authority, instead serving as the formal “grammar” by which one can exercise creative action within the range of possibilities offered by a tradition:

“Asad’s critical perspective on ritual highlighted above, which has greatly influenced Mahmood’s approach to understanding prayer in light of Mona, is also shaped by his re-reading of Marcel Mauss’s “Techniques of the Body”. While Asad’s genealogical study of Christian monasticism highlights by example the problem of reading ritual as symbolic behavior and a preference for the role of disciplinary practices, Asad revives Mauss’s well-known essay in order to retrieve it from the tradition of
symbolic anthropology. The body, in Asad’s re-reading of Mauss, is not to be understood as a site of cultural imprinting that needs to be decoded, much as a perspective that sees the body as a site of imposition by external forces would, but instead is the “developable means for achieving a range of human objectives, from styles of physical movement (e.g., walking), through modes of emotional being (e.g., composure), to kinds of spiritual experience (e.g., mystical states)” (Asad, *Genealogies* 76). Asad quotes from Mauss’s final paragraph in the essay that addresses religious experiences: “I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques which we have not studied, but which were studied fully in China and India even in very remote periods. This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think there are necessarily biological means of entering in to ‘communion with God’” (ibid.). For Asad, Mauss opens up a space in which “embodied practices (including language in use) form a precondition for varieties of religious experience”, such that the “inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies” (76-77). Conversely, for Asad as for Mahmood, the body as a means for learning practices is the key to understanding the making and cultivation of a self as a social psychological process, especially as it relates to understanding religious experience. Though, despite the progress that Asad and Mahmood have made to advance a conception of ritual action in the making of a religious self, neither Asad nor Mahmood deals with the “socio-psycho-

---

6 In *The Ethical Soundscape*, Charles Hirschkind takes a step in this direction when he invokes cassette sermon listening as a “relaxed attentiveness”, an “undisciplined discipline” that exploits the “possibilities of thought and action born of the body’s pervasive and largely inaudible dialogue with the world” and shapes the “sensory conditions for a modern Islamic ethics” (Hirschkind 83). See Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Columbia UP, 2006.
biological” implications of Mauss’s call for greater understanding of the effects of various techniques on the body in their respective studies of disciplinary practices in religious communities. Asad attempts to provide a further description of what this could look like as an ethnography of the human body to understand the linkages between religion, belief, and politics:

“…we need ethnographies of the human body – its attitudes toward pain, physical damage, decay, and death, as well as toward bodily integrity, growth and enjoyment, and the conditions that isolate persons and things from or connect them strongly with others. What architecture of the senses – hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, tasting – do particular embodiments and sensibilities depend upon? How (whether through projects or fortuitous developments) do new sensory perceptions take shape and make older ways of engaging with the world and older political forms irrelevant? In trying to answer these questions, the researcher will of course need a framework of interpretation to help identify the senses and their expression, but the senses themselves do not necessarily require meaning. The researcher will understand that it is possible for someone to encounter something unpredictably that transforms her, to be gripped through her senses by a force (whether immanent or transcendent) without having to interpret anything. We need to think about the self in ways that are neither relativist (the world is what the self sees it as) nor reductionist (the self is determined by external and internal causes)” (Asad, “Thinking about religion” 51).

In light of Mauss’s desire to attend to “socio-psycho-biological” techniques and Asad’s call for ethnographies of the human body, let’s now turn to elucidating how Randall Collins’s interaction ritual theory might provide a useful resource to take a constructive step in this direction for understanding prayer as a disciplinary practice.

**Interaction Ritual Theory and Prayer**
Randall Collins, in his book *Interaction Ritual Chains*, presents a comprehensive vision for a theory of interaction ritual based on Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence that occurs during intense social events and rituals, Goffman’s notion of interaction rituals as everyday face-to-face encounters, and Mead’s conception of the self, that seeks to describe a “full-scale social psychology” (Collins, *Ritual Chains* 44). Collins describes it as a theory of “momentary encounters among human bodies charged up with emotions and consciousness because they have gone through chains of previous encounters” (3-4). This theory can be applied to understand any kind of situation where bodies are interacting; in his book, Collins uses it to analyze a diverse array of activities, from conversations to sporting events, from smoking to sexual encounters, as well as processes of introversion such as thinking and individualism. While *Interaction Ritual Chains* represents Collins’s most systematic articulation of the theory, it implicitly undergirds his analysis of the worldwide history of philosophy in his major work *The Sociology of Philosophies* (1998) and explicitly informs his analysis of violent situations in *Violence: A Microsociological Theory* (2009).

Since the usual context for employing interaction ritual theory is to understand human, face-to-face relations that entail bodily copresence, the theory can be applied to understand any religious ritual. Sociologists⁷ have begun to use interaction ritual theory

---

⁷ Robert Bellah has endorsed interaction ritual theory, both for its explanation of the origin of language as a “pervasive natural ritual” (See Bellah, Robert N. “The Ritual Roots of Society and Culture.” *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Michele Dillon. Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 31–44) and for its argument that daily life is a ritualized process that requires bodily presence (See Bellah, Robert N. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011). In addition, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke were influenced by an earlier explication of interaction ritual theory, prior to its more fully developed articulation in *Interaction Ritual Chains*, for its application in understanding
to illuminate a diverse range of religious practices and activities, including Karen Cerulo’s prospective study of prayer, Erika Summers-Effler’s study of a Catholic Worker group, R. Stephen Warner’s analysis of Sacred Harp Singing, Margaret Poloma’s work on understanding the role of Godly love in the Pentecostal movement, Scott Draper’s attempt to quantitatively test hypotheses from IR theory in the context of religious organizations, James Wellman’s study of American megachurches – ‘God is Like a Drug’, and Michal Pagis’s application of IR theory to vipassana meditation retreats8. Collins has also published his own perspective on interaction ritual theory and its implications for the study of religion9. Though, to date, scholars of religious studies and anthropology have not yet employed or critically appraised this theoretical resource for their research on rituals and the role of the body in religious practices10. Below, I provide


10 It is significant that Constance Furey’s critical appraisal assessing how attention to the body has transformed religious studies over the last thirty years, which articulates a preference for understanding the role of body and subjectivity in practice with reference to intimate relationships (human-human and divine-human), does not mention interaction ritual theory as a resource for understanding practices and networks of relationships in religious lives in a way that could be consonant with Robert Orsi’s perspective in
a brief sketch of interaction ritual theory and I argue that it can be fruitfully adapted to understand the relation of the human and the divine within prayerful situations, as well as the relation of human co-participants during prayer with each other.

Here is a model of an interaction ritual:

Figure 1. Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004)

According to Collins, at the center of an interaction ritual is the “process in which participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other’s bodily micro-rhythms and emotions…a fine grained flow of micro-events that build up in

---

patterns of split seconds and ebb away in longer periods of minutes, hours, and days” (47). The individual, who is the actor in these encounters, is the “precipitate of past interactional situations and an ingredient of each new situation” (5). The individual is an ingredient, not the determinant of social interaction because situations are “emergent” properties (ibid.). When bodies are assembled, there is a process of “physical attunement” that takes place that leads to a shared experience of action, awareness, attention, and emotion (34-35). This shared experience gives rise to emblems and markers which come to represent the identity of the group (36). Both the people and the objects are charged with what Durkheim called a ‘sort of electricity’ that Collins refers to as “emotional energy”, which is stored like a battery within the poles of the symbolic objects of focused attention and the individual (38). This energy can be positive (high) or negative (low), depending on the quality of the interaction and whether it is energy boosting or energy draining. Collins provides a more detailed conception of positive emotional energy:

“This socially derived emotional energy, as Durkheim says, is a feeling of confidence, courage to take action, boldness in taking initiative. It is morally suffused energy: it makes the individual feel not only good, but exalted, with the sense of doing what is most important and most valuable… this feeling of emotional energy has a powerful motivating effect upon the individual; whoever has experienced this kind of moment wants to repeat it” (39).

Collins also refers to positive emotional energy as “drive” (108) and “moral sentiment” (109), which are carried through and across different situations by individuals as they seek out successful interactions that will provide emotional energy. In contrast to
expressive or dramatic outbursts of short-term emotion, emotional energy is to be understood as a “strong steady emotion, lasting over a period of time…that gives the ability to act with initiative and resolve, to set the direction of social situations rather than to be dominated by others in the micro-details of interaction” (133-134).

This creates the grounds for a “theory of individual motivation”, what Collins calls a “dynamic microsociology”, in which we “trace situations and their pull or push for individuals who come into them” (44). For Collins, interaction ritual theory is a “full-scale social psychology, not only of emotions and situational behavior, but of cognition”, due to the relationship among rituals, symbols, and memories (ibid.). Thus, as a methodological tool, interaction ritual theory is “not just a theoretical construct”, but it “describes, with greater or lesser precision, what observably goes in social encounters” (65). The theory attempts to mediate between, “postmodernist and similar theories that posit ubiquitous situational flux of meanings and identities, and a cultural view that fixed scripts or repertoires are repeatedly called upon”, whereby the “operative structural conditions are those that make up the ingredients of interaction ritual” and that “cultural repertoires are created in particular kind of IRs, and fade out in others” (43).

As the efficacy of the theory hinges on this concept of emotional energy to understand individual motivation, which Collins conceives as an “empirical variable” (133), how does one observe and measure emotional energy or the micro-rhythms and emotions that take place within an interaction? One way is through self-report of one’s subjective experience of emotions and solidarity, whereby enthusiasm and confidence are
indicators of high emotional energy, and withdrawal and depression are indicators of low emotional energy. One can also observe these dynamics by analyzing such aspects as bodily postures and movements, eye contact, and facial expressions, as well as the rhythmic coordination and flow of speech of the ritual participants. More invasively, it is possible to trace the effects of emotional energy by assessing hormone levels (134-140). In addition, it may also be possible to track emotional energy through neuroimaging technologies, but this has not yet been attempted in the field of micro-sociology.

Collins identifies different kinds of interaction rituals within a situation of copresence. The most general type of rituals are separated into what he terms “natural”, “formal”, and “forced”, depending on the nature of how the mutual focus of attention is generated. Natural rituals do not have any particular procedures for building up a mutual focus of attention and emotional entrainment, whereas formal rituals do have certain ceremonial procedures (50). Forced rituals, which can take place within both a natural and formal context, are those for which the individual only engages half-heartedly. While successful natural and formal rituals can lead to high levels of emotional energy, forced rituals are energy draining and lead to low levels of energy (53).

A secondary conceptual delineation of rituals, which can take shape as either a natural, formal or forced ritual, are power and status rituals. The character of these rituals hinges on the dynamics of the particular bodies in copresence with one another. Power rituals are operative when individuals are brought together who have unequal resources, thus a dynamic of order giving and order taking is enacted (112). Status rituals are those
which facilitate and confer membership within a group, constructing degrees of inclusion and exclusion (115). Individuals within a status ritual differ in the level of their participation according to their place along four aspects: ritual intensity; central/peripheral participation; social density; and social diversity (116). The long-term levels of emotional energy gathered from engaging in successful power and status rituals are different – for power rituals, the energy one receives is an expectation to dominate, whereas in status rituals, it is the ability to confer membership within the group; low levels of energy emerge when one is consistently dominated or excluded in these rituals (119).

When considering interaction ritual theory as way of understanding prayer, one issue that immediately arises is that while prayer can occur in groups, it often occurs alone and the being that is addressed in prayer, whether conducted alone or in a group, is not present in the same way as another human being. So, is bodily presence necessary for an interaction ritual? Collins asks this same question within Interaction Ritual Chains for different reasons, as he is trying to understand other forms of human interaction where people are not physically together, such as via the telephone or the internet. Collins says that bodily presence “makes it easier” to establish the conditions necessary for a successful interaction, such as physical attunement, a common focus of attention and a shared rhythm (64). For Collins, a common rhythm is the key ingredient to a successful conversational ritual, where the timing of participation shifts is like “keeping up a line of music” (69). A degree of bodily synchronization takes place in conversational rituals where gestures and features of voices such as pitch, range, loudness, tempo, accent, and
duration of syllables are all part of a process of “rhythmic entrainment” (75-77). Collins calls the process of rhythmic entrainment on the micro-level the “mechanism by which emotional contagion occurs within a successful interaction” (119). Thus, it is possible for successful interaction rituals to take place without bodily copresence, but it is far more difficult to maintain rhythmic entrainment through various media that only allow for certain forms of copresence.

In the case of prayer, the individual pray-er often comports one’s body in a particular way (i.e., kneeling, closing of the eyes, meditative upright posture, prostration, swaying, hand coordination, breathing, holding, wearing, reading, or looking at specific ritual objects, etc.) that marks off this activity from other aspects of life in order to signal engagement with this form of interaction that allows the copresence of the divine to be brought forth in a focused fashion. A hypothesis would be that a pray-er gains positive emotional energy from the act of praying to the degree that one’s body and mind are repetitively entrained to enter into the prayerful interaction. Connecting the coordination of body with the verbal recitation of prayer could be key to understanding how successful is one’s rhythmic entrainment in uttering prayer. In this case, one would need to investigate not only how the coordination of body affects how a prayer is said, but how this differs according to the different kinds of prayers being said and the context within which prayer is enacted. It could very well be that repetitive entrainment is most important for successfully conducting prayer alone, whereas the mutual presence and activity of others in close proximity dictates attention to bodily coordination and the rhythmic flow of the interaction.
If we are to fully conceive of prayer as an interaction ritual, then is it clear that the emotional energy gained from continually successful prayer interactions results in feeling “exalted”, with “high levels of enthusiasm, confidence, initiative, and pride, resulting from controlling the attunement of interaction in either a power or status situation” (121)? I would argue that it does. While such words as “enthusiasm” and “pride” are not the first that come to mind when one envisions the emotions one experiences as a result of engaging in prayer, there is indeed an enthusiasm for the fruits of the spiritual life and a confidence that emerges in the security and knowledge of a relationship with the divine that one can express to others. In this way, initiative is not cast in a utilitarian light to affect causal activity, but is understood as the drive of moral sentiment that seeks to further engage with the divine and spread emotional energy to others. Even when one engages in prayer as a way to deal with the suffering of self and others, a successful interaction in such circumstances leads to the drive of moral sentiment to persevere in the face of hardship and difficulty. A call for help in petitionary prayer ultimately galvanizes the emotional resources of the prayerer.

Throughout, the discussion of prayer in this chapter has envisaged the interaction as taking place either between an individual and the divine, or a group and the divine. But, there are more complex interaction rituals with prayer that include third parties, such as saints and holy people to whom prayer can be addressed as a conduit to the divine, or situations where prayer is prompted within a group by a particular clerical figure or prayer leader, acting as a singular voice for a group prayer where the group responds with an “Amen” or a “Lord, hear our prayer” as an affirmation in formal rituals. In these
situations, dominance is shifted away from either the divine or the individual, and power is vested in these third parties, with saints and holy people driving the process of divine power and with clergy and prayer leaders driving the process of human power within their given status relation. Collins refers to persons who occupy leadership positions within interaction ritual chains as ‘charismatic’ (126). Indeed, this is as an apt descriptor for the role of these third party persons within the life of prayer.

As indicated above and in our earlier discussions of the work of Wayne Proudfoot and D.Z. Phillips, while it is possible to have interaction rituals without bodily co-presence, there is still the issue of how the character of God and spiritual beings should be conceived within interaction ritual theory. The character of the person praying and the being to whom prayer is directed are accounted in so far as the prayerful situation indicates the appropriateness of that kind of relation between the human person and the spiritual being. The set of prayers available to the pray-er within that person’s tradition and their particular verbal/linguistic form would constitute the appropriate way to communicate to the spiritual being; one would expect this to vary for believers across and within different traditions. Another example is that it is not appropriate in all traditions to envisage a ‘personal relationship’ with a spiritual being. It would stand to reason that the set of prayers available to a pray-er toward a spiritual being in a tradition that does allow for a ‘personal relationship’ would include prayer language that is more colloquial within the pray-er’s repertoire. Both religious traditions and the spiritual context of a believer determine the particular God-concept that is operative within a prayerful situation and the kind of language that a pray-er would use. With specific reference to the character of the
spiritual being, the name used by the pray-er to address that spiritual being can also be illustrative for understanding the nature of the prayerful situation. For example, in Christianity, some common words to use for addressing the divine would be Lord, Jesus, Christ, God, Heavenly King, Father, Baby Jesus – each of these words and their different permutations could likewise be indicative of the particular character of the spiritual being addressed and could meaningfully impact understanding of the dynamics involved in the situation. Additionally, prayers addressed to intercessors such as saints and holy people could indicate a more complex set of interactional relationships.

A challenge for using interaction ritual theory and the methodological orientation of micro-sociology in general, is the naturalistic, Meadian symbolic interactionist tradition that would, at first attempt, define a prayer internal to the self. According to Randall Collins in his recent paper, “The Micro-sociology of Religion: Religious Practices, Collective and Individual”, prayer is conceived micro-sociologically as a “type of internal dialogue” (Collins, “Micro-sociology” 19). Using Mead’s frame for dividing the self into the I, Me, and Generalized Other, this approach would start from the structure of the self and then determine how prayer would fit into the interactionist model for verbal thinking. While this fits well into the classical model of a Feuerbachian ‘projection’, Collins states that prayer has a “distinctive structure” that is addressed to an “ideal person” who has “very great powers, far beyond the usual role-taking of internal dialogue” that entails kinds of acts that are not normally present during internal dialogue, such as “asking for help, praising, or thanking” (20).
Considering the caveats that need to be made in order to distinguish prayer from the kinds of dialogue that would ordinarily take place in verbal thinking or conversation, does it make sense to posit the spiritual being as separate from the self, even if that being can’t be materialized? Cerulo and Barra, in an article entitled, “In the name of…: Legitimate interactants in the dialogue of prayer”, answer this question in the affirmative. Taking Collins’s interaction ritual theory as the basis for a research study with 100 individuals from different religious traditions regarding their petitionary prayer practices, Cerulo and Barra treat the individual and the prayer “target” as social actors in a “dyadic exchange” that is defined by distinct interactional criteria: “prayer is intentional action that is other oriented and executed with both a specific purpose or goal in mind and the expectation of reception – i.e. being heard and understood” (Cerulo and Barra 376). By defining prayer in this way, Cerulo and Barra emphasize the similarity of prayer to other forms of human interaction, which is “heavily influenced by one actor’s perception of their co-interactants orientation, capabilities, and inclinations” (ibid.).

In their research, Cerulo and Barra find that there is a link between the “earthly status” of the individual and the “divine status” of the spiritual being whereby individuals with higher socio-economic status preferred to petition the “highest available authority (i.e. God or the Holy Trinity)”, while those with lower socio-economic status preferred to petition a more “human” entity, such as Jesus, Mary, saints, or deceased relatives (382). In addition, they found that people’s targeting practices for specific kinds of petitionary requests were affected by specific contexts for action on the part of the spiritual being, thus making some targets more appropriate than others. For example, while most
respondents preferred the highest available authority for most requests, Cerulo and Barra find that there is a direction of increasing anthropomorphism, with the least anthropomorphic prayer targets being petitioned for world problems or forgiveness and the most anthropomorphic targets petitioned for protection from enemies and being lonely (383). These findings reinforce that the language of the believer should be taken into account for understanding and explaining the prayerful situation – specifically the language of the prayer and the person’s specifically inherited God-concept that indicates the character of the being addressed. In order to fruitfully employ interaction ritual theory to understand the phenomenon of prayer, one needs to go beyond Collins’s assertion of prayer as a “type of internal dialogue” to bring forth how the pray-er linguistically names, conceives, and perceives the spiritual beings involved in the interaction, which influences both the description and explanation of these religious experiences, but does not fall prey to becoming a ‘protective strategy’. Cerulo and Barra’s approach to viewing both the pray-er and the prayer ‘target’ as social actors is a constructive step forward.

If we return to our previous discussion regarding disciplinary practices in light of interaction ritual theory, one might see successful ritual weeping as a form of positive emotional energy that entails gaining favor and solidarity in relationship with the divine and intensification of one’s confidence, initiative, and enthusiasm for performing prayer. Similarly, with reference to Charles Hirschkind’s work, one could understand cassette sermon listening as the occasion for generating successful interaction rituals through a process of rhythmic entrainment, as well as building the symbolic resources for the
receptivity of the Qur’anic message and intentionality of Muslim practice in shaping solidarity. Thus, rather than just see these practices as specific kinds of technologies that can be mobilized to advance purposes of power, an alternative way to understand these practices that aligns with Mauss’s recognition of “socio-psycho-biological” techniques sees these practices as either succeeding or failing to the degree that they generate positive emotional energy for the ritual participants in a way that enacts and prolongs a specific set of beliefs. In this sense, the micro-level analysis of emotion and the body within interaction ritual theory might provide a more fundamental level of analysis to understand the emergence of the more macro-level conception of ‘habitus’, per our earlier discussion of Orsi’s appropriation of the term from Bourdieu, and the particular technologies that are employed to support it, per our discussion of Foucault and Asad, that constructively mediates between our notions of practical and symbolic activity.

**Analyzing Prayer: Case Studies and the Comparative Endeavor**

Over the past several decades, comparative research in religious studies has become a contested methodology, resulting from a critique of how comparative studies of religion were conducted in the middle of the 20th century in a structuralist and/or phenomenological mode, based on the lack of specific rules to guide the research project once structuralism and phenomenology were abandoned as productive theoretical approaches. In the early 1980s, Jonathan Z. Smith succinctly highlighted this problem in his essay, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells”: “For, as practiced by scholarship, *comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity. The chief*
explanation for the significance of comparison has been contiguity. The procedure is homeopathic. The theory is built on contagion. The issue of difference has been all but forgotten” (Smith, Imagining Religion 21). As a result, under the influence of post-structuralist and postmodern strategies, religious studies as a field (by and large) has opted to conduct research on specific religious traditions in particular time/geographical contexts that resist comparison to other traditions in the absence of meta-theories that provide a responsible way to make productive comparisons of similarity and difference. Comparison, when it is done with these modified methodological lenses in light of these criticisms, is self-conscious about the imaginative exercise in talking across traditions, time periods, and geographical contexts and pays attention to the power dynamics of the researcher in selecting/collecting, interacting with, and analyzing one’s data: “The task, then, for those committed to the comparativist enterprise becomes one of clarifying our assumptions, rectifying our procedures, and justifying our goals” (Smith, Relating Religion 30). At this juncture, I will turn toward briefly introducing the Padre Pio Prayer Group and Nur movements, describing the comparative approach of this project, and the reasons why these cases have been selected for furthering knowledge of prayer.

Padre Pio, a Capuchin priest from Pietrelcina, Italy, who lived from 1887-1968, was a controversial and influential figure in the Catholic Church. He is most well-known for bearing the marks of the stigmata beginning in 1918 through to his death in 1968. Initially accused of being a fraud and a threat to the Vatican hierarchy, Padre Pio had a strong devotional following in Italy, with many thousands of people traveling far and wide to have him hear their confession. His life’s mission was dedicated to the
development of a hospital in the area of his monastery, San Giovanni Rotondo, which was a poor and remote region of Italy with little access to quality healthcare facilities. Padre Pio’s hospital, the Home for the Relief of Suffering (Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza), opened in 1956 and is still in operation today as one of the leading medical centers in Italy.

The Padre Pio Prayer Groups, a loosely organized set of groups that began in the late 1940s with the encouragement of Pope Pius XII and the initiative of Padre Pio, became a full-fledged international devotional movement during the post-Vatican II era. While the groups provided the Catholic lay community a way to engage in directed, regular prayer together, it was specifically devoted to prayer for the alleviation of suffering. Padre Pio is noted as stating, “It is prayer, this united strength of all good souls, that moves the world, that renews the consciences; that supports the ‘Casa’, that comforts the suffering, that heals the sick, that sanctifies labor, that elevates health care, that gives moral strength and Christian resignation to human suffering, that spreads the smile and blessing of God on the fainthearted”. With approximately 3,000 such groups\textsuperscript{11} worldwide and statutes codified in the 1980’s to govern their formation and activity, the purpose of the groups is to “aim at an integral Christian formation through prayer and generous activity towards the suffering, according to what Padre Pio indicated”\textsuperscript{12}. Each group must go through a formal application process within the Church and needs to be under the specific direction of an approved spiritual leader, usually a parish priest. As

explicit devotion to Padre Pio has significantly increased worldwide since his
 canonization in 2002 and the humble regions of Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo
 have become transformed into significant centers of Catholic pilgrimage, the message
 and person of Padre Pio are having a growing influence on popular Catholic devotional
 practice worldwide.

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, a Muslim scholar who lived in what is now modern-day
 Turkey from 1878-1960, is the controversial founder of the Nurculuk (Nur) Movement, a
 Turkish-based Islamic movement that aims to offer a middle path to engage with the
 modern world, including the sciences, with a strong basis in Islamic principles and
 openness to interfaith dialogue. Said Nursi, whose influences range from the Sunni and
 Sufi traditions of Islam, is the author of the *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light), a collection
 of his many commentaries on the Qur’an authored throughout his lifetime, which total
 more than 6,000 pages. An important figure and military leader in the late Ottoman
 Empire, Nursi became a leading voice against the Kemalist authorities in Turkey shortly
 after they came to power, strongly criticizing their materialist and positivist values for
 which he spent a number of years imprisoned or exiled. The writings of Nursi are
 considered by his followers to be inspired by Allah and they are elevated to a spiritual
 status due to the nuance of his interpretations and the degree to which they speak to a
 modern life, often communicating through parables and allegories that employ scientific
 knowledge and societal perspectives with which the contemporary reader can identify.
 While in exile, a small group of followers began to study Nursi’s writings and became
 influential in disseminating his teachings throughout the 20th century amidst threat of
persecution. Nursi is the spiritual father of many of the modern Islamic movements in contemporary Turkey, including the Gülen Movement, which vie for influence within Turkish society. Although Nursi advocated a separation of religion from politics, since Nursi’s death, the movement has fragmented along differing interpretations of Nursi’s writings, with each group staking particular positions on the degree to which the movement should be involved in politics and civic activism and construed through the lens of ethnic nationalism.

According to Hakan Yavuz, Nursi saw Islam as a “strategy for transforming society by raising individual consciousness” that entailed three things: “a normative order and a moral order to differentiate right and wrong; a worldview that informs one’s understanding of human reality and the world; and an inner force to constitute the self and to empower oneself against the odds of modern society” (Yavuz and Esposito 4). The groups of followers who studied Nursi modeled what became an important institutional precursor for the establishment of dershanes, Nur study centers and reading circles, which are small groups that meet once or twice weekly where prayers are made and the writings of Nursi are read and discussed that help to transform one’s life and consciousness toward a modern lifestyle consonant with Islam. These reading circles are organized “horizontally, not hierarchically” (Yavuz, “Circles” 309) in order to encourage brotherly friendships. Their task is to “inculcate Islamic values and norms in society through conversational reading and prayers” (298), which serve to form networks of communities in a secular society while also democratizing Islamic knowledge from “the hegemony of the ‘ulama’” (307). In one of the few articles published on the concept of
prayer in the Nur movement, David Law provides a close reading of Nursi’s writings in comparison to those of Thomas Merton, arguing that prayer for both of them is “part of the solution to the crisis caused by secularism” because it entails “self-transformation”, by allowing individuals to “break out of the confines of their egocentricity” and open themselves up to “turn in love to our fellow human beings”, that can have significant consequences for societal transformation (Law 217-218).

The comparison between the two research populations - the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement and the Nur movement - is highly informed by Jonathan Z. Smith’s criticisms and William Paden’s recommendations for re-envisioning comparison in light of these criticisms, especially the call for enacting greater rules in the comparative enterprise and paying attention to similarity and difference in the points of comparison. Talal Asad, whose work has closely engaged both the Christian and Islamic traditions, has also opened the space for comparison: “I want to make it clear that I have nothing in principle against comparisons between Christian and Muslim histories…But one should go beyond drawing parallels…and attempt a systematic exploration of differences” (Asad, “Anthropology of Islam” 3-4). Following from the path that Paden envisioned, Ann Taves articulates a new approach for comparison in Religious Experience Reconsidered that can account for similarities and differences and reorients the enterprise

---

around a “stipulated point of analogy” (Taves, Religious Experience 123) in order to understand “things deemed religious” within intercontextual and intracontextual circumstances. For the purposes of this project, the “stipulated point of analogy” as the object of study is prayer. In addition, Ann Taves’s articulation of the “Composite and Composite” model for comparison of religious formations is especially helpful for understanding prayer within a group context, where the object of study (prayer practices) can be conceived as constituting efficacious pathways toward achieving specific individual and group goals. In this model, “composite formations” are understood as involving “a set of two or more interlocked ascriptions” and the beliefs and practices associated with those ascriptions (51-53, 181).

Pertaining to the Padre Pio Prayer Group and Nur movements, the goals of the prayer practices vary between the two populations under study. Thus, Taves locates appropriate research questions that can be asked in this kind of comparison both within a given tradition, such as “Do the practices really effect the goal?” and “Is the goal the right one?” in order to highlight contextualized debates within a religious tradition, as well as across traditions, such as “Can we (as scholars) identify cross-culturally stable processes by means of which practices effect goals?” and “If practices rely on common underlying processes, does this lead to corresponding similarities in the way the goals are understood?”, which allows the researcher to illuminate ideas that may have more general applicability to understand common practices such as prayer (130). These research questions will play a role in guiding the investigation of prayer as I analyze the field data collected in the two populations, present the theological and historical understandings of
prayer within both specific movements under investigation, and seek to understand the more general processes that may underlie prayer practices within these populations.

In relation then to the “composite and composite” model, why has this project been structured to study the practice of prayer in a comparative fashion in a Catholic and an Islamic movement using an ethnographic methodology? In response to this question, I offer three interrelated answers. First, since prayer as a specified practice is strongly present in the significant majority of religious traditions, especially in the major monotheistic traditions as a form of communication and relationship with the divine, the capability of generating or uncovering knowledge that would have general import to understanding the goals of prayer, even in a small-sample project, is put forth as an explicit aim of this endeavor in light of interaction ritual theory. Consonant with this challenge, I agree with John Walton when he states that cases “come wrapped in theories” and are “always hypotheses”: “They are cases because they embody causal processes operating in microcosm. At bottom, the logic of the case study is to demonstrate a causal argument about how general forces take shape and produce results in specific settings. That demonstration, in turn, is intended to provide at least one anchor that steadies the ship of generalization until more anchors can be fixed for eventual boarding” (Walton 122). At play in this project is both the furtherance of generally applicable knowledge of prayer and the applicability of interaction ritual theory to generate constructive hypotheses for describing and explaining the practice of prayer.
In taking on this challenge, I am aware of the fact that attempts at offering general
knowledge about prayer have been few in the field, mostly relying on typological
approaches as an entrée to analysis in order to categorize the different forms of utterance
that one might consider “prayer” relative to specific goals. Typological approaches to
prayer have been undertaken in anthropology, psychology, religious studies, and
society, but to date they have largely been based on assumptions from Christianity and
have not had wide impact in influencing the direction of research on prayer. This project
does not formally proceed utilizing a typological framework, but the selection of the
Padre Pio Prayer Group and Nur movements as case studies is based on the ability to
view and address different forms of prayer utilized and named within the Catholic and
Muslim traditions in order to analyze their employment, which may lead to the formation
of typologies within an interaction ritual frame.

Second, while I do refer to “Catholic” and “Muslim” forms of prayer, the terms
are self-consciously not used in a monolithic fashion. Instead, they are conceptualized
within the specific life-worlds generated by the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement and
the Nur movement, as each of these movements employs their understandings and
practices of prayer such that they would be consistent with the greater traditions - they
respectively do not conceive of themselves as being heterodox relative to the central
doctrines and practices of Roman Catholicism and Sunni Islam. The dynamic relation
between the conceptualization and enactment of prayer within the movement relative to
their respective traditions is important for highlighting differences within a tradition: “For
even where traditional practices appear to the anthropologist to be imitative of what has
gone before, it will be the practitioners’ conceptions of what is *apt performance*, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form” (Asad, “Anthropology of Islam” 15). Each movement engages lay communities of believers who are fully engaged in the world for the purposes of increasing spiritual development and devotion, based on the ideas of two popular, charismatic male figures who lived as contemporaries in the 19th and 20th centuries, but who likely had little to no knowledge or awareness of each other. Emanating from Italy and Turkey, respectively, the histories of both movements are tied to the specific ethnic and cultural dynamics of their circumstances, but they have each grown beyond their geographic borders and share a deep commonality in confronting what they view as the dangers of unbelief brought by modern culture, negotiating religious belief and practice within a larger cultural dynamic of secularization.

Though, this still leaves the question open as to why study the two movements generated by Padre Pio and Said Nursi when there are scores of new movements operating today associated with the three monotheistic traditions that are de facto grappling with the circumstances of modernity and formulating ways to innovate and adapt in order to attract, serve, and develop the faithful. This leads to the third point, which is that both movements use the mechanism of small group discussion meetings and support - ideal for evaluating the application of interaction ritual theory in action - to perpetuate themselves utilizing resources and structures that are specifically connected to their founders. This differentiates and complicates them from other kinds of group meetings where reading scripture is the focus of attention or group prayer is enacted for
ritual or intercessory purposes. The process by which each of these movements negotiates the charisma associated with their founders, while maintaining their orthodox ethos within the larger tradition, provides an important vantage point for understanding the tensions and dynamics associated with incorporating the ideas, perspectives, and goals of saintly exemplars within their respective Catholic and Muslim contexts and the implications that has for the conceptualization and enactment of prayer. These group meetings also provide a practical window for observationally highlighting that which is ‘valued’ at both the individual and group levels as part of the perceived negotiation of religious and secular forces within the movements. Aligned with the perspective of Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, in their introduction to the volume *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*, this project aims to contribute to the effort of providing an ‘ethnography of value’:

In referring to “ethnographies of value”, we signal our interest in the ways that people in various contexts decide (or experience or identify) what is of value as well as the processes that allow them (and us) to assign or apprehend such things. In considering value as ethnographically relevant, we thus focus on processes through which people mark things as special or singular both through discourse and behaviors…We approach and query how things – actions, objects, experiences, institutions, rituals, and the like – acquire meaning in events and interactions. An understanding of processes of valuation requires that we pay close attention not only to events and interactions but also to the various resources, processes, and structures that enable the articulation of value” (Taves and Bender 10-11).

Thus, in order to understand these movements and what they value, it is necessary to employ an ethnographic methodology to see these group meetings in action at the micro-level. While these movements are most vibrant within their home countries, they
each have access points in the United States where meetings are conducted in English. The Padre Pio Prayer Group movement has a full-fledged presence in the United States, with approximately 130 groups recognized throughout the country. The Nur movement has a much smaller footprint in the United States, with no public presence in the country, but is linked through ethnic Turkish communities, where dershanes and reading groups can be located through networks of social relations and connections with Nur organizations in Turkey. For the purposes of the comparison, this project contains two chapters each on the Padre Pio Prayer Group and Nur movements, with each couple beginning with a chapter on the historical overview of the lives of Padre Pio and Said Nursi, along with the movements that they inspired and formed, followed by a chapter discussing the ethnographic work conducted within these communities in the United States.

In summation, this project takes a comparative approach to understanding prayer – offering ‘ethnographies of value’ to gain contextual insight into how prayer as a ‘disciplinary practice’ is enacted, conceived, and ‘lived’ in the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement and the Nur movement – utilizing interaction ritual theory as a model to illuminate the respective “paths” and “goals” of prayer, aiming to provide a new perspective for researching prayer as a social interaction that takes into account its cognitive and emotional factors as well as its linguistic, communicative, and embodied sensibilities for furthering the humanistic and social scientific study of religion. The theoretical and methodological perspectives shared in this chapter have ostensibly shaped and formed the selection of the two research cases, providing the frame to demonstrate
how the practice of prayer negotiates the relationship between modern, everyday life for the purposes of enacting spiritual development within these specific contexts while seeking to offer insight into more generalizable knowledge about prayer applicable to other contexts.
CHAPTER 2

Padre Pio: The Power of Dilemma and Devotion

If one conducts an online search for information on Padre Pio, one will be treated to an enormous array of books, web sites, and articles, speaking to those within the Catholic community about him as the first stigmatic priest who had special attributes, such as the ability to catalyze miraculous healings through prayer, read hearts and minds while hearing people’s confessions, bi-locate to be in the presence of others who were in need, and emit a fragrant odor of flowers from his bloody wounds that could not have been the product of man-made perfumes. Padre Pio, a Capuchin friar who lived from 1887-1968 and was canonized as a saint in 2002, was a 20th century icon in Italy, a force of prayer and piety in a country damaged by two world wars, brought together through the increase of global communications technologies, and involved in a process of tumultuous change, confronted by the realities of a society that had moved beyond ancient ways of conceiving the Christian message and practice. He was a controversial and polarizing figure within the Church, perceived as a de facto threat to the power of the Vatican by his presence, the prospect that his stigmata might have been faked, and the inspired devotion and commitment of followers who saw in him a divine presence and a greater authenticity than Church hierarchy. He was a curiosity outside of the Church, alternately inspiring deference from political and cultural figures seeking to associate
with his religious and symbolic power, and heated skepticism, seen as a person who inspired a fanatical movement that must either have been perpetrating a fraud or had some kind of unexplained medical condition that allowed him to bleed constantly out of his hands for fifty years. Apart from the deep and vast attestations of his person from the Catholic faithful which continue to this day, the phenomenon that Padre Pio inspired in his life and after his death has largely gone unexplained by academic biographers, historians, and sociologists.

It is into this context that Sergio Luzzatto, a well-known Italian historian and biographer of Mussolini, published his Padre Pio: Miracoli e politica nell’Italia del Novecento in 2007, later translated into English as Padre Pio: Miracles and Politics in a Secular Age in 2010. Awarded the 2011 Cundill Prize, the largest non-fiction history prize in the world ($75,000), the book attempts to tackle the controversies of Padre Pio’s life, combining recently declassified data obtained from Vatican archives with the cultural and political history of twentieth-century Italy. Luzzatto seeks to paint a very different portrait of Pio, aiming to understand Pio the historical actor, rather than Pio the saint, the miracle-worker, or pious priest. Luzzatto states:

“No historian has ever written about the world of Padre Pio, almost as if there were something shameful about elevating the friar and his followers to the level of historic actors. Apparently what scholars of the Middle Ages take for granted – that studying beliefs is not the same as being a naïve believer oneself – remains to be accepted by scholars who deal with the present” (Luzzatto 5).

In his book, Luzzatto writes about the Vatican’s investigations into Padre Pio’s stigmata, his activities, and the devotional movement that he inspired, as well as the historical
context and the people – fellow priests, devotees, and some nefarious individuals – who populated the world of Padre Pio and made him into a phenomenon. Luzzatto’s text has sparked controversy in the Catholic world, where several faith-inspired writers have taken issue with claimed inaccuracies in Luzzatto’s book, and question whether he has been sufficiently objective in his historical treatment, especially in his recounting of the potential fraudulentness of the stigmata. For the purposes of this chapter, I will not wade into the controversies in the Catholic world about Luzzatto’s book, but I will utilize his book as a way to tell the story of the ‘historical Pio’ that shines a light on the movement that he spawned, the battles that he had to endure within the Church, and the icon that he became. While Luzzatto aims to perform an admirable task in his portrait of Pio - to “restore Padre Pio of Pietrelcina to the place he deserves in twentieth-century history” (11) - I will argue that he writes from an avowedly modern, ‘secular’ perspective which brings an edge to his historical narrative that simplifies the notion of sainthood and avoids grappling with the complexities and meanings involved in religious devotion. It’s understandable that this form of reductionism would rub those coming from a faith-based perspective the wrong way, but it also detracts from Luzzatto’s analysis because he

---

14 See, Saverio Gaeta and Andrea Tornielli’s, Padre Pio l’ultimo sospetto (2008). For an English rendering of the key points of the book, see Gaspari, Antonio. “The Polemics of Padre Pio: Interview with Journalist Andrea Tornielli.” ZENIT, May 16, 2008. In addition, noted Catholic journalist Vittorio Messori, in his Foreword to Francesco Castelli’s, Padre Pio Under Investigation: The Secret Vatican Files (Ignatius Press, 2011), writes “Saverio Gaeta and Andrea Tornielli have accurately and vigorously answered Luzzatto in their volume Padre Pio. L’ultimo sospetto, in which they highlight not only the historian’s numerous inaccuracies, but also his genuine mistakes and his frequent manipulation of the texts he uses to confirm his thesis” (Messori xi). This contrasts with Messori’s initial take on the book, published in a 2007 article in the Italian periodical Corriere della Sera, where he attempts to counter the sensationalist headlines about Luzzatto’s treatment of Pio’s stigmata and states that the book “is serious and does not deserve the scandalous headlines; it is a book resulting from years of work and research in different fields”. For an English language rendering of the key points of the article, see “New book on Padre Pio not an attack, says Catholic journalist”. Catholic News Agency, November 2, 2007.
misses an opportunity to evaluate and understand the animating power of the Padre Pio
movement and what it means for Italy, Catholicism, and the world in the twenty-first
century.

**A Note on Miracles and Secularism**

Luzzatto makes his intentions clear at the outset of the book about his approach
toward Padre Pio’s stigmata and the veracity of the myriad miracles that have been
attributed to the Capuchin friar:

“Let me be clear right away that this study does not intend to establish once and
for all whether Padre Pio’s wounds were *genuine* stigmata, or whether the works
he did were *genuine* miracles. All those seeking answers – affirmative or
negative – as to whether the stigmata or the miracles were ‘real’ had better close
this book right now”. (4)

Given the varied audiences who are likely to pick up the book, this is an appropriate
disclaimer in order to set the stage for the historical treatment that he wants to give Pio,
seeking to be agnostic to the truth of such phenomena whereby he intends to treat them
“as an anthropologist would, making no distinctions between reality and myth” (ibid.).
The methodological agnosticism he seeks to employ in not making a distinction between
“reality and myth” in treating Padre Pio’s stigmata and miracles does not extend to his
broader understanding of religion. This is evinced early on when he states strongly,
“Saints exist mainly to perform miracles” (ibid.) and he reduces the persistence of religion in the modern world to lack of a solution to the problem of evil:

“secularism hasn’t destroyed religion, because political, cultural, and scientific progress has not eliminated the dimension of evil from our lives, nor the need, for many, to see misfortune as part of a providential plan. The story of Padre Pio cannot be understood without keeping in mind the shrewd observation once made by a writer and politician Ignazio Silone: having a labor union doesn’t mean you can do without the saints, because ‘the poor are always afraid’. Especially among the most humble, material progress does not destroy piety, that is, the spiritual need for reassurance and the wish to be protected” (5-6).

As we will see in the pages below, Luzzatto is at his best when he is drawing a historical narrative based on the de-classified Vatican sources and other archival and textual evidence to better understand the conflicts and contextual situation surrounding Padre Pio and his movement. Though, when it comes to his treatment of religion, he is short-sighted. The reduction of the power of religion, for Luzzatto, to providing a solution to the problem of evil shades his ability to understand how our “Secular Age”, per the title of the book, entails complex and deep interconnections between our understanding of what we consider to be religious and secular. This might be a product

---

15 There are numerous works of scholarship attesting otherwise. For example, John Stratton Hawley, in citing Vatican II documents discussing the cult of saints whereby the faithful seek in them “example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid in their intercession”, Hawley uses the frame of example, fellowship, and aid as a way to understand the meaning of saints within multiple religious traditions. See Hawley, John Stratton. “Introduction: Saints and Virtues.” Saints and Virtues, edited by Hawley, U of California P, 1987, pp. xi-xxiv. Another example, as a response to the modern treatment of saintliness as a “primitive throwback”, saints can be conceived in a postmodern fashion as models of excess who “queer stable binary structures”. See Meltzer, Francoise and Jas Elsner. “Introduction.” Saints: Faith Without Borders, edited by Meltzer and Elsner, U of Chicago P, 2011, pp. ix-xii.

16 For more nuanced understandings of secularism, see Talal Asad’s prompting for an anthropology of secularism, whereby one seeks to trace how changes in the conceptualization of the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’, which are dependent on each other, “articulate changes in practices” (Asad, Talal. Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity. Stanford UP, 2003, p. 25) and philosopher Charles
of Luzzatto’s contemporary Italian intellectual milieu, which may not have been enriched by the recent nuanced and critical discussions on the concept of secularism available at the time of publication of the Italian version of his book, but it nonetheless creates a more rigidly dichotomous rendering of the difference between the religious and the secular. This allows Luzzatto to pose a strong differentiation regarding the meaning of miracles in our contemporary era, as opposed to the Middle Ages:

“As long as Christian faith was unquestioned, the portentous methods – mysterious healings, bodily marks, celestial apparitions – by which the divine appeared to man were seen as signs of the existence of God, and theologians, notaries, and doctors could debate their authenticity without shaking the whole house of the Christian supernatural…But in the contemporary era, once Christian faith became a choice, the same portentous events started to be seen as something more: they became proof of the existence of God.” (6).

Configuring the understanding of miracles as “proof” for the existence of God which have the potential to question the “whole house of the Christian supernatural” in contemporary society can seem a bit myopic when seen within a backdrop of global Christian practices that function much more within a worldview that implicates how the divine interacts with humanity and the world during a given time, rather than as a singular form of proof. It is quite possible that the threat posed by the visibility of Padre Pio’s stigmata, alongside his public piety and the ardent devotional following that he has within Italy, poses this kind of challenge from the perspective of a non-religious interpreter and, more broadly, the culture within Italy of those who self-identify as non-Christian. Though, if one is trying to tell the story of a religious figure and the

community around that figure from a position of methodological agnosticism, one is on weak grounds to make such a claim.

It is true that Padre Pio, being the first stigmatized priest and existing at a time that can catalog and communicate that wonder on a global level, does provide something different than other saints, which has had a unique influence on Italian society and the Catholic world. That difference is less about “proof” and more about authenticity of the Christian message, testified in body and practice, and the challenge that presents to the authority of the Vatican due to the way that it provides a tangible icon for Catholics of human and divine suffering. As Luzzatto goes on to describe in his book, which will be covered in detail below, the controversy around Padre Pio is first and foremost one of an internal struggle within the Church about how to handle a stigmatized priest than it is of somebody who would serve as a rallying cry to offer proof to unbelievers or additional proof to believers. Luzzatto rightly acknowledges this when he states: “Measuring themselves against Padre Pio, leading men of the Church also had to face tough questions about the material nature of faith, about the proper limits of pastoral duty, about the direct or indirect routes to sainthood” (7), but he misattributes the problem of the stigmata when he continues: “And behind these was a question even more serious and troubling: could a good Christian ever accept the existence of an alter Christus, a living Christ figure?” (ibid.).

The characterization that the question of Padre Pio’s stigmata as being “serious and troubling” and whether the Catholic faithful could “ever accept the existence of an
alter Christus” betrays a lack of understanding for how the stigmata and, more generally, the miracles attributed to Padre Pio would be interpreted within Catholic tradition and religious practice\textsuperscript{17}. Thus, Luzzatto’s overemphasis on seeing the miracles of Padre Pio in our era as proof of the existence of God, one that would challenge the Christian worldview and the place of Jesus, allows him to offer a degree of insight as to how he must have been seen by non-believing Italians, but it ultimately functions in the text as a form of methodological atheism, rather than methodological agnosticism, that reduces the complexity of what Luzzatto can state about the impact of Padre Pio on both the secular and religious communities of Italy. Thankfully, Luzzatto’s text provides evidence to bring out some of these subtleties, but his own reductionist limitations are evident at various points of his presentation, which potentially serves as a call for a historian of religion to tackle the complex story of Padre Pio and the influence he has had on Roman Catholicism over the past century.

**Paradigmatic Dilemmas**

Padre Pio’s genius as a Catholic saint - in body, in practice, and in teaching – lies in the symbolic power and physical pain and suffering of the stigmata that began relatively early in his life in 1918, but also in the way that he steadfastly upheld traditional practices throughout his life like confession, disciplined prayer, and

\textsuperscript{17} See Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Fragmentation and Redemption*. While Francis of Assisi and Padre Pio are the only males in history that claim to physically bear the five wounds of Jesus, there are “dozens of such claims for late medieval women” (Bynum 187). Among these “blood prodigies”, “female bodies provide a disproportionate percentage of the wonder-working relics in late medieval Europe”. (Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Fragmentation and redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. Zone Books, 1992.)
celebrating Mass, while also innovating within the Church by building the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza and stimulating the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement later in his life. The combination of these factors that span across his vocation as a Capuchin priest in Italy makes Padre Pio a paradigmatic figure in Catholic history, one that necessarily entailed controversy due to the irrepressible character of his physical presence and the degree to which that reality gives him the potential platform to inspire believers as the authentic voice of the Christian message, higher than that of the Pope. During a tumultuous time of cultural, political, and social upheaval, Padre Pio served as a steadying light to the faithful of Italy, one that became stronger as controversies within the Church about him waxed and waned, which further galvanized public fascination and ended in the strong support of Pope John Paul II to beatify and canonize him as a saint after his death.

Luzzatto’s text aptly speaks to a number of these dynamics to draw out the dilemmas that presented themselves during Padre Pio’s lifetime. This chapter will explore three such dilemmas – the onset of the stigmata and the controversy that erupted to verify its authenticity; the building of the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza as a hospital dedicated to alleviating the physical and spiritual suffering of those who live in San Giovanni Rotondo and the surrounding region; and the devotional following that emerged during his lifetime which made Padre Pio an international celebrity and the founder of a prayer movement that echoed his commitment to traditional Catholic practices, the cultivation of spiritual disciplines, and intercessory prayer. Throughout the articulation of these dilemmas, miracles attributed to Padre Pio will be discussed, as they are
Dilemma 1: A Stigmatized Priest

Born in 1887 in the small town of Pietrelcina, Italy, Francisco Forgione became Padre Pio when he was ordained in 1910 as a Capuchin, a strict order following the way of St. Francis, the first known stigmatic, which requires a vow of poverty and a life of prayer. The Capuchin order grew out from the Franciscan monastic tradition in the sixteenth century, when it was argued that Franciscans were straying too far from the vows of poverty and contemplation that St. Francis had originally envisioned. Until 1916, Padre Pio spent much of his time away from his Capuchin order, instead gaining permission to stay in Pietrelcina due to ill health and the need to take care of his family when his father and brother briefly immigrated to the United States. He also served in World War I during this time, though his poor health did not see him spend much time on the battlefront.

During these years, Padre Pio wrote letters to his superiors at San Giovanni that were deeply mystical, speaking of: “Jesus’ infancy, of the heavenly bodies of the Savior and the Virgin, of the blood of the Crucifixion, of sin, suffering, redemption, and expiation, of himself as the passive object of divine action, of offering himself as a sacrifice” (19). Many of the letters that Padre Pio wrote reproduced, word for word, a book entitled the Letters and Ecstasies of God’s Servant, Gemma Galgani, published in 1909 to tell the story of a 20-year old Italian woman who began to experience the
stigmata in 1899 and died in 1903. Though it is not known whether his superiors knew they had been copied, Padre Pio authored a *Short Treatise on the Dark Night* while he was stationed during military service, attesting to his own independent mystical perspectives (21). By 1916, Padre Pio moved into the monastery of Santa Maria della Grazie in San Giovanni Rotondo, a place from which he would not leave for more than 50 years.

As early as 1912, Padre Pio had written to his superiors about pains he had felt in his hands, side, and feet, what may have been thought to be potentially an ‘invisible’ stigmata. These pains would occur several days a week for a number of years. By September 20, 1918, Padre Pio attests that he began to bleed from the five wounds of Jesus on his hands, feet, and side. He bled continuously from this date forward, especially in his hands. Padre Pio informed his superior, Father Benedetto, in October 1918. Initially hidden from others, the wounds on his hands could be seen in public by 1919 when he celebrated Mass. Due to the excitement generated in visitors to the monastery, he was already gaining a reputation for being a saint, with miracles being attributed to him amongst the faithful and newspapers reporting on the many people who would come to see him in San Giovanni Rotondo and take Communion during the Mass from his hands. This excitement also created a “relic cult”, according to Father Paolino of Cascalenda, the father guardian of Santa Maria della Grazie, where people tried to obtain pieces of Padre Pio’s clothing:

“When the friars sent out their dirty linens to the laundresses of San Giovanni Rotondo, the shirts believed to belong to Padre Pio, or sometimes just the
bloodied parts of those shirts, would often disappear. The devout, both locals and outsiders, were so determined to come away with something vaguely resembling a relic that they would sometimes come into the monastery armed with scissors. ‘The crowd…slashed chasubles, shirts, girdles, even chairs where Padre Pio had sat,’ reported Father Paolino” (39).

Although the superiors at San Giovanni attempted to quell the situation by discouraging the collection of relics and not permitting Padre Pio to meet with journalists or photographers, the enthusiasm would not abate: “Every day, as many as seven hundred letters and telegrams arrived at the monastery from all over: from Tuscany, from Liguria, from the Marches, from Sicily, even from France and England, Malta and America” (41).

As the attention to Padre Pio grew, he underwent a series of investigations by doctors, where they examined him and the authenticity of the stigmata. Between 1919 and 1920, Padre Pio was examined by three different experts – Dr. Luigi Romanelli, Prof. Amico Bignami, and Dr. Giorgio Festa. While they each verified the presence of the wounds, Prof. Bignami had recommended that all medicines be removed from Padre Pio’s cell, including iodine, under suspicion that he might be chemically causing the wounds, and had his hands bandaged for a week. Thinking that the wounds might heal or lesson in appearance when bandaged, instead “blood began to flow more copiously than ever, so abundantly that it was necessary to wipe the blood off Padre Pio’s hands even as he stood before the altar to celebrate mass” (ibid.). Each of the reports written by these experts indicates differences in appearance of the stigmata, including some who only saw marks but no bleeding from Padre Pio’s side and feet, and they also attested to the unexplained fragrance of flowers emanating from his wounds that Padre Pio could not
notice himself. These reports became part of a file, accumulating evidence for the inquisitional body – the Holy Office – of the Catholic Church.

While this information was being collected, other forms of correspondence were submitted to the Holy Office which shed a more troublesome light on the fanaticism of the people coming to San Giovanni Rotondo, questioned the spiritual direction of Father Benedetto and the atmosphere created by Father Paolini that allowed the fanaticism to continue in order to elevate the stature of the monastery, and shed doubt on the person of Padre Pio. There are two items of note in this regard. First is a correspondence sent to the Holy Office from Father Agostino Gemelli, a Franciscan from Milan, who had become influential in the Church in his efforts to found a Catholic university in Italy and had made a pilgrimage to see Padre Pio. A prolific medical doctor by training and scientist who had many publications to his name, he had undergone a conversion experience to Catholicism in 1903. From then on, he was an active figure at the intersection of medical science and faith during his career as a friar-scientist, writing on matters in biology and psychology, and he took a particular interest in seeking to understand mystical experience and neuropathy in his *Neurosis and Beatitude*, published in 1912.

In April 1920, piqued by the claims of Padre Pio’s sainthood, Father Gemelli visited Padre Pio. Having spent only a few hours with Padre Pio, Father Gemelli wrote a letter to the Holy Office, whereby he claims to have unsuspectingly conducted a “psychiatric examination” (57) of the alleged saint. In the letter, while Father Gemelli
voiced no concerns about Padre Pio’s religious life, he was concerned by the “atmosphere of suggestion” that had been created by Father Benedetto who “testifies to extraordinary happenings” connected to Padre Pio, and the “uncontrolled tales and legends” in San Giovanni about miracles attributed to Padre Pio and “superstitious practices” perpetuated by propaganda from the Capuchin friars (58-59). Father Gemelli recommended that Padre Pio be removed from San Giovanni and undergo a rigorous psychiatric exam, have his wounds examined under a microscope, and wrap one of his limbs in plaster to see if the wounds would heal.

The second were depositions given in 1920 before the bishop of Foggia, which oversaw the diocese that contained San Giovanni Rotondo, by a male pharmacist, Dr. Valentini Vista, and his female cousin, Maria De Vito, who also owned a pharmacy. Maria De Vito had stayed in San Giovanni for a month in 1919, becoming part of the circle of devout women, “spiritual daughters”, who attended to Padre Pio. When she returned home from her one month stay, she passed along a secret request to her cousin from Padre Pio to fill a 100 gram bottle with carbolic acid. In Dr. Vista’s testimony, he verified that he filled the bottle, thinking the motives were innocent as Padre Pio had relayed to Maria De Vito that he needed the acid to sterilize needles, but Dr. Vista stated, “When I heard this request, it occurred to me that carbolic acid in that form could be used by Padre Pio to procure or irritate those wounds on his hands” (91). A few weeks later, another secret request for four grams of veratrine came from Padre Pio, which is a highly poisonous substance that is only prescribed in milligram doses. Dr. Vista confided his
doubts to Maria at that time and told her not to accept any more requests from Padre Pio for pharmaceuticals.

Other concerns were also raised by trusted sources, such as from the archbishop of Manfredonia, Monsignor Pasquale Gagliardi, who described the scene in San Giovanni as “out of control, with lay sisters circulating in the streets with photographs of Padre Pio tied around their necks, and selling the photos and bloody handkerchiefs and other relics to pilgrims” (93). Taking all of this evidence under advisement, the Holy Office ordered in 1921 that an Apostolic Visitor would be sent to “sort out the matter of the stigmata, observe the friar’s relationship with women, and evaluate the spiritual leadership of Father Benedetto” (100). Monsignor Raffaele Carlo Rossi, a recently named bishop of Volterra was appointed to make a one-week visit to San Giovanni in June 1921, and issued a 150-page report to the Holy Office in October 1921. While he was there, Monsignor Rossi interviewed many of the religious superiors, Padre Pio’s fellow friars, had six depositions with Padre Pio and made an examination of the stigmata. The stigmata was subjected to close physical analysis, including using a “tailor’s meter to measure the depth” (101) of the wounds and to verify their physical characteristics. In the depositions, Padre Pio was interrogated about his religious life and practices, performance of miracles (he denied knowledge of any miraculous event attributed to him in the stories circulating in public), and why he had secretly requested the carbolic acid and the veratrine. Padre Pio attested to these requests, saying that he did not have a prescription for the carbolic acid, but he used it in service to the monastic community to sterilize the needles that were often administered to young men in seminary. As for the
veratrine, he requested it for “recreational purposes” to play a joke on his brothers: “he would mix the substance with snuff in order to make other friars sneeze uncontrollably” (103).

Despite some of the debatable responses on the use of carbolic acid and veratrine, the report that Monsignor Rossi produced verified that there are stigmata on Padre Pio’s hands, and that they are likely of divine origin: “Should this manifestation be not only exceptional, but also miraculous, the Lord will demonstrate as He sees fit” (106). Though, Monsignor Rossi was negative in his assessment of the environment in San Giovanni Rotondo, where the town had turned into a “cour des miracles” (107) that was enabled by Father Paolino and stated that “not even one of “Pio’s miracles was real” (108). Luzzatto, drawing parallels to stories of miracles from centuries ago, speaks of the contemporary context as not unlike that in medieval France:

“In twentieth-century Italy as in medieval France, the conviction that a miracle performed depended on the belief that there were such things as miracles. The rest came almost by itself. The devotion of the believers meant that any cures must be due to the intercession of the saint. The cured and their families became witnesses to a success story, while those cases where illness persisted were attributed to other causes and then repressed from memory. Even in the twentieth century, a reputation for miracle working could spread far and wide without there being any outright deception or any miraculous cures. Unlike Father Gemelli, the followers of Padre Pio felt no need to make a miracle correspond to medical science” (110-111).

Monsignor Rossi’s report weighed other charges, including whether there was any inappropriate behavior between Padre Pio and his “spiritual daughters”. While Bishop Rossi acknowledged that sometimes the level of physical contact and informality
between the women and Padre Pio was more than would be condoned, he ruled out that Padre Pio’s chastity was in danger: “On this most important point of Christian, religious and priestly virtue, P. Pio is unassailable” (113).

In June of 1922, the Vatican had weighed all of the evidence collected by the Holy Office and issued a severe limitation to Padre Pio’s duties:

“His person must not be the object of attention or curiosity,” the cardinal ordered. “He must not display the so-called stigmata, nor speak of them or allow them to be kissed.” And there was more. The Capuchin friar was henceforth to celebrate only the early morning mass and only in the chapel where lay visitors were barred entry. He was to break off all relations, ‘including correspondence,’ with Father Benedetto of San Marco in Lamis. He had to make clear ‘both to his brothers and to outsiders,’ expressing himself ‘both in words and in deeds,’ his ‘firm wish to be left in peace to await his own sanctification’” (114-115).

As a result of these measures, from 1922-1933 Padre Pio had limited contact with outsiders, though the energy and commitment that Padre Pio had generated did not fully wane. Skirmishes in public and in the media occurred during this time, as the Vatican in 1923 released the findings of its report from Bishop Rossi, attesting to the fact that “there was no proof of any supernatural involvement” (121) in the purported miracles and in the presence of the stigmata. There was a confrontation in San Giovanni Rotondo after the release of the report, whereby local townspeople prevented Vatican and police authorities from transferring Padre Pio to a different location (121-129). A disputation between the report of Dr. Festa published in 1925, who was sympathetic to the potential supernatural origin of Padre Pio’s wounds and criticized Father Gemelli’s psychological analysis that was published in 1924, and the devastating response approximately one year later from
Father Gemelli, who had become rector of the first Catholic university in Italy, calling Padre Pio a “psychopath” whose “self-destructive compulsion would disappear only when he was removed from the ‘suggestive atmosphere’ of San Giovanni, an atmosphere of which he was both ‘cause and effect’”(141). In 1931, even more repressive measures were handed down by the Vatican in response to media support in favor of Padre Pio and growth of devotion to him in San Giovanni Rotondo, whereby Pope Pius XI ordered that Padre Pio be “relieved of almost all his faculties as a priest” (176), where he could no longer hear confession, teach seminary students, or involve himself in the spiritual guidance of others.

Despite local protest from community and political leaders in San Giovanni, the Vatican did not change its position until 1933, when there was a transition in key leadership positions in the regional diocese and at the Vatican to those who were sympathetic to Padre Pio, including Raffaele Carlo Rossi, who was now a Cardinal. In the same year that Gemma Galgani was beatified (1933), the restrictions on Padre Pio began to be lifted, as the new Archbishop, Cesareo of Manfredonia, viewed Padre Pio as a “pastoral resource for the diocese rather than a problem” (182). Due to these changes in Church leadership, Padre Pio was once again able to publicly celebrate Mass, give confession, and offer counsel to those who were under his spiritual direction. As his open wounds had continued to bleed now for 15 straight years, weakening the cause of detractors who thought the stigmata to be fraudulent, public interest and devotion was able to grow as increased attention came to San Giovanni Rotondo and the stigmatized friar in the years after the restrictions on him ceased.
Dilemma 2: A Grand Hospital in a Small Town

In his newfound freedom, Padre Pio was visited by famous Italians, royalty, and high-level Church officials, while devotion to Padre Pio became normalized into the culture of Italy. As his fame grew and Italy became enmeshed in World War II, letters for intercession and support from the faithful also grew precipitously: “Until 1939, an average of about nine thousand letters addressed to Padre Pio arrived at Santa Maria della Grazie each year. In 1940, the number rose to twelve thousand; in 1942, it stood at fifteen thousand, and by 1945, the letters numbered more than twenty thousand” (202). While war raged in the country, including attacks on cities such as Foggia and Bari, there were no bombs that hit the Gargano peninsula or came close to San Giovanni Rotondo. For many years after the war, multiple British pilots testified that a “bearded friar with his arms open wide had appeared in front of their gun sights, darts of flame leaping from his fiery eyes, and persuaded them to return to their bases without dropping their murderous munitions on the Gargano” (213). As the Great War came to an end in 1945, with the liberation of the country from German occupation and the decline of Mussolini, the Catholic Church began to play a central and authoritative role in Italian society, and Padre Pio’s notoriety, tales of his miraculous intercessions, and public power increased as well.

It is within this context that Padre Pio began to realize his dream of building a hospital to serve the residents of San Giovanni and the Gargano region. In 1925, Padre Pio had been instrumental in using money that had been generated by enthusiastic donors
to his cause to build a badly needed medical facility for the town, which had “two wards, fourteen beds, and a plaque giving Padre Pio full credit for the construction” (217).

Though, the hospital was damaged in an earthquake in 1938 and was not reparable. From then on, Padre Pio set his sights on raising funds to build a new hospital in the town, though his ambitions far outstripped that of the humble facility that had just been damaged.

There are two key figures that supported Padre Pio in his quest to build a state-of-the-art facility. The first is Emanuele Brunatto, a deeply questionable character who was an ardent follower of Padre Pio from the 1920s onward. Luzzatto spends a significant portion of his book detailing never before told stories of Brunatto’s personal history and connectivity with Padre Pio. At the outset of introducing the reader to Brunatto, Luzzatto calls him a “chronic liar, a ruthless extortionist, and an incorrigible double-dealer” (148).

Author of arguably the most important early biography of Padre Pio in the 1920s, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, which would become the basis for all future hagiographies of the friar, Brunatto already had a history of being a criminal when he managed to become accredited as a journalist to access Padre Pio and write the book. Published in 1926, the book didn’t just tell the story of Padre Pio’s early life and stigmata, but was candid in making negative assertions about the Vatican and papal power. Calling the plan to transfer Padre Pio away from San Giovanni “‘systematic repression’, an ‘infernal plot’ to ‘obstruct his mission’”, Brunatto characterizes Pope Pius XI as the “Antichrist occupying St. Peter’s” (159). The book provided an even wider admonishment to the clergy: “According to Brunatto, Padre Pio saw the Church as incapable of rightly preaching the
word of Christ, and had told his closest followers, both lay and clerical: “I do think, yes, that a terrible punishment awaits us priests, a grave punishment” (160).

While the Church banned the book, and sought to obtain and destroy all copies, Brunatto successfully masqueraded a year earlier in 1925, under a false identity as a respected professional from San Giovanni, to gain an audience with Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, then the Vatican secretary of state, to enlist his help in supporting the cause of Padre Pio by helping him write a memo to the Holy Office attesting to the authenticity of Padre Pio’s stigmata, the good his presence has done for San Giovanni Rotondo, and the transformation that Padre Pio has enacted in Brunatto’s own life (161-162). He maintained his Vatican relationships with this fraudulent identity, being assigned as a lay investigator in 1927 to look into charges of the corruption of clergy connected to the San Giovanni Rotondo region. Brunatto used this opportunity to gather significant evidence of the misdeeds and scandals of the regional clergy, evidence which he threatened to publish and used to blackmail the Church hierarchy for decades to further the cause of Padre Pio (162).

Armed with this information, as well as the clandestine network of Padre Pio supporters he was able to mobilize and connect with the Vatican and Fascist hierarchies, Brunatto was a key figure behind the scenes in both fanning the flames that led to the severe limitations placed on Padre Pio in 1931 and assisting in the swift reversal in 1933 of those limitations when Church leadership responsible for the San Giovanni Rotondo region changed hands. In the 1930s, Brunatto was living in Paris, fronting a fraudulent
shareholding company which sold patents for diesel locomotives that was intended to raise funds for the cause of Padre Pio, while also serving as a spy for the Fascists in Italy. As war broke out in Europe, Brunatto moved on from the shareholding company business, successfully navigating Nazi-occupied Paris to create a lucrative opportunity on the black market, acquiring and selling food, drink, and desired commodities for German troops stationed in the city (205). The success that Brunatto had in the first year of trading on the black market between 1940 and 1941 led to an investigation and conviction for fraud by the German authorities for profiteering for which Brunatto was reprieved and did not serve his three-month jail sentence, allowed him to make a significant contribution in June 1941 to the efforts that Padre Pio desired in San Giovanni. Under the name of the Committee for the Construction of the Hospital of San Giovanni Rotondo, Brunatto deposited in the bank a sum of 3.5 million francs, “at a time when the average French citizen stood at about one thousand francs”, to serve as the foundation for building the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, the House for the Relief of Suffering (204).

After the war, Brunatto was a fugitive from justice in France for being a collaborationist. Hiding under pseudonymous names, Brunatto was condemned to death in absentia in 1948, which was later reduced to five years in prison in 1951 and eventually annulled by the Court of Cassation (229-230). He mysteriously passed away in 1965, never having actually published the scandals about Church officials that he always threatened. Taking the measure of Brunatto’s activities from the 1920s to the 1940s, whatever one may think of his character and his criminal behavior, Luzzatto is
right to state: “Without Brunatto’s hard work, the Padre Pio cult might never have overcome the obstacles in its way and blossomed into its astonishing postwar prosperity” (148). Though, when considering the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, there is a second important figure in the story, Barbara Ward. While ground was broken and building began in 1947 based on the funds from Brunatto and countless people who contributed smaller donations, the project for the massive hospital could only have been completed with the support of Barbara Ward. The foreign editor for the Economist, Ward visited Padre Pio in the fall of 1947 and was “enchanted” (219) by him. Ward’s fiancé, Robert Jackson, was then the deputy chief of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which was in charge of assigning and distributing funds for postwar relief in Europe.

Prioritizing medical care in the war-ravaged nations, the UNRRA worked with the Christian Democrats who were elected into power in 1945, as well as Vatican officials to determine which projects would merit funding in postwar Italy. These efforts pre-dated the Marshall Plan, which was not put into effect until 1948. The criteria established by the UNRRA called for supporting “structural interventions, not for financing of individual local efforts” (222), and it did not seem that Padre Pio’s hospital would merit support under this plan. Lodovico Montini, a Christian Democrat leader, lobbied to be the representative of the Italian delegation. Lodovico Montini’s brother, Giovanni Battista Montini, who was then the Vatican deputy secretary of state and would later become Pope Paul VI, served with Lodovico as the main Italian representatives to work with the UNRRA, represented by Robert Jackson. By late 1947, the UNRRA had been
replaced by the American agency, Aid from the USA (AUSA), but the decision-making players were still the same.

In March 1948, the Montini delegation put forward many public health funding requests to AUSA, but their top request was for the hospital at San Giovanni. While San Giovanni had requested 252 million lire, the Montini delegation recommended 100 million lire to be dedicated to the project for the “Creation of a hospital to be named after Fiorello La Guardia” (224). Fiorello La Guardia, the former mayor of New York City who was beloved in Italy for leading a radio show during the war which was broadcast every Sunday in Italian, was thought of as a “secular saint” who was the “living incarnation of miraculous, invincible America” (225). Following the war, between 1946 and 1947, La Guardia had served as the director general of UNRRA just prior to his death in 1947. In April 1948, just days before a contentious vote was to take place between the Christian Democrats and the Communists for control of the country, the Italian prime minister announced that the Italian government had allocated 250 million lire from the UNRRA Fund to build a hospital in San Giovanni Rotondo to be named after Fiorello La Guardia.

This funding, which represented about half the size of Brunatto’s donation, amounted to a significant contribution in comparison to other UNRRA public health projects in Italy, as the entire Red Cross received 130 million lire, and all of the hospitals in Italy combined received 1 billion lire, only four times that of Padre Pio’s hospital (226). While Padre Pio “blessed the plaque crediting UNRRA with financing the hospital
and officially naming it for Fiorello La Guardia…La Guardia’s name would fleetingly appear on the façade of the building as it went up. But it would disappear as the work continued, to be replaced by the words that still adorn the hospital today: “Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza” (228)18.

As the funds to complete the “genuine cathedral of medicine” (217) had been secured, the building process took nine years, from 1947-1956. When the building was inaugurated in May 1956 with 20,000 people in attendance, the achievement was astonishing: a massive marble structure with 100 hospital beds, four operating rooms, separate wards for all of the major medical specialties, equipped with the latest medical technology that would significantly improve the health and well-being of the residents of rural San Giovanni Rotondo and the surrounding population. Luzzatto opines further on the achievement that the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza represents:

“…the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza was a first in Italian (and European) religious life because its founder was, after all, a miracle healer. Traditionally, the healer-saint had established his credentials in opposition to the knowledge of medical doctors, who were seen as arrogant, expensive, and useless. Since the nineteenth century, the effort to bridge the gap between scientific explanations

18 C. Bernard Ruffin, a clergyman in the Lutheran Church practicing in the United States, has written what is considered to be the definitive English-language biography of Padre Pio from a faith-based perspective, entitled Padre Pio: The True Story. With the first edition published in 1982 and a revised and expanded edition published in 1991, his book parallels Luzzatto’s in that he used a combination of primary and secondary sources, including Padre Pio’s writings and letters, to communicate the difficulties and conflicts in Padre Pio’s life in what is a historically reverential portrait of the friar. It is informative to read this volume alongside Luzzatto’s. For example, Ruffin provides insight into Padre Pio’s perspective regarding the UNRRA funding, for which Padre Pio and his supporters had originally requested 400 million lire: “To Padre Pio’s immense rage and stupefaction, the Italian government passed on only two hundred fifty million lire to the Casa. The failure of the government to make the entirety of the grant available for “The Work” (as the project came to be called) was looked upon by Pio as an act of thievery. It is said that to the end of his life he never forgave the Italian bureaucracy. The UNRRA asked Pio to name his clinic “The Fiorello Henry LaGuardia Hospital” after its recently deceased director general. Although he agreed to erect a plaque in memory of the former New York mayor, he insisted that the institution be given the name he had selected” (Ruffin 283).
and miracle cures had come entirely from the medical side – as with the bureau des constatations at Lourdes, for example, where miracle cures were examined using modern symptomological and statistical techniques. With the Casa Sollievo, however, Padre Pio headed in the other direction, not from science toward miracles, but from miracles toward science” (257-258).

The founder of the hospital, the “miracle healer” Padre Pio, was also in the unusual position of being the owner/director of the hospital. While he had been allowed to oversee the fundraising and the finances for the building of the hospital, in 1957 the Societa Casa Sollievo, which runs the hospital, was split from the financial corporation (the Vatican bank) which legally owns the hospital. The Vatican released Padre Pio from his vow of poverty in leading the Societa Casa Sollievo, and he distributed 199,999 shares out of 200,000 (one symbolic share was held by the Vatican bank) to those who had a stake in the hospital (259).

**Dilemma 3: Managing Celebrity and a Devotional Movement**

In considering the two dilemmas pertaining to Padre Pio that have been discussed – the problem of how the Church was to handle a stigmatized priest and the process of allowing a friar with a strict vow of poverty to become involved in fundraising in order to build a monumental hospital – one can recognize that the celebrity status that increased over time for Padre Pio and the related and growing number of people devoted to him, or at least curious about him and the stories of his stigmata, the fragrant smell of flowers

---

19 See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, for a discussion of how values of love and charity in caring for the sick during epidemics in the Roman world created a competitive advantage for the survival of the Christian movement (Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity*. HarperOne, 1996). The Christian ethic of care led to the proliferation of hospitals in the medieval world, an important precursor to the emergence of modern hospitals based on medical science. This-worldly, Christian notions of “healing” are ultimately based on virtues of love and charity, not miracles, which are not opposed to medical science.
coming from his body, and the tales of his miraculous interventions, mind- and heart-
reading, and bi-locations, played an intertwined and mutually re-enforcing role in
growing a movement. Until the outbreak of World War II, the Padre Pio movement was
largely safeguarded and promulgated by networks of those who were at odds with the
Church authorities and Vatican hierarchy, whether they be sympathizers within the
Church or lay followers, skeptically regarding the actions that had been taken to stifle
Padre Pio. While the Capuchins in San Giovanni Rotondo were capitalizing on the
situation to bring attention and increase the wealth of the Order and the town, the
devotional movement sparked by Padre Pio was likewise viewed skeptically by the
Church as they sought to quell popular activity that could undermine Church authority.
With the outcome of World War II, which brought the rise and support of Pope Pius XII,
the demise of Fascism, and the ascendancy of the Catholic Church and the Christian
Democrats in Italy, Padre Pio’s movement was free to grow in line with the cultural
currents of the day – “circumstances combined to make the Padre Pio cult accessible,
visible, and fully legitimate” (235). From 1948, with the victory of the Christian
Democrats over the Communists and the funds secured to complete the Casa, to 1958,
which saw the passing of Pope Pius XII, Luzzatto calls these years “Padre Pio’s golden
age as a living saint” (234).

By the early 1950s, with improved road networks following the Marshall Plan and
postwar reconstruction, it was reported that more than 100,000 pilgrims a years were
visiting San Giovanni Rotondo, with many sleeping outdoors near the friary either
because there were no hotel rooms available in the small town or because they wanted to
rise early to get a seat to see Padre Pio celebrate Mass (238). As long lines became routine for pilgrims waiting for Padre Pio to hear their confession, the Capuchins introduced a “booking system” so that “only those with a numbered ticket” would be admitted to the confessional (268). Though, the system was administered by the “spiritual daughters” who were close to Padre Pio, and soon they were “changing the numbered tickets, manipulating lists of penitents, and dictating to Padre Pio exactly when he should occupy his post in the confessional” (269). The number of hagiographical books written about Padre Pio after 1948 also increased precipitously. Eight of these were banned by the Holy Office – in accordance with canon law, the Church needed to ban these eight because they told of “new apparitions, revelations, visions, prophecies, miracles, etc.” which were not reviewed and approved by the Church in advance (250). The Holy Office was careful not to communicate that these actions meant to criticize Padre Pio, noting that “Padre Pio himself has said several times that there are things written and said about him that are wonderful, but not true” (ibid.).

Publications on Padre Pio didn’t just increase amongst the faithful, but he became a popular figure in secular photojournalism, where images of the friar with the stigmata became ubiquitous. According to Luzzatto, “historians of photography have recently suggested that Padre Pio was the leading motif in postwar Italy’s iconographic imagination, rivaled only by the beauty queen Miss Italia” (241). In a hagiography, I Saw Padre Pio, published during this time, the author Don Lingua writes, “everyone and everything is by now photographed…It’s the illness of our times, in a way; we’re so distracted that something tangible is needed to collect our thoughts. In the midst of so
many shameless images, do we not want people to lay their eyes on one who does not tempt, but redeems and exalts” (240)? Referring to Roland Barthes’s semiological work on iconography, Luzzatto notes “it was that marriage between stigmata and miracles that explained Padre Pio’s huge popularity”, a popularity that resonates with Barthes’s notion that “photography has something to do with resurrection” (241). Luzzatto takes his analysis a bit further, as he seeks to further explain the pervasiveness of Padre Pio as an icon:

“As the medievalists have shown us, the notions a society develops about its miracles tell us many things about how individuals relate to the sacred and about a community’s horizon of expectations. In the case of Padre Pio, the media’s logorrhea about his miracles was part of a more general phenomenon. On the eve of that great transformation that would be known to Italians as the miracolo economico – their “economic miracle”, when Italy ceased being an agricultural nation and became an industrial one – publicizing Padre Pio’s miracles was a way of clutching on to a world that was disappearing” (245).

While Luzzatto’s claim that the popularity of Padre Pio and tales of his miracles indicate “clutching on to a world that was disappearing” is debatable, one could instead think of the growth of Padre Pio’s image as an icon of miracle-working being consonant with the miraculous optimism of a time when Italy could have been reeling in debt and poverty after the carnage of World War II, instead pushing forward and redeemed by the grace of God via Padre Pio. While that interpretation may contrast with the growing secularization of Italian society for the remainder of the twentieth century through today amidst the ubiquity of Padre Pio’s devout and pious image, it is not clear that the persistence of Padre Pio’s iconography as a miracle-working stigmatic functions as a
backward- or forward-looking metaphor – it is likely to be both – and the secular and religious worlds of Italy alike continue to appropriate him as a sign of memory and hope.\textsuperscript{20}

Despite the grand success of the Casa, the celebrity of Padre Pio, and the mutually beneficial forces operating between the Vatican and San Giovanni, the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958 signaled a renewed effort to question the authenticity of Padre Pio’s piety and the problematic role of devotees close to the friar. Some of Padre Pio’s adversaries placed listening devices in his cell, and potentially in his confessional, to spy on him to determine whether there was inappropriate behavior between Padre Pio and any of his “spiritual daughters” (269). When Monsignor Pietro Parente, the assessor at the Holy Office, took possession of the tapes, which indicated potential carnal relations between the 73-year-old friar and one of his spiritual daughters, he brought them to the attention of Pope John XXIII in June 1960. While the Pope did not listen to the tapes, he also did not question Monsignor Parente’s conviction as to what they implied, as the Pope’s diaries indicate that he had already been tracking the names of particularly questionable “spiritual daughters”. As someone who had held deep reservations for decades about Padre Pio, John XXIII was appalled by the “terrible calamity of souls” that this represented, but he was otherwise “indifferent” and “tranquil” upon consideration of the situation. He recorded the following note in his diary on June 25, 1960, the day he

\textsuperscript{20} It would seem that Luzzatto is falling prey to the secularization thesis. If we take Daniele Hervieu-Leger’s diagnosis of religious traditions in \textit{Religion as a Chain of Memory}, we could view the dynamics of post-World War II Italy around Padre Pio – including up to the current day – as a process of appropriating religious signs in a de-institutionalized context to create a new chain of memory for the Italian people that has meaning (Hervieu-Leger, Daniele. \textit{Religion as a Chain of Memory}. Translated by Simon Lee, Rutgers UP, 2000).
learned about the tapes: “The reason for my spiritual tranquility, and it is a priceless privilege and grace, is that I feel personally pure of this contamination that for forty years has corroded hundreds of thousands of souls made foolish and deranged to an unheard-of-degree” (271).

Pope John XXIII ordered an apostolic visitation, undertaken by Monsignor Carlo Maccari, where he met with Padre Pio nine times, interviewed fellow friars, and closely investigated the routines at Santa Maria della Grazie over a month-long period in 1960 to discuss the specific concerns about the “spiritual daughters” and the broader role that they played in facilitating his activities in the friary. While Maccari’s writings about the episode indicate that there was a “barrier of reciprocal mistrust” between the two men, the report he generated from the visitation was, according to Luzzatto, “studiously impartial” (272-273). He interviewed the three main “spiritual daughters” in question - Cleonice Morcaldi, Tina Bellone, and Caterina Telfner - while a different spiritual daughter, Elvira Serritelli, had claimed that she had been Padre Pio’s mistress in the 1920s, while claiming that Cleonice Morcaldi had been his mistress since 1930 (274). The three women would routinely kiss Padre Pio on his chest and arms, and caress and squeeze him after Mass for all to see. Ultimately, Monsignor Maccari “suspended judgment” about whether Padre Pio really had carnal relations with his “spiritual daughters”, but he focused his attention on the extensive nature of the phenomenon that had grown around Padre Pio:

“The fanaticism” went far beyond little San Giovanni, he wrote, radiating out wherever the Capuchin’s spiritual daughters resided, and fermenting “idolatry and
perhaps even heresy”. Spread by the printed pamphlets the pilgrims carried, the holy cards with photos of the “first stigmatic priest”, the large-type headlines of the photo magazines, even by records that reproduced “the true voice of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina”, propaganda for the Gargano cult had reached the proportions of an “industry” advertising a product – miracles – by means of “religious conceptions that oscillate between superstition and magic”” (275).

While noting Padre Pio’s indifference\textsuperscript{21} to the “mastodontic…machine” (ibid.) of propaganda surrounding the friar and incredulous to understand how this man could have created such a movement, Monsignor Maccari made a series of recommendations – replacing some of the other friars at Santa Maria della Grazie, that a new “legal statute be drawn up for the Casa Sollievo to separate more clearly the spiritual ‘healing’ carried out by the Capuchins from the medical role of the doctors”, and exercising greater control over when Padre Pio could celebrate Mass and publications about Padre Pio using the imprimatur of the diocese, all of which were applied by the Holy Office by the end of

\textsuperscript{21} Bernard Ruffin tells a more complex story, granting insight into the emotions and perspectives of Padre Pio in responding to the fanaticism of those who were called \textit{Le Pie Donne} (The Holy Women), who “literally fought one another for the best spots during Padre Pio’s Mass and for the opportunity to make their confessions to him at the most convenient times, frequently directing their ire, through means of fingernails, hairpins, and even knives, towards ‘outsiders’ who dared to take up the time of ‘their’ Padre Pio” (Ruffin 239). Here is a lengthy and illustrative recounting of how Padre Pio handled certain events: “Sometimes Padre Pio reacted in good humor. Once, when a woman grabbed his arm and refused to release it, he said, “All right, take it! You can have it! But let me go!” Another time, when a group of adoring nuns screamed, “Padre, give us a relic!” he shouted back, “Sisters, go back to your convent and make your own relics!” On other occasions, he was not so accommodating. Bill Carrigan recalled an instance when a woman literally flung herself into Padre Pio’s path and lay, screaming and moaning, clutching his habit. Seemingly furious, Pio bellowed, “Get up from there!” Frightened, the groupie withdrew. Once in the sacristy, Pio insisted that he was not really angry, but that “you’ve got to be sharp with these people! It’s the only thing they understand”. Joe Peterson recalled that, when the women grabbed at him, he often shouted, “\textit{Ah, via, via!}” (“Oh get away, get away!”) and took his cord and twirled it menacingly at them. Sometimes he roared, “This is paganism! This is fanaticism!” Leo Fanning declared, “If he lost his temper, I would not blame him for one minute. If you could have been there and seen how these people would act, the pushing and the shoving, how they’d try to poke him with their hands…” Pio’s reactions were sometimes so extreme as to provoke a reprimand from his superior. Yet he justified his outbursts, insisting, “If we do not behave so, the people will eat us…They squeeze my hand in a vise, they pull my arms, they press me on every side. I feel lost. I am forced to be rude. I’m sorry, but if I don’t act this way, they’ll kill me”. Many times he remarked, “There should be a big fence around this area with the sign, ‘Lunatic Asylum’” (293).
1960 (277). John XXIII, upon hearing the results of the apostolic visit from Monsignor Maccari, recorded his view of Padre Pio as a “straw idol” (278).

As a result of the new sanctions placed on Padre Pio, the popular press took on his cause, portraying him as the “lonely hero battling the mighty Church of John XXIII” (281). While the changes were implemented at San Giovanni, the restrictions did not last nearly as long on Padre Pio as they did from the decade of the early 1920s to early 1930s. Instead, with the passing of John XXIII in the early stages of the Vatican II proceedings in 1963, which sought to modernize the Church and reduce local forms of popular piety, the installation of Pope Paul VI, who had been instrumental years before in securing the funds for the Casa through the UNRRA, brought positive changes for Padre Pio in the last years of his life. By 1964, the Holy Office announced that Padre Pio could return to his priestly activities “in full liberty” (283). By 1965, Padre Pio’s health began to decline, and by 1968 the wounds of his stigmata began to disappear, whereby the father guardian of Santa Maria della Grazie testified that the wounds “were completely healed and showed no scars” (284). On September 23, 1968, days after he had celebrated a Mass to honor the 50th anniversary of the appearance of the stigmata, Padre Pio passed away.

With his passing, one might think that the story of Padre Pio’s contentious history within the Church would have come to a relative close, or would not have been opened up for scrutiny in the years shortly thereafter. Instead, Pope John Paul II, who had visited Padre Pio in the late 1940s and had filed an appeal with a group of other cardinals in the
1970s prior to his election as Pope when the Holy Office blocked the Church from pursuing canonization for Padre Pio, announced in 1982 that the canonization process would begin to look into his candidacy. On May 2, 1999, Pope John Paul II celebrated the beatification of Padre Pio with more than a million people in St. Peter’s Square. Rather than avoiding the stigmata, as Pope Gregory IX had done with Francis of Assisi many years earlier and Pope Pius XI had also done with the beatification of Gemma Galgani in 1933, John Paul II explicitly mentioned it. “Those who went to San Giovanni Rotondo” stated Pope John Paul II, “to hear his mass, to ask his advice, or to make confession to him could detect in him the living image of a suffering, risen Christ…Marked by the ‘stigmata’”, Padre Pio’s body “displayed the intimate link between death and resurrection that composes the mystery of Christ’s return…he had offered an “exact replica of the stigmata of our Lord…he was bread broken for men hungry for God the Father’s pardon” (288-289).

As signaled by the more than one million people who flocked to St. Peter’s Square in 1999, the popularity of Padre Pio has not only continued since his death, but has grown enormously, especially in Italy. As Peter Jan Margry notes in his article, “Merchandising and Sanctity: The Invasive Cult of Padre Pio”, the increase of devotion to Padre Pio in Italy has “diminished, overaken, or even entirely replaced older local devotions” (Margry 89). Padre Pio has not only become a national saint within Italy, but since his canonization, he is “sacrosanct”, “unassailable” and “no longer open to
discussion”, as “very few people publicly raise questions about him” (92). According to Margry, “the majority of Italians have something related to Pio either in their home or carried on their person”, and prints or photos of Padre Pio in private and semi-public spaces such as shops and restaurants are ubiquitous (104). Padre Pio’s image is routinely placed “next to a saint’s image or painting or in a chapel”, crowding into icons of Mary or other saintly figures (ibid.). According to opinion polls, “in 2001, 53 percent of Italians said that they would turn their faith first to Padre Pio in a dire circumstance”, and a “2006 poll suggested that more Italians pray to Padre Pio than to any other figure, including the Virgin Mary and Jesus” (Bergstresser 203). Margry sees these dynamics as evidence that many in Italy grant Padre Pio their “unconditional personal trust, which they will not or cannot grant the official Church” (Margry 107).

If Padre Pio has now become part of everyday religious practice in Italian culture at a time when weekly Mass attendance and congregational participation is in decline, the energetic nerve center for Padre Pio has remained in San Giovanni. The movement of Padre Pio is bolstered by the mass distribution of the official monthly magazine Voce di Padre Pio, published in six international languages, with a print run of 100,000 copies in Italian and a total distribution of 200,000 copies in English, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish editions (102). In addition, pilgrims have continued to flock to San Giovanni Rotondo, where approximately 2.5 million pilgrims arrive each year, strongly boosted by the official canonization of Saint Pio (101). To better understand the purposes of those who attend the shrine, Margry cites a 1985 study by Giuseppe

---

22 Hence, the controversial reactions to Sergio Luzzatto’s book on Padre Pio.
Scarvaglieri, whereby Scarvaglieri surveyed pilgrims to find out their main motives for traveling to San Giovanni to venerate the shrine. He identified the following six motives, denoted by percentages of people who hold this as their primary motive (93-94):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Motive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td>Pio as an ‘imitator of Christ’, an example of Christian life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>24</strong></td>
<td>The stigmata in particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td>Pio’s compassion, caritas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td>His miraculous powers, Pio as healer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>Pio as confessor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>Pio as a man of mystery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, more than 90% of the motivation for pilgrims to attend the shrine (as of 1985) was connected in some way to Padre Pio as an exemplar of Christ (both in life and in his stigmata) and his compassion for and miraculous healing of the faithful. Each of these motives echoes with the theme of suffering, which comports well with Padre Pio’s controversial life and person, as well as with the difficulties that people bring to him for his intercession. Christopher McKevitt highlights the theme of suffering in Padre Pio’s life – on a physical (health ailments), mystical (stigmata), and moral (persecution by the
Church) level – and how his total experience with suffering allows Pio to be “seen to understand the sufferings of any petitioner who sought his assistance. More importantly, through suffering he was empowered to heal pain” (McKevitt, “To Suffer” 59).

McKevitt goes on to distinguish two models for the alleviation of suffering – active and passive – that Padre Pio embodies:

> “Active, he determines to find practical solutions to people’s problems. Suffering can be an evil in the world and as such it is to be alleviated, transformed into wellbeing and physical regeneration. Of course, this latter endeavor can never be completely successful. Hence the appeal of Pio the stigmatist. Passive, he accepts mystical pain and moral suffering in the form of mistrust and calumny. This acceptance is seen to be transformative of spirit, productive of grace on behalf of others, eschatological in its implications” (65-66).

Given the close connection with Padre Pio’s experience of suffering and the multiple ways in which he can address and embody it for the faithful, it is not surprising then that devotees desire to “achieve maximum physical contact with him” and that the “statues of Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo are touched and kissed at length” (Margry 94).

While San Giovanni continues to be a popular pilgrimage site for those who are drawn to Padre Pio, the increase of pilgrims during the canonization process led the Capuchins to approach the renowned architect Renzo Piano to build a large, modern and innovative new church building to honor Padre Pio, to serve as a new home for his bodily remains, and to have a large, open air plaza to contain gatherings for special events. Inaugurated in 2004, the new church is a short walk from the chapel and friary from where Padre Pio lived and practiced his mission, but it may feel like miles away from the folk devotion to the saint with its haute style and lack of connection to where Padre Pio
celebrated Mass. Now on a par with Marian shrines such as Lourdes in France and Fatima in Portugal, pilgrims to San Giovanni come to tour the museum dedicated to Padre Pio in the friary, to sit in the same chapel pews where Padre Pio could be seen giving Mass, to view the cell where he slept and suffered, to leave written prayers and intentions for Padre Pio’s intercession, and to take in the meditative spaces and ornate crypt housing Pio’s tomb in the new church. The Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza can be admired by pilgrims from the outside, as its imposing edifice and modern additions have made the hospital a center of medical research, considered to be one the best in southern Italy and in the entire country. For those who visit the city, they enter a world that is a tourist attraction, with numerous hotels, restaurants, and highly commercialized shops to purchase devotional objects with images of Padre Pio, as well as a wealthy town in the rural mountains of southern Italy built on the back of the twin economic engines of tourism and healthcare. Within Italy and around the world, much of the pilgrimage activity is driven by Padre Pio’s popularity within Italy, Catholic media that highlight Padre Pio in other countries, the publications from San Giovanni and the countless hagiographies that continue to be produced to honor Saint Pio, and the Padre Pio Prayer

---

23 For an ethnographic analysis of the experience of pilgrims in San Giovanni Rotondo, including differences in experiencing the presence of Padre Pio in the new church relative to the friary, see Mesaritou, Evgenia. “‘He is among us, get it into your head, he is alive and always here’: saintly presence at the pilgrimage centre of Padre Pio and the importance of ‘being there’.” Culture and Religion, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 87–109.

24 The SCIMAGO World Report 2012 included the Casa Sollievo in its world list, ranking it 9th in Italy for its scientific output of high quality, peer-reviewed publications. Serving approximately 57,000 patients per year and employing 2,500 people across 9 medical departments and 40 clinical units, the hospital specializes in research dedicated to genetic diseases, innovative therapies, and regenerative medicine. For more information in English, see http://www.operapadrepio.it/en/.

25 McKevitt has noted how, for the local residents of San Giovanni, the place has been “appropriated by various kinds of outsiders” (McKevitt, “San Giovanni” 91), from the employees of the hospital, to the endless flow of pilgrims, to the fanatical devotees who took up residence in the town during the life of Padre Pio and continue to play a presence, thought of by the locals as “crazy” (93).
Group movement, whose headquarters are stationed on the grounds of the hospital in a separate building.

The Story of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups

Throughout Sergio Luzzatto’s text, the subject of the prayer groups arises only on occasion. Luzzatto discusses the work of Roberto De Monticelli, a journalist for the Italian publication *Epoca* who covered the increased devotion to Padre Pio in the 1950s, as one of the first to notice the rise of prayer groups, which were often headed by “a person who claimed to be in contact with Padre Pio, hearing his voice and receiving counsel on various matters” (Luzzatto 246). Following the death of Pius XII and growing skepticism within the papacy of John XXIII toward Padre Pio, evidence of conflict within the Church regarding pilgrimages to San Giovanni and the growth of these groups can be seen in 1960 by Monsignor Albino Luciani, Bishop of Vittorio Veneto, who would later become Pope John Paul I for thirty-three days in 1978 and published a warning to Catholics in a diocesan bulletin about the dangers of “unconscious Marxism and conscious secularism” and, separately, criticized the devotional movement dedicated to Padre Pio:

“The faithful need solid bread (the mass, catechism, the Holy Sacraments) to nourish them, not chocolates, pastries, and sweetmeats that fill them up and dupe them. Among such indigestible sweetmeats, the Bishop notes, are pilgrimages to P. Pio on organized bus tours. Although himself a holy man, P. Pio has some followers whose behavior borders on the ridiculous, on superstition. Priests are forbidden to participate in or lead “pilgrimages” to S. Giovanni Rotondo. As for “prayer groups”, the Bishop has not, when asked, permitted them to be formed. Should there be such a group in some parish, it may continue but with reserve, but
it would be better if it were allowed to wither away, and let no new ones be created” (267).

When the papacy transitioned to Paul VI and the official Vatican disposition toward Padre Pio was supportive for the remaining years of his life, the groups became officially recognized by the Church and played a key role in advancing the cause of Padre Pio’s canonization after his death.

While Padre Pio had informally gathered groups of his spiritual daughters for many years, the formal growth of prayer groups came in the wake of two developments. First, Pope Pius XII called for the formation of groups of Christians both during and in the aftermath of World War II, where he stated: “We need strong groups of adults and youth, who, keeping themselves closely united with Christ, gather at least once a month for the Bread of Life and encourage others to do the same” (February 17, 1942). Following the war, as recounted by Frank Rega in Padre Pio and America, Padre Pio’s response to Pope Pius XII in 1947 was, “Let’s do something about it. Let’s roll up our sleeves and be the first to respond to the appeal of our Roman Pontiff” (Rega 222). Once Padre Pio took the initiative and encouraged his devotees to form such groups, they informally sprang up in parishes all over Italy.

Second, to support the construction of the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, a biweekly bulletin by the same name began to be published, which included information about gatherings of devotees in different locations. In 1950, the designation “Prayer Groups” was utilized in the bulletin for the first time by Dr. Guglielmo Sanguinetti, a
physician close to Padre Pio who was a key figure in leading the construction of the Casa and the early emergence of the groups prior to his death in 1954 via heart attack. Dr. Sanguinetti codified the first Statute of the Prayer Groups in 1951 at the direction of Padre Pio and brought together the intertwined missions of the Casa and the Prayer Groups: “It was the ever present impetus of the Casa to promote, develop, and organize the Prayer Groups as the other face of the relief of suffering, in a Christian sense. The basis of Christian action must be prayer, the soul of everything” (Leone 49). According to C. Bernard Ruffin, “Sanguinetti functioned as Pio’s right arm in coordinating the establishment of formal groups in twenty-three Italian cities, in which the faithful met monthly, with the consent of the local bishop and under the guidance of a priest, to pray for the pope, for Padre Pio’s ministries, for world peace, and for their own intentions” (Ruffin 284).

At the inauguration for the Casa on May 5, 1956, in which the Prayer Groups played a role in preparing the celebration, Padre Pio stated in his speech: “A new army formed through sacrifice and love is about to rise up to the glory of God, and to comfort sick souls and bodies…A place of prayer and science where human beings can be united in Christ Crucified, as a single flock with a single shepherd” (Leone 65). On the one year anniversary of the successful hospital in 1957, Padre Pio announced, as part of the expansion plans for the Casa, that the “temple of prayer and science” will include a “common house of the Prayer Groups” to serve as an international place to organize the prayer group movement (84). In 1959, the first National Meeting of the Prayer Groups was held in Catania, Italy, with more than 1500 people in attendance (117). As the
groups continued to grow and the Casa continued to succeed, Padre Pio spoke directly to them at the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the hospital in May 1966:

“Infinite thanks to the Lord and to the Blessed Virgin, and blessed be those that in any way cooperated with the Work. But my mind and paternal thought goes in a special way to the Prayer Groups, now spread all over the world and here today for the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Casa, and for their second International Convention. They, together with the “Casa del Sollievo” are the advanced positions of this citadel of charity, alive with faith, centres of love, and in which Christ himself is present every time they meet to pray and celebrate the Eucharistic Agape, under the auspices of their Pastors and Spiritual Directors. It is prayer, this united force and strength of all good people, which moves the world which renews consciences, which sustains the Casa and which comforts the suffering, which heals the sick, which sanctifies work, which elevates medical assistance, which gives moral strength and Christian resignation to human suffering, and which spreads the smile and benediction of God on every languor and weakness. Pray a lot, my children, pray always, without ever getting tired of it, because it is to prayer that I entrust this Work, which God has wished and which will continue to progress and prosper thanks to the help of Divine Providence and the charitable and spiritual contribution of all those who pray” (95).

In the days just prior to Padre Pio’s passing in 1968, another International Convention of Prayer Groups was held as part of the 50th anniversary festivities to honor the emergence of Padre Pio’s stigmata. By this time, the movement had grown to more than 700 groups, with 68,000 members in 15 countries (Rega 224).

In the wake of Padre Pio’s death, the movement of prayer groups continued to grow, with yearly regional and national conventions happening in various parts of Italy, France, and Switzerland throughout the 1970s, and beginning in Ireland and the USA in the 1980s (Leone 118, 125). For groups forming in other parts of the world, especially those far from the Italian geographical context, “the sensationalized aspects of his [Padre
Pio’s] biography became its primary unifying factor” (Di Giovine 482). In September 1975 in Rome, at the 5th International Convention of Prayer Groups, there were 20,000 people gathered for Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica and 100,000 people in St. Peter’s Square. This was the first time that Padre Pio’s name and recognition of the Prayer Groups had been uttered in public by the Pope:

“All attention was turned towards the loudspeakers despite the inevitable buzzing of the crowd and then, the words we were waiting for ‘Prayer Groups from the Home for the Relief of Suffering of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina’. These words were pronounced for the first time by the Pope in a public audience, in front of more than one hundred thousand people including forty or so bishops from all over the world and in front of many dioceses, organisations, and Catholic movements….It is a consecration worth more than any written document, which seals years of work, suffering and waiting. Not only for the groups, but also for Padre Pio, because it is clear that his name, pronounced here this evening by the reigning Pope, sounds like a reveille” (Leone 127).

The groups would go on to greater recognition once Karol Wojtyla was elevated to Pope John Paul II in 1978, as he spoke at the 6th International Convention in Rome in 1980, and the Pope held a special audience with them in October 1983 on the 15th anniversary of Padre Pio’s death, the year that the canonization process began for the stigmatic friar. There were 20,000 in attendance, representing now more than 2,000 groups. Pope John Paul II spoke directly to them:

“What characterizes your cooperation is your knowledge that the first indispensable means for the expansion of the kingdom of God in the minds and souls, is continuous, humble and devoted to prayer. The Christian should ‘pray always, without ever tiring of it’ ….In imitation of the primitive Christian community of Jerusalem, which was assiduous in its prayer as if of one heart, you should make prayer the basis of Christian life; prayer of adoration, prayer of praise, prayer of entreaty, as your statutes incisively affirm, “with the Church, for the Church, in the Church”. The prayer of the individual becomes communitary,
it is expressed in the conscious and active participation in the liturgy, it finds its strength in the sacraments... This spirit of communion and obedience does not signify a lessening of the Christian intellect. In the realms of faith, God Himself has chosen the instruments and the human channels to conserve, transmit, and interpret the Truth which He Himself has chosen to reveal to men. You that belong to the “Prayer Groups”, may you always be exemplary in this spirit of full and unconditional adhesion to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, guided by the Pope and the Bishops, as your Founder always stated. Prayer does not isolate from other men and from their concrete problems. The Christian, when he looks to the heavenly Father, cannot but be in intimate and deep union with his brothers. Thus, from the prayer of adoration to God, which almost touches our structural precariousness, unleashes the need for fraternal charity, and pushes one to open oneself to others, and to find all the adequate instruments and ways for both their spiritual and physical good. Charity towards God finds its concrete realization in real and active charity in favour of the suffering and the needy. This is your characteristic, which has its tangible expression in the “Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza”, spiritual centre and seat of the international association of Prayer Groups.” (142, 145).

In this context, one can clearly see that Pope John Paul II is valorizing the special role of coming together in prayer for the Christian life, which creates “intimate and deep union with his brothers” that “unleashes the need for fraternal charity” and “does not signify a lessening of the Christian intellect”, but he is also stressing the importance of loyalty of the groups to the Church, “full and unconditional adhesion to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, guided by the Pope and the Bishops, as your Founder always stated”. While one can rightly see this as a message targeted to the particular predicament of the growing Padre Pio Prayer Group movement, the dynamic of encouraging traditional spiritual practices and popular piety, while emphasizing fidelity to the Church, is a hallmark of Pope John Paul II’s papacy of balancing the modernizing trajectory of the Church since Vatican II while promoting tradition. Part of his approach to this balancing act was his disposition toward creating more saints within the Church.
In that same year, 1983, the Pope changed the rules for canonization, whereby he reduced the waiting period for candidacy from fifty years after the death of a potential saint to five, and the number of miracles needed to confirm after one’s death for the beautification and canonization processes from two to one for each stage26. Thus, Padre Pio was surely not alone in his ascendancy as a saint during the years of John Paul II’s papacy, but his movement continued to create unique challenges for the Church in Italy and around the world.

One of those challenges revolved around creating new Statutes for the groups that have the approval of the Vatican. Already in development and referenced in the papal quote above as of 1983, the new Statutes were formally approved in May 1986 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Casa and rolled out to all groups throughout the world to guide their formation and development. The Statutes27 contain 22 Articles and are guided by five principles:

“The Groups propose to follow the general principles of the Franciscan spirituality of Padre Pio – which includes:

A. Total and unconditional adherence to the teaching of the Catholic Church, guided by the Pope and the Bishops.
B. Obedience to the Pope and the Bishops whose representative, in each Group, is the Spiritual Director. This representative is a priest nominated by the Bishop.
C. Prayer with the Church, through the Church and in the Church. By this is meant an active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church as an essential means of intimate union with God.
D. A willingness to share in the sufferings of Christ, as an effective means of reparation, according to the teaching of St. Paul.

26 “During his [John Paul II] papacy, he named 482 saints and 1341 “blessed” (Vatican n.d.), which is more than in the past 500 years combined” (Bergstresser 198).
27 See Appendix
E. Generosity and self-sacrifice in undertaking works of charity, especially for the suffering and needy, as a practical demonstration of the members’ love of God”

Consistent with the theme of obedience to the Church, the Articles lay out the rules for the Groups, governing their structure, leadership, and bureaucratic control for all members, both clergy and laity. They cover issues related to connectivity with the International Association located in San Giovanni to the local regional diocese, including formal registration and reporting to the International Association, which is “subject to the Holy See” (Article 1). The Articles also dealt with how the Group Leader and Assistant Group Leader are to be elected for five-year terms, how they nominate a Secretary for a five-year term, and the task of a Spiritual Director - the “religious instruction and formation of the members” - which means to preside over the Group’s liturgical activities (e.g. – celebrating Mass and hearing confession), as well as to “organize Retreats, or courses of spiritual exercises and initiate other ways he may deem useful and suitable” (Article 12). The four individuals are “responsible for the administration of each Group” and they “regulate and organize works and initiatives to be undertaken by the Group” (Article 8).

The activities of the Group are also regulated, which includes a normal “monthly meeting” where a Mass will be celebrated, along with the “liturgy of the hours and the Rosary” preceding and following the Mass (Article 14), as well as the “study of Catholic doctrine…as part of their spiritual formation”, and they will “take initiative in promoting and assisting the work of evangelization and play their full part in the various pastoral activities of the local Church” (Article 2). Each Group can create a “specific rule” to
govern a Group’s activities in alignment with the Statutes, but that must be “approved by a plenary meeting of the members of the Group” and, if approved, needs to be sent to the Director General of the International Association in San Giovanni and appended to their membership (Article 20). The following prayer intentions are “recommended” to the Groups, including: “The Church, the Pope, the Bishops, Ecclesiastical and Religious Vocations, the sanctification of the Clergy, zeal in living the Christian life, the conversion of sinners and of atheists, the sick, especially the incurable, the old and other intentions which include the needs of the Church and society at any particular time” (Article 15). While members are not obliged to contribute financially to the Group (Article 17), they are to “dedicate themselves, in a special manner, to works of charity, especially towards the sick, the old, the marginalized” (Article 16). Overall, members “shall seek to be an example through accepting the sufferings and sacrifices which form part of their daily lives and by the sincere practice of the Christian life” (ibid.).

The Statutes provide a mechanism not just for an orderly, global proliferation of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups that is within the sphere of the Church, but it also creates a format that intentionally divorces itself from the particular charisms of Padre Pio and discussions of miracles. Thus, the Church, under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, has sought to successfully couple the sanctification of Padre Pio, acknowledging his stigmata, while also bringing the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement under control and seeking to avoid it as being a fan club for the friar or a forum to testify to miraculous healing, instead using it as a vehicle to encourage the spiritual formation of laity.
To date, we know that the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement has continued to flourish since these Statutes were enacted. As of 2002, there were more than 2,000 groups (Margry 102) and, by 2013, there were approximately 3,300 registered groups in 60 countries (Salisci, “Prayer” 92), with about 75% of those groups based in Italy (Salisci, “Groups” 97). Of the approximately 25% outside of Italy (more than 800), about 130 of these registered groups are in the United States, spread across 29 states and Washington, D.C., with the greatest numbers of groups in the Mid-Atlantic States (47 in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania), New England (22 in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont), and California (10)\(^{28}\). There have not been any academic publications specifically focused on the Padre Pio Prayer Groups in the United States and, until recently, no academic publications focused on the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement at all. That changed with two recent articles, which have been published in Italian by Mario Salisci, a sociologist at the University of Genoa in Italy, which seek to understand the dynamics of the movement\(^{29}\).

The first, “Prayer as Relationship. An Analysis of Padre Pio Prayer Groups”, discusses the results of interviews with 25 Padre Pio Prayer Group leaders from Italy, Monaco, and the United States about their experiences leading groups. According to the interviewees, the capability of their leadership, which is acted upon as a divine “call”, is premised on three elements: the charisma of Padre Pio, the ability to relate well to

\(^{28}\)These figures were obtained counting the number of groups listed on the Padre Pio Prayer Group USA Web site, as of May 2016. See www.pppg.org/?page_id=49.

members of the group, and being a good example to others” [30] (Salisci, “Prayer” 93).

Throughout the interviews, Salisci found that the group leaders conceived of prayer as a way of accessing a transcendent relationship with the divine, whereby prayer offers the means of “obtaining the possibility of access to its intense, refreshing, and vitalizing energy” (92) [31]. Rather than viewing prayer as an “essentially individual act”, the respondents say that it creates a “relational system” that is “realized in community bonds” along two dimensions: “horizontal” amongst members of the group and “vertical” in relationship to the divine (93) [32]. Calling prayer a “language of the heart”, it is a form of communication that is “not immediately verbalized” and “more than thought”, more closely identified as an “emotion” (94) [33]. With Padre Pio, who has the ability to “transform suffering”, the prayerful relationship that is enacted through the prayer group has the capacity to bring joy without ignoring pain (95) [34]. Thus, prayer serves as a “cathartic mechanism” that relieves “emotional tension” but, at the same time, helps one

---

[30] Original text: “La leadership dei capigruppo si fonda dunque su tre elementi: il carisma, riconosciuto dai membri; la capacità relazionale; infine, l'essere d'esempio per gli altri”

[31] Original text: “Il primo e più importante concetto che emerge dalle interviste è la preghiera come relazione con la trascendenza. Durante tutte le interviste mi sono trovato di fronte alla descrizione di una forma di rapporto, dove l’Alter della relazione è Dio stesso: la preghiera è vissuta come la modalità di rapporto con Dio, la possibilità di mettersi in contatto con un Padre buono e onnipotente, comprensivo della nostra debolezza, ottenendo in questo modo la possibilità di accedere alla sua grande energia ristoratrice e vitalizzante.”. All translations from Italian to English facilitated with Google Translate.

[32] Original text: “Come si vede, e al contrario di quello che comunemente si pensa, la preghiera non è vissuta come un atto sostanzialmente individuale, intimo e proprio del foro della coscienza ma si realizza nel legame comunitario, divenendo istituzione sociale e dando origine a un sistema relazionale che si articola in due dimensioni: in orizzontale, tra I membri del gruppo; in vertical, verso la trascendenza.”

[33] Original text: “La concezione della preghiera degli intervistati esula dalle formule verbali e dalla morale e include una complessità sorprendente, una modalità conoscitiva diversa ma non per questo meno efficace: è il «linguaggio del cuore», una forma di comunicazione non immediatamente verbalizzabile, un linguaggio di senso che oltrepassa la dimensione psicologica. La preghiera è descritta come un movimento intimo che parte da dentro: più che pensiero è considerata emozione.”

[34] Original text: “Al contrario, più volte citano Padre Pio e la sua capacità di trasformare la sofferenza in possibilità più che in limite. Il rapporto con chi soffre assume così le caratteristiche di una relazione complessa che, oltre la gioia, non disconosce il dolore, simboleggiato dalla Croce.”
to see reality in a more “delicate and incisive” way and nourishes a “constant spiritual search” (97)\textsuperscript{35}. Thus, rather than seeing prayer just as a coping mechanism, Salisci, in drawing from a Weberian approach to the “routinization of charisma”, Otto’s notion of the sacred, and Mauss’s early conceptualization of prayer, views the responses of the group leaders as opening new interpretive possibilities for sociology in order to understand prayer, since it goes beyond symbolic and coping dynamics and acknowledges transcendence as an “active element in social processes” (100). In the context of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, this involves understanding how the relationships between the individual and the divine, group members between and amongst themselves, and the individual with Padre Pio has an effect on social life.

The second, “Groups of Padre Pio in Latin America”, speaks to the growth of new groups in Argentina and Brazil, as well as Uruguay and Costa Rica, based on interviews, fieldwork, and participant observation that Salisci conducted. While some of these countries, like Uruguay and Costa Rica, have seen the emergence of “official” groups that are registered with San Giovanni and follow the Statutes, Argentina and Brazil have a significant and proliferated network of unofficial groups that meet in private homes, often weekly, which greatly outnumbers that of registered groups. The reasons for this are due to the difficulty of securing Spiritual Directors and the length of time it can take to receive official recognition by San Giovanni as a group, which is not always

\textsuperscript{35} Original text: “I leader dei Gruppi considerano la preghiera anche come un potente meccanismo catartico che pulisce il pensiero e consente un’interazione con la realtà allo stesso tempo più delicata e incisiva. Gli effetti pratici riferiti sono piuttosto noti e vanno dall’allentamento della tensione emotiva al miglioramento delle performances, anche lavorative; allo stesso modo, però, il contesto diviene il campo per una costante ricerca spirituale.”
successful. Salisci notes that this dynamic of having official and unofficial Padre Pio Prayer Groups replicates itself all across the world (Salisci, “Groups” 102), which leads to a significant underestimation of the number of people who are part of the movement. In addition, more than 90% of all the groups surveyed by Salisci across Central and South America are led by women (100).

To conclude, as part of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Argentinian Pope Francis honored two Capuchin saints, Padre Pio and Leopold Mandic as “saint-confessors” to inspire people to become reconciled to the Church and to God by the confession of their sins. The remains of the two saints were transported to the Vatican for veneration and, as part of the festivities on February 6, 2016, Pope Francis welcomed 80,000 representatives from the Casa and from groups around the world in St. Peter’s Square to celebrate the Padre Pio Prayer Groups. In calling the groups to be “power stations of mercy” and to “provide the light of God to the world and the energy of the love of the Church”, Pope Francis strongly advocated for the power of prayer, including mentioning “miracles”:

“I think of the prayer groups, which St. Pio described as “nurseries of faith, hotbeds of love”; not only meeting centers to be at ease with friends and to be consoled somewhat, but hotbeds of divine love. The prayer groups are this! Prayer, in fact, is a true and proper mission, that brings the fire of love to the whole of humanity. Padre Pio said that prayer is a “force that moves the world.” Prayer is a force that moves the world! But do we believe this? It is so. Try it! It - he added - “spreads God’s smile and blessing on all languor and weakness” (Second International Congress of Prayer Groups, May 5, 1966).

Prayer, therefore, is not a good practice to get some peace of heart; nor is it a devout means to obtain from God what is useful to us. If it were so, it would be moved by a subtle egoism: I pray to be well, as if I took an aspirin. No, it’s not so. I pray to obtain this thing. But this is to do business. It is not so. Prayer is something else, it’s something else. Prayer, instead, is a work of spiritual mercy,
which wishes to lead everything to God’s heart. “You take charge, who are a Father.”

It should be this way, to say it simply. Prayer is to say: “You take charge, who are Father. Look at us, who are Father.” This is relation with the Father. Prayer is this. It is a gift of faith and of love, an intercession of which there is need as of bread. In a word, it means to entrust: to entrust the Church, to entrust people, to entrust situations to the Father - “I entrust this to you” - so that He takes care of it. Prayer, therefore, as Padre Pio loved to say, is “the best weapon we have, a key that opens God’s heart.” A key that opens God’s heart: it is an easy key. God’s heart is not armored with many means of security. With prayer, you can open it with an ordinary key, because He has a heart of love, the heart of a Father.

It is the greatest strength of the Church which we must never abandon, because the Church bears fruit if, she does as our Lady and the apostles did, who were “with one accord devoted to prayer” (Acts 1:14), when they awaited the Holy Spirit - devoted and concordant in prayer. Otherwise, one risks leaning elsewhere: on means, on money, on power; then evangelization vanishes and joy is extinguished and the heart becomes troubled.

Do you want to have a troubled heart? [The people: “No!”] Do you want to have a joyful heart? [“Yes!”] Pray, this is the recipe!

While I thank you for your commitment, I encourage the prayer groups to be “power stations of mercy”: power stations that are always open and active, that with the humble power of prayer provide the light of God to the world and the energy of the love of the Church. Padre Pio, who described himself only as “a poor friar who prays,” wrote that prayer is “the highest apostolate that a soul can exercise in God’s Church” (Epistolario II, 70). Be always joyful Apostles of Prayer! Prayer does miracles. The apostolate of prayer does miracles.”

CHAPTER 3

Experiencing Padre Pio Prayer Groups

The Glove

In September 2010, I attended my first Padre Pio Prayer Group meeting, which takes place on the first Saturday of every month, except during the summer, at a Catholic church in the eastern United States. A parish with deep roots in the local Italian community, the Church has hosted a Padre Pio Prayer Group for more than 40 years, claiming to be the longest running and largest such group in the United States. The group was co-founded by a former parishioner named Joan who passed away in 2004, but who became a well-known devotee of Padre Pio after witnessing a miraculous healing of her baby daughter in the 1960s through his intercession. Upon desperately traveling to San Giovanni Rotondo in 1968, months before Padre Pio was to pass away, the friar blessed her daughter and she made a promise to God that if the baby lived, the world would know about the greatness of Padre Pio. Soon after her and her husband returned, her daughter began to greatly improve. As part of medical treatment, her daughter needed to have her bladder removed, but soon after the procedure, doctors discovered that she had a “rudimentary bladder” growing in the place of the one that had been removed. Her

37 The stories about the group meetings I attended are based on my field notes. I did not tape record while I was in the field, so all quotes and paraphrasing have been reconstructed from the experiences I recorded in field notes. All personal names mentioned in this chapter are pseudonymous, for the exception of Leti and Lenny Martelli and Father Francis Sariego.
daughter survived these tremendous health difficulties, while she upheld the promise. Not only did she help to establish this Padre Pio Prayer Group, but she helped to establish many others in the United States.

The gathering began at approximately 8:30AM. When I arrived, a priest was available for adherents to make confession, while others in attendance were scattered within the pews of the Church. Those who lead the prayer group identified five different people who were present to lead the recitation of the rosary. As they began the rosary around 8:40AM with approximately 50 people in attendance, the first member selected initiated the opening prayers associated with the rosary, which begins with all people who are present reciting the initial set of prayers and then each of five members leading a set of 10 Hail Mary prayers, proceeding from one to the other as they advance through the five ‘decades’ that constitutes a cycle of the rosary. As is typical for praying a rosary in a group format, the prayer leader for each set of Hail Mary prayers says the beginning of the traditional version of the prayer – Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus – while all in attendance proceed to complete the prayer – Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. Rosary prayers, whether done

---

38 There is a weekly schedule observed for the rosary within the Catholic Church around a set of four “Mysteries” - “Joyful” (Monday/Saturday), “Sorrowful” (Tuesday/Friday), “Glorious” (Wednesday/Sunday), and “Luminous” (Thursday) – which are meditations on episodes in the life and death of Jesus, with each set containing five specific mysteries to correspond to the five decades, with one mystery recited before embarking on each decade. For example, a rosary conducted on Saturday meditates upon the “Joyful” mysteries, which are the Annunciation of Jesus to Mary, the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, the Nativity of Jesus, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, and Finding Jesus in the Temple at age 12. These mysteries are recited in order, one at a time, at the beginning of each of the five decades of the rosary.
individually or in a group format, ritually create a rhythmic flow as one solemnly proceeds through each of the Hail Mary prayers. Participants in this group have no set pattern for where they would sit in the church. Many close their eyes while sitting in the pews, others might be kneeling or keeping their eyes open with gaze directed forward. Some may be using rosary beads to keep track of each set of 10 Hail Mary prayers, while others might be looking at a written version of the rosary to keep track of the transitions from one decade to the other, have handy as a reference for the beginning and concluding prayers or the specific naming of the mysteries that constitute a full rosary sequence which are not as readily memorized as an Our Father or a Hail Mary prayer. While the seating position and arrangement of the pray-ers does not exhibit a general pattern, most in attendance are aged 60 and above and are well-experienced in quickly generating the cadence and flow associated with the recitation of the rosary. On average, it takes about 15 minutes to complete a recitation of the rosary.

Mass began at 9:00AM. While reciting the rosary, the pews began to fill with about 100-125 people attending the service on a Saturday morning. Consistent with the composition of those who participated in the rosary, the audience is older with about a 75/25 ratio of women to men, no families with young children (although adult children of older attendees were present), with very little racial diversity. Just as the Mass is about to begin, a lay member of the group spoke at the front of the church, welcoming those in attendance to the Padre Pio Prayer Group and asking those in attendance to pray for the intentions of the Church and those written in a black book that is placed on the podium, filled with the names of people and continuing prayer requests that is brought to every
monthly meeting, consistent with the purposes of the Padre Pio Prayer Group. Father Jones, the spiritual director of the group who was hearing confessions while the rosary was being recited, entered and began the Catholic Mass.

In his homily, Father Jones thanked those in attendance for coming to church on the Saturday morning of Labor Day weekend. He spoke about his and Padre Pio’s “love of the Mass” and the need for all to engage in processes of reconciliation and the practice of confession in order to make spiritual progress to fully live a Catholic life. Father Jones also said that one should pray the rosary four times a day, but that he tries to do it at least once a day. He noted that this Padre Pio Prayer Group is an “inspiration” to him and his fellow priests and spoke of them as the “cream of the crop”. In transitioning to a discussion of the current state of society as not in keeping with a Catholic lifestyle, a theme he would return to in many future homilies as I attended the group, he mentioned a recent rally led by the TV personality Glen Beck and the desire to return society to have a greater focus on “faith, hope, and charity”.

Following the Mass, the meeting began afterward in the basement of the church, with about 50 people attending. Four rows of rectangular tables with chairs are set-up lengthwise relative to the front of the room, where a podium and rectangular tables are set-up against the far wall, but perpendicular to the rows of tables and chairs for the meeting attendees. The entrance to the basement opens in the back of the room relative to the podium. Upon making a right into the basement, a table is set-up with donuts and sweets available for meeting attendees to take, with a donation bucket next to the food. I
learn shortly upon walking in that the group used to have pizza, but fewer people are regularly attending and the donations received won’t cover pizza for everyone. Once everyone enters, there are about 50 people attending the meeting. Some go immediately to the snacks and drinks and have a seat while waiting for the meeting to start, but most enter a procession line at the back room, straight ahead upon entering the basement, where those in line are waiting to touch a relic of Padre Pio.

A man named John, who is almost 90 years old but looks much younger than his age, is at the front of the line holding a glove, encased between two rectangular pieces of thin, pliable plastic held together on four sides by tape, allowing each person who approaches to touch the object. The glove originally belonged to Padre Pio, one of his signature gloves with the fingers cut out in order to hide and protect the marks and blood of the stigmata on his hands, and was obtained in 1970 when Joan and Michelle, a woman in her early 80s who is married to John and who co-founded the Padre Pio Prayer Group with Joan, traveled to the Vatican and were permitted to bring back the glove to share with the Catholic faithful. When going through the procession, most people place it on their chest and say a quick prayer to themselves, but some may place it near a specific physical ailment on their body and say a prayer. John is the bearer of the glove. He keeps the glove at all times inside of his shirt when not using it in order to protect it, and will regularly visit when called upon to lay the glove on those who are deathly ill or

---

39 It should be noted that, in all instances where I state that someone has been touched by The Glove, a person isn’t actually touching The Glove. One is physically coming into contact with the casing for the glove (in this case thin, clear plastic where one can feel the imprint of The Glove upon firm contact).
badly wounded in the hospital, as those who are suffering want to experience the power of the relic via the intercession of Padre Pio to heal their ailment.

Shortly after arriving into the meeting, I pick up the newsletter for the group aptly entitled “The Glove”, which is generated once a year and contains the Mass and meeting schedule for the year (September to June), a listing of the committee members for the group, a phone number to dial for requests for a visitation with The Glove, and a few paragraphs to reflect upon for the purposes of spiritual development on two sides of a single sheet of heavy, yellow-colored paper. Here is an excerpt from the beginning of the newsletter, which is from an uncited quote from Padre Pio:

“May Jesus’ Mother and ours obtain for us from her Son the grace to live a life entirely according to the heart of God, a completely interior life altogether hidden in Him. May this most dear Mother unite us so closely with Jesus that we may never allow ourselves to be enraptured or lured away by anything belonging to this despicable world. May she keep us always close to infinite sweetness, to Jesus. Then alone will we be able to say with St. Paul that we are sons of God in the midst of a depraved and corrupt nation.”

On the backside of the newsletter is a poem entitled A Flower and a Butterfly by an anonymous author. Here is an excerpt from this poem:

“God always does things right. His way is the best way, even if to us it is the wrong way. If you ask God for one thing and receive another….TRUST…

You can be sure that He will always give you what you need at the appropriate time.

For what you want is not always what you need.

God never fails to grant our petitions, so keep on going to Him without doubting or murmuring.
Today’s thorn is tomorrow’s flower!

God gives the very best to those who leave the choices up to Him!”

Michelle began the meeting by celebrating that the group is entering its 41st year, and asks all to say a couple Hail Mary prayers and an Angelus prayer along with her. After the prayers, Michelle spoke to the group about evil and suffering in the world. She says that “God is mad” and is “getting madder”, with reference to recent natural disasters, such as earthquakes, volcano eruptions in Indonesia, Hurricane Earl, and flooding in Pakistan. She says that we live in an evil world and prayer is needed. While talking about these concerns and sharing stories with the group about her past travels to illustrate the evil in the world, group members in the audience were talking to each other while Michelle was speaking. She was clearly annoyed that this was happening, but tried to speak over the social chatter amongst a handful of different members in several areas of the room who weren’t focused on what she was saying, an occurrence that would repeat itself on many occasions as I attended more group meetings.

In accordance with the Statutes, the group’s charitable cause is to raise funds for Padre Pio’s House for Aged Priests which is being built in San Giovanni Rotondo. At the end of every meeting, there is a raffle where people can purchase tickets for $1, whereby the winners can obtain various objects that are laid out on the front table by the podium and have been donated to the group over the past month. The objects could include devotional items such as crucifixes, pictures of Mary, Jesus, or Padre Pio, food items, or household items and decorations that might be put to good use in someone’s home.
When the meeting ended, I introduced myself to some of the people who are involved in running the group. I met Jessica, who administered the raffle and began to tell me about miraculous events that have occurred with The Glove and how John will bring the glove to anyone who is in need and requests it. Louise, one of the group leaders who was nearby and was listening to our conversation called John a “saint”. Further in our conversation, Jessica recounted to me a story from when she was 18 years old, when her fiancée at that time, who was abusive, got into a fight with her uncle who had given her a kiss during her high school graduation party. He caused a tremendous scene and drove around the building in circles during the party. While she was anxiety-ridden in the days ahead trying to break off the engagement, she had an experience one night where a hooded monk that she attributes to be Padre Pio walked into her room and disappeared. After the experience, she broke off the engagement and the experience deepened her faith. Later, Jessica met her future husband through the church, and they have now been married for 36 years. He is a deacon and a Eucharistic minister. They have two grown children together, who are each about to get married, though she shared that while the children “live their faith” and do many “good works”, they no longer attend church, as they began to “have doubts”. She sadly recalled a story where her husband refused offering Communion to their daughter during a Mass where he was serving as a Eucharistic minister. Jessica also introduced me to her mother, who has been attending the group for all 41 years. The mother said that the group is a blessing and that they are all “like family”.

*******************************************************************************
The experiences recounted above are from my first meeting, but I continued to attend meetings with this group regularly for approximately two years. In a meeting in 2011, Michelle spoke about how she became connected with Padre Pio. After writing a letter to Padre Pio in 1958 upon reading about him in a magazine, she did not hear back from him. Then she wrote a second letter that was responded to by Padre Pio’s superior. This began a 10-year correspondence between her and Padre Pio, which deepened their relationship. Once the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement became established, she traveled all over the world – including places like Sri Lanka and Guam – to spread the message about Padre Pio and set-up prayer groups. She talked about the first convening of the prayer groups in 1975 in Rome. According to Michelle, it was the first time that Pio’s name was publicly uttered in the Vatican – “Viva Jesus! Viva Maria! Viva Padre Pio!” the crowd said. The feeling and the moment, according to Michelle, was “extraordinary”. In reflecting on her many years engaged with Padre Pio, she was thankful for witnessing and hearing about so many miracles.

Many of the same themes and dynamics that I experienced in the first meeting would continue in subsequent gatherings, where about the same number of people attended the rosary, Mass, and meeting. I later learned that the reason why a larger number of people attend Mass is that there is a fairly set crowd of people who attend every day and are not a part of the group. I also learned that while some of the group members have their home parish at the church where the meeting is located, many others in attendance drive into the area from other towns not formally connected to this church in order to attend the gathering. During the Mass, Father Jones’ homilies would regularly
turn to the dual themes of spiritual development through Mass attendance and prayer, as well as bemoaning the problems of the world. He would encourage those in attendance to engage in Eucharistic Adoration, which is a special form of prayer where a consecrated Communion wafer, understood within Catholic theology to be the body of Jesus, is displayed in a room where pray-ers gather to contemplate and pray with the body of Christ. He would also encourage attendees to regularly watch Mother Angelica on EWTN, a Catholic television station, which is a presentation of her reciting the rosary along with her order of nuns so that people can be supported to pray the rosary at home.

When his homilies stayed on the topic of spiritual development and would mention Padre Pio as an example to be imitated, in these moments his message focused on encouraging others to love God in their heart, mind, and soul as enacted through Catholic ritual practices. He talked about Padre Pio’s unceasing devotion and prayer for many hours a day, including regularly reciting the rosary more than 100 times a day. He stated that when we pray, we allow ourselves to be aligned with God’s will, which is to bring well-being, happiness, joy, self-fulfillment, and peace to our lives. He mentioned prayer as guiding a person to be able to “speak up” in the face of unbelief, and implored those in attendance to touch the lives of others, “with their prayers and sacrifices”, who aren’t living a Catholic life and encourage them to come to church or bring them to the Padre Pio Prayer Group meeting.

When Father Jones would turn to discuss worldly matters, his tone would become more exasperated. Topics would range from how Catholics don’t take the time to come
to come to Mass or pray regularly, to abortion, to current events in the news. For his homily in February 2011, which was during the early stages of the Arab Spring, he talked about the “horrible” events taking place in Egypt. He stated, “What can any of us do about it? You’re doing it by coming to Mass”. In his homily in March 2011, he emphasized the Catholic Mass as a way of peace, and spoke about how all of the troubles in places like Egypt, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan are a result of a blindness and a turning away from God. In a September 2011 homily, he even touched on the church molestation scandal, where he hoped that the church could use this as an opportunity to increase the “spiritual development of our lives and those within our community.”

The tone of the meetings would sometimes seek to model the call to spiritual virtue that Father Jones called for in his homilies by extolling praying the rosary - Michelle shared in a meeting that she prays it 2-3 times a day - and routinely engaging in intercessory prayer on behalf of special intentions shared by the group. In one meeting, Michelle shared how regularly praying the rosary “transforms you” and has contributed to the strength of her 62-year marriage to her husband John. Though, the focus of the meeting was often on testimonies to the miraculous. As the style of the meeting is for someone to be speaking at a podium at the front of the room, the group generally did not actively engage in any kind of conversation or pedagogical cultivation of spiritual disciplines and sensibilities that would be helpful for living one’s life in a more spiritually attuned fashion. Instead, stories were routinely shared by John, Michelle, and outside speakers who would visit the group to attest to miraculous occurrences as a result of being touched by The Glove and praying to Padre Pio. These stories are numerous,
from the more casual (e.g., - John brought The Glove to someone in the hospital who is
now on the mend), to the more awe-inspiring (e.g., – someone who comes back from the
brink of death after being prayed over with The Glove). For the purposes of this chapter,
I will share three such awe-inspiring stories.

******************************************************************************

The first comes from Arthur, a guest who spoke at one meeting, having made a
special trip from some distance in order to tell his story. He recounted that nine years
ago, he discovered that he had Stage 4 Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma all throughout his
body except in his brain. He was close to death. He was later brought to a hospital in his
hometown, but was told all they could do was keep him comfortable until he passed
away. He traveled to a hospital in a larger city to see a doctor whom he and his family
trusted, but the doctor told them there was nothing that could be done. Arthur went back
home and was in tremendous pain for five days after the visit to the city hospital. On the
sixth day, he could not take pain medication anymore. He had shrunk to 60 pounds and
could not eat or drink. He was taken back to the hospital in his hometown and was
visited by a mysterious woman in a bright white hospital dress who gave him medicine
and said he’d be OK. He felt better the next day, but still not well. His family decided to
take him back to the city hospital. It was going to take a few extra hours for a bed to be
ready at the hospital, so he stopped at a family member’s house for a few hours. Many
family members gathered, as they thought this would be the last time they would seem
him alive. In the gathering, he was introduced to Louise’s husband, who had brought The
Glove. When Arthur touched The Glove, it was “super-hot” and he felt a surge throughout his arm and then his whole body. He felt better! The family could not believe it and they freaked out. He got out of his wheelchair unassisted and was able to get in the car by himself to go to the city hospital. When he arrived at the hospital, the doctors could not believe it. His cancer was entirely gone and there was no tissue scarring. According to Arthur, the doctors thought it was a hoax orchestrated by the government. They yelled at Arthur’s daughter – “we are scientists, we don’t deal with miracles”. Arthur has been fine and cancer-free ever since.

The second story comes from Sal, who visited the prayer group to share the miracle that happened to him in healing from colon cancer as a result of praying to Padre Pio. Sal’s friend, who spoke on Sal’s behalf, passed out brochures entitled “A Miracle”, which provides a testimony of the miracle Sal experienced as written by his friend. “A Miracle” opens in the following way:

“One of the greatest gifts we have is to be able to pray, to pray for a situation over which we feel we have no control, to pray for others, to intercede for someone in need, and to request God’s mercy and grace. We must also remember that faith is also one of God’s greatest gifts and if you live by faith, extraordinary things will happen.”

The brochure tells the story of Sal’s cancer diagnosis in August 2009, the aftermath of his diagnosis and treatment, Sal’s request for “prayers from his family, friends, and from his parish family”, and the visit he made at the suggestion of his friend (the author of “A Miracle”) to the National Center for Padre Pio in Barto, PA, since it is a “holy place of strength, inspiration, and miracles”. While there, he watched an episode of the TV show
“Unsolved Mysteries”, which the shrine plays to introduce visitors to Padre Pio, his stigmata, and the many remarkably unexplained things attributed to Padre Pio such as prophetic insight, celestial perfume, miraculous healings, and bilocation. The resident priest at the shrine gave Sal a special blessing, had him “pray over a replica of St. Pio’s blessed glove”, which is encased in a glass picture frame, and he and his wife lit a prayer candle. Upon leaving the shrine, Sal remarked that he was “inspired”. The brochure then proceeds to take several paragraphs to introduce who Padre Pio was before continuing with Sal’s story.

In October 2009, Sal began chemotherapy and radiation, but in November he collapsed due to a blood infection and was brought to a hospital to recover for three weeks. While there, Sal “gave out prayer cards of Padre Pio to the nurses, hoping to enlighten them to prayers and faith, and to encourage them to a more Christian life”. Sal returned home in December and continued to receive treatment for the infection until January 2010, when the infection cleared and he was able to proceed in the months ahead with his cancer treatment. Following PET scans to see the size of Sal’s tumor and other medical measures in January and February, Sal was in the process of preparing for a 10-day stay at a hospital in March, where they would perform surgery to remove the cancerous tumor. On March 12, Sal had a pre-operation exam prior to the surgery. When he awoke from the exam, the doctor told Sal “how extraordinary” it was that he could not find his tumor, that he was clear, and that he didn’t need to have any further medical procedures.
Sal attributes his recovery not only to prayer, but also the care that his wife provided and the healthy eating habits introduced to him by the doctors overseeing his care, including eating organic food and a “special green tea known as 710 EGCG” that have antioxidants to help one stay clear of cancer. Joe specifies his attribution of Padre Pio’s role in the process as “stalling the PET scan testing that delayed the operation he was to receive. The PET scan machine broke and the test was rescheduled which gave Joe more time to get antioxidants in his body, which he feels allowed his polyps to shrink and avoid surgery”. Sal concludes by saying that the ordeal “made his beliefs stronger”: “If you have enough faith, prayers, God, and blessing of Padre Pio, you can overcome anything. St. Padre Pio was a living crucifix and made people believe and whoever goes to the Father with this intention, will acquire courage for the fullness of life. Living consists not only of faith, but also of hope and charity”.

The third story comes from an article that Michelle brought to the attention of the group that was published in the February 2012 periodical entitled Guideposts40. The article tells the story of Leti Martelli, whose 15-year old son Lenny had broken his neck while snowboarding. A teenage boy who loved playing many sports was paralyzed from the chest down. Leti stopped all that was happening in her personal and professional life to devote herself full-time to Lenny’s care. Despite much time spent in hospitals, rehabilitation, and praying frequently ever since learning of her son’s spinal cord injury, Leti was not seeing much improvement in her son’s condition. “Early in his treatment I’d

---

overheard someone say Lenny had about a five-percent chance of walking again and making a complete recovery. I held on to that five percent. I prayed for that five percent”. Lenny got an extra dose of motivation when Leti reached out to Phil Martelli, a well-known college basketball coach at St. Joseph’s University, who shares the same last name (but bears no relation) and promised to have Lenny join him at center court of the basketball arena when he is walking again. Lenny worked even harder in his rehabilitation after this special visit, but no results.

When faced with the prospect that her son might not walk again, she wondered what else she could try:

“I looked down at my hand. I was clutching a prayer card that someone had given to us. On it was a picture of Padre Pio, an Italian friar born in the nineteenth century who went on to become a saint. Padre Pio’s simple advice to believers was: Pray, Hope, and Don’t Worry. But how could I not worry? I’d tried everything and my son was not recovering. A bit of light filtered into Lenny’s room from his window and I held the card up to read the prayer printed on one side. At the end of the prayer I was supposed to state what I was asking for. “I confidently beseech you, Lord, to grant me the grace of healing for my son”. I said those words over and over. The prayer was so short. It seemed tiny compared to the monumental miracle we needed. I said the prayer until it seemed that I was saying it in my sleep.

I sat up with a jolt. Had I dozed off? Well, I was awake now, because I realized that Lenny and I weren’t alone in the room. A figure stood by the door. I squinted to try to see more clearly. It wasn’t a doctor or a nurse. It was a man wearing a long robe made of rough fabric and tied around the waist by a rope. Okay, I thought, this is weird. There’s a friar in the room with me. I should have been freaking out. But I wasn’t. The figure radiated peace and calm. He walked slowly to Lenny’s bedside and stood looking down at my son. He then laid his hand on Lenny’s right leg, the one that always gave him the most trouble in therapy. The hand rested there for a moment, then the figure backed out of the room.

I let out a long breath. What on earth had just happened? I looked at the prayer card again. Pray, Hope, and Don’t Worry. Relief began to trickle through me,
then surged, as mysterious as the figure of the old friar who had just visited. For the first time in ages I did not feel worried. I leaned back, closed my eyes and dropped back to sleep”.

The next day, the therapists working with Lenny asked him to walk:

“Lenny took a step with his left foot, then another with his right. All of a sudden, before any of us quite realized what was happening, he was walking. Supported by the two therapists, he made it to the end of the hallway and then turned around. “Whoa”, he said, looking startled. “How did I get here?” A huge grin and he answered his own question. “I walked!” He headed back up the hall toward me. “Mom!” he cried. “I’m walking!””

In the days, weeks, and months after this moment, Lenny began to make progress and eventually walked again with the assistance of canes, returned to school, enjoyed his special moment at center court of a St. Joseph’s basketball game, and began to do all of the things he used to do except play sports. In reflecting on what occurred, Leti concluded:

“I still can’t say for certain what really happened that night in Lenny’s hospital room. Obviously, God performed a miraculous work of healing. But I think there’s a little more to it than that. Maybe the real miracle is in those simple words of Padre Pio’s: Pray, Hope and Don’t Worry. I’d wanted healing for Lenny and I’d worried I wasn’t doing enough to make it happen. I’d forgotten God has his own timing and his own way of working. The doctors, the physical therapy, the visits from Lenny’s friends, the wonderful visit from Coach Phil - those were all part of the miracle of Lenny’s healing. There’s a saying, “Give time, time.” Perhaps time is one of the greatest healing miracles of all. Maybe Padre Pio did visit us that night not so much to heal Lenny as a reminder from God that healing was already underway. Pray, Hope and Don’t Worry. These days I do all three.”
In reading selections from Leti Martelli’s *Guideposts* article to the group, Michelle commented that John was the person who gave the Padre Pio prayer card to Leti that she had been holding prior to receiving the vision of the friar.

In May 2011, John was the leader of the meeting, as Michelle was very ill and could not make it. He began by relating stories of people whom he had recently visited with The Glove, and miraculous stories that he has witnessed as part of his visitations with The Glove over the years. At this juncture, John began to reflect on the connectedness between The Glove and the occurrence of miracles in a fairly brusque tone. Whenever he blesses someone with the glove, especially someone who is ill and suffering, that person thinks the glove heals them. But, John stated that The Glove is a “sacramental”, which are objects that have been blessed for holy use, and that it is “God’s will” that determines whether a miracle occurs. When it comes to miracles, John says there are two kinds: All of nature and creation as a miracle, and we are all miracles for being created in the image of God; and when something happens that we can’t understand. These statements by John were a marked departure from any other presentation that was made during the group meetings, as it sought to clarify what he understands to be happening when one is blessed by touching The Glove. He waded into more theological space by seeking to practically define the concept of a miracle and deeming the relic to be a “sacramental”, which are typically understood to be objects like
a scapular or a miraculous medal, or even holy water and rosary beads, which are consecrated and may bring divine favor when used with good intention.

One might think that the audience may have sought to engage with John on this issue in a broader conversation on the meaning of being blessed with The Glove, but no questions were asked or comments made. Instead, a number of group members were generally socializing and talking when John was speaking, both when he was talking about past miraculous occurrences and when he ventured into theological territory. One might think that the group members would be held in rapt attention hearing of such attributed miraculous events or be left to ponder the nature of the experiences and testimonies that they would hear, as in the stories outlined above. In general, the group could expect to hear such stories as they are a fairly frequent occurrence in the meetings. Instead, when anyone was at the podium talking - be it Michelle, John, one of the other prayer group committee members, or even an outside speaker - social chatter amongst the attendees was common when others were speaking, regardless of the subject matter. Needless to say, this was a disruptive presence during many group meetings.

One example is when a man from the Philippines, an invited guest, spoke charismatically about the formation of a Padre Pio Prayer Group he was bringing together in the Philippines and the construction of a prayer garden to Padre Pio. As he went on at length about the process, the low-level, disruptive chatter that was usual grew much louder and it became difficult to hear the man speak. The prayer group leader asked several times for the group to quiet down. They quieted down a little bit, but overall the
group seemed turned off by the man’s presentation and were relatively disinterested in what he had to say, though some tried to listen intently. A point to note in this instance is that the Pilipino man was the second speaker of the day, following the testimony of Sal’s miraculous story of being healed of colon cancer.

A second example was during the June 2011 meeting, which was the final gathering before the summer break. This happened to be the meeting where Arthur, mentioned above, gave his testimony about being healed of Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. A woman was invited to speak following Arthur, who was relating how she has a rare form of lung cancer where she can’t receive radiation treatment. She was told that she was two weeks from death. While she was in the early stages of her testimony, the group became very disruptive engaging in social chatter, choosing not to listen to what she had to say. The group leaders chastised the audience and they finally quieted down. As her story continued, she had to stop all forms of treatment and her infected lung got better. Though, the cancer had spread to her other lung and she continues to battle the disease. As she related how John visited her with The Glove, she began to cry. She said that God has been good to her throughout her life, including when she recovered from a brain surgery early in her life when she only had a 10% chance to live.

Following the emotional testimony, the presentation portion of the meeting ended and Jessica transitioned to the chance-off. At the time, Jessica was new to speaking in front of the group. She said that she has been “blessed” to be part of the group for many years and with “much trepidation” she now speaks in front of the group with the
microphone. The group began to tune her out and engage in conversations when there were problems with the microphone working properly. A man, who was visiting the group for the first time, went up to the front of the room and was able to adjust the microphone so that it worked. When he did that, he chose to speak into the microphone, and said that although this is his first visit to the group and doesn’t consider himself to be the “best Catholic” (referring to the fact that that most of the people in the audience are thought to be devoted Catholics who go to Mass often and are committing to be at this group for several hours on a Saturday morning every month), he knows how to be quiet and said that others in the group need to be “more respectful”. When Jessica returned to the microphone after the man’s statement, she said that “those who speak while others are talking should be ashamed of themselves”.

As attested in the account of the first meeting I attended, when Michelle began speaking and became annoyed by the social chatter in the audience, it seems that the low-level social chatter has likely been a regular feature of the group for some time, but that it likely got out of hand beginning with the 2010-2011 meeting year. In the September 2011 meeting, the first one after the June 2011 meeting described above, and you could tell the group leaders were taking a more direct and combative approach. Following the end of that meeting, when most were milling around and talking to one another, one of the leaders confronted a person who had been talking during the meeting and the person was squarely put on the defensive. Voices were raised and the person ended up walking away with no resolution.
Throughout my time attending the meetings, one striking moment of complete silence in the group occurred during the second meeting I attended, where a woman spoke about her father who had just passed away. She was close to her father and spoke highly of him as an honest, kind, generous, and forgiving man. She was in charge of selecting the readings for the funeral and she spoke at his service. In reading from what she wrote for the funeral, which included a song that she penned in honor of her father, the audience’s attention was closely held in silence for the inspiring and moving moment of her heartfelt expression. This moment was the only significant departure from the ebb and flow intervals for relatively quiet attention and low-level social chatter that normally dictated the flow of a meeting when others were speaking at the podium.

A factor that may have contributed to the greater growth of chatter was the serious illnesses that began to plague Michelle during the year. While Michele was able to lead most of the meetings in the first half of the 2010-2011 year, she missed several due to serious illness in the second half of the year and routinely missed meetings throughout much of 2011-2012. She suffered from bouts of flu, pneumonia, and asthma, wouldn’t be able to eat, and would often have chronic intestinal problems and pain. Betty and Jessica, two members of the committee for the group, began to share the responsibilities for leading the group in Michelle’s absence, and John would still come for a blessing with the glove. Betty would usually be the primary speaker at the meeting, while Jessica would lead the chance-off but sometimes share her stories with the group. Since they do not personally have history with Padre Pio like Michelle or visiting the sick with The Glove like John, Betty enacted a different approach to running the meetings, sharing
personal stories about her life and difficulties, relating faith-inspired jokes to infuse a more light-hearted tone, and encouraging people to pray and follow their path with God in-line with the sentiments of Padre Pio.

As the group transitioned more to Betty and Jessica’s leadership due to Michelle’s poor health, attendance at the prayer meeting began to dwindle and there were fewer volunteers to help conduct and organize the meetings. At the meeting in June 2012, it was unclear whether the group meetings would continue, where they might only start to do rosary, Mass, and a blessing with the glove. They did continue into the 2012-2013 year with the hope that Michelle’s health might improve, but she was only able to attend a few meetings.

I attended two meetings in the 2012-2013 year, bringing my field work with this group to a close. As part of shifting the approach of the meetings, an innovation that Betty and Jessica tried to enact for the December 2012 meeting was a “Prayer Pollyanna”. Typically, in the December meeting, the chance-off is replaced by a Pollyanna where each person attending agrees to bring in a gift worth less than $5 and place it on the front table. Everyone gets one ticket and gets to choose an item from the table once their number is called. This time, instead of bringing gifts, each person is asked to write down prayer intentions for a specific person or set of people on a piece of paper, fold them up, and put them in a basket. People could put as many in the basket as they wanted. After all the papers were collected in the basket, you would grab prayer
intentions out of the hat, typically the same number that you had placed in the basket. The commitment was to pray for the intentions on the paper every day until Christmas.

This “Prayer Pollyanna” was a clear gesture to shift the focus of the meeting away from the miraculous and toward further prayer engagement, but the group continued to decline in Michelle’s absence and with the new format. In the last meeting I attended in April 2013, there were 50-60 people at the Mass, and about 30 people at the meeting. When I went downstairs for the meeting, Betty and Jessica immediately greeted me. One of them said, “Chris! We didn’t know if you were coming back! We thought all of the talking in the group drove you away”.

**Prayer as a Weapon**

“Prayer is the best weapon we have, it is the key to God’s heart” – Padre Pio

On a number of occasions, Padre Pio is noted to have referred to his rosary beads, and prayer in general, as a “weapon” in service of Catholic faith and against evil. Viewing much of earthly activity as involved in a cosmic struggle between good and evil for individual souls, Padre Pio has written on, and hagiographers have talked at length about his battles with the Devil. Padre Pio reports on being physically assaulted by evil forces and experienced great physical pain as part of these trials.

In the prayer group I attended, the metaphor of prayer and the rosary as a “weapon” was stated on many occasions by Michelle, and was reinforced by other group members as well. An elaboration of this concept has been provided by Father Francis
Sariego, a Capuchin friar who is the National Coordinator for the Padre Pio Prayer Groups in the United States. Through the main web site for the prayer groups, www.pppg.org, Fr. Sariego issues a monthly letter to the prayer groups. While the prayer group discussed above never mentioned or made use of these letters in any of its presentations or discussions, it is instructive to read through them.

The letters are 2-3 single-spaced pages in length, addressed to the “Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio” with “The Lord give you His peace!” as an opening salutation, and they provide a message to the groups suitable for theological reflection in one’s spiritual life of prayer and worship. These letters typically include a discussion of biblical passages, papal writings or catechetical matters, with references to the lives of saints and Padre Pio for how they served as exemplars for living a life of Catholic faith in word and deed. In several of these letters, Fr. Sariego expands on the concept of prayer and it’s understanding as a spiritual “weapon”, which people should “use against anything that may lead them away from a holy and healthy relationship with God”. As part of a Lenten meditation for the March 2011 letter, Fr. Sariego locates prayer, as well as fasting and almsgiving, as such a “weapon of faith” that is used in “spiritual battle”:

“Prayer establishes, strengthens, or re-establishes our personal relationship with God. Through prayer we see ourselves from the perspective of the Divine Plan. God becomes a ‘Real Presence’ in our lives Sacramentally in the Eucharist, our daily Viaticum for life’s journey, and spiritually, at every moment and encounter throughout the day. Then it is that the gift of existence and life we recognize in persons, places, and things remind us of the awesome presence and love of God

41 To view the monthly letters from Father Sariego to the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, see the Padre Pio Prayer Groups USA Web site, www.pppg.org/?page_id=70.
for all and in particular for ‘me’. How can anyone not accept the challenge to keep him/herself always available to the love of such a God?”

Thus, prayer is conceived not as a weapon that kills evil, but as a protective armor that safeguards one’s relationship with God. Prayer is enacted as a challenge to be in the presence of God in an otherwise secularized world. Elsewhere in this letter, Fr. Sariego clarifies his use of the term “battle”:

“It is a battle with the forces within us and around us. Sometimes it is a battle with two forces within us. St. Paul himself writes about the spirit and the flesh often seeming to be at odds with each other. The great saints even struggled with faithfulness to virtue. The battle is not a lost cause. There is only one God and no matter how strong, the ‘spirit of evil’ is, it can never be equal to God! The spiritual battle is an experience that strengthens the weak and challenges the strong in spirit. No one encounters an ‘enemy’ it will not be able to overpower.”

In this way of conceiving prayer, it is a tool used in service of spiritual development and the cultivation of virtue against evil in one’s life and in that of others. In an earlier letter for October 2010, Fr. Sariego calls the Spiritual Children of Padre Pio a “militia of prayer”:

“The Spiritual Children of Padre Pio are a ‘Militia of Prayer’. In unity there is strength. We believe in the power of prayer and the strength and endurance created by a deep relationship with God. If God is for us, who can be against us? The greatest witness we can give others flows from living in the Presence of God. Truly convinced of this, we must be tranquil and at peace within ourselves because God is in control.”

The metaphor of a “militia” conceives of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups as offering to the world and to each other a united and strong “witness” of the power and will of
God, able to fight those forces that would seek to prevent one from engaging in a relationship with God. In his February 2011 letter, Fr. Sariego speaks more directly to the prayer groups on this issue, telling them that their lives are “unique – ordinary lives lived in an extraordinary way”:

“You find strength in the bond of the Spirit’s Love and your commitment to prayer and service. The ‘official’ monthly gathering, in which every Prayer Group is expected to participate, is a celebration of unity in charity. You carry its graces in your lives until you gather again to share and be strengthened by one another at your next monthly encounter. Praying, reflecting, sharing, ministering to each other and even to others outside the Group, the image of Christ and the spirit and encouragement of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina is more deeply manifest to all… Padre Pio’s words offer us the encouragement and reminders to ‘keep on course’.”

I had the opportunity to interview Fr. Sariego to learn more about his perspectives on prayer and the prayer groups in May 2011, including the role of miracles and relics in the groups. In a continuation of the reflections contained above, he stated:

“Prayer is trying to bring myself in awareness of God and to realize that every good expression of my natural life is blessed as long as I make use of my life in accord with what God gave me. Prayer keeps this focus alive….Prayer is a strength within the life of an individual who prays that allows them to stay strong in any encounter due to the strength of their own power through God.”

In asking him to clarify his use of the terms “weapon” and “militia”, he stated that the concept of prayer as a weapon is the “powerful, gentle violence of God’s grace that can’t be overcome by the enemy”. He admits that the phrase, “militia of prayer” is his own, as he wants to convey the need for the groups to be able to “stand up and fight for

the faith”, but he also wants to convey that the groups “bind themselves together in prayer” and that they “stand together” and have “strength in suffering” and “strength of spirit”. “Prayer helps you never to feel lonely”, but “if prayer doesn’t go beyond the self, it is not good”.

Commenting on the role of miracles in the groups, especially for those who have relics like a glove, he admits that “the extraordinary affects the prayer groups, but the thrust of the prayer groups is the holiness of the individuals in the church to be filled with the spirit to lead a God-centered life that beneficially affects others”. Fr. Sariego takes particular issue when the groups use a relic such as a glove for healing purposes, and he posted a public statement in 2007 on this issue that is available on the Padre Pio Prayer Group Web site:

“Dignified veneration of relics demands that formal use of a relic ‘blessing’ or ‘applying’ the relic on another person, or public veneration of the relic, should be done with the express knowledge and consent of a competent representative of the Church (bishop, pastor, priest spiritual director, etc.)… The use and imposition of relics should always be performed with the permission of Church authority in order to avoid any semblance of fanaticism. Sometimes the relic becomes more important than the Sacrament of the Sick and the blessing, prayers and consolation of the Church… When someone is called to bless with the relic of Padre Pio, it would be commendable if that person encourage the sick, infirm, or troubled individual to call a priest to administer the Sacrament of the Sick, the Sacrament of Reconciliation or to speak with the person involved. Unless our actions lead to a trust in the Church and her ministers, the pious devotion and concern with the relic can seem like nothing less than ‘magic’ and a substitution for the Sacraments. Relics are not ‘magical amulets’ but objects that help us trust in God through the holy person whose intercession we invoke”.

In providing further commentary for those groups engaged in this activity during my interview with him, he stated: “They’re holding onto the marvelous, but they’ll eventually lose the sense of mystery. Let the sacrament be the first thought, along with the relic. [The] connection between God and saint is always there, with or without a relic. That’s why one prays to saints for intercession.” One can see by the public statement and Fr. Sariego’s comments that the clerical concern in using relics like a glove from Padre Pio to pray over those who are sick is not just an issue of missing the “sense of mystery” in the power of intercessory prayer through a saint or not showing “any semblance of fanaticism”, but it is also seen as a challenge to the Church’s role of conducting sacraments and the intentions that are involved in receiving those sacraments. Though it is certainly possible or likely that someone who wants to be blessed with a relic like a glove from Padre Pio will also have a priest perform the Sacrament of the Sick, Fr. Sariego is concerned that the sacramental process will not be the focus for the person who is sick.

The Anointing of the Sick, one of the Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church (Baptism, Eucharist, Repentance, Confirmation, Matrimony, Priestly Orders, and Anointing of the Sick), is performed by a priest on someone who is in danger of death due to sickness or old age. A priest can perform this anointing in any place where the person is located: “the “priests of the Church” - in silence - lay hands on the sick; they pray over them in the faith of the Church - this is the epiclesis proper to this sacrament;
they then anoint them with oil blessed, if possible, by the bishop.” (Catechism 1519)\textsuperscript{44}

The Sacrament has four specific effects:

“\textit{A particular gift of the Holy Spirit.} The first grace of this sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. This grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews trust and faith in God and strengthens against the temptations of the evil one, the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death. This assistance from the Lord by the power of his Spirit is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God's will. Furthermore, "if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."

\textit{Union with the passion of Christ.} By the grace of this sacrament the sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ's Passion: in a certain way he is consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior's redemptive Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.

\textit{An ecclesial grace.} The sick who receive this sacrament, "by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ," "contribute to the good of the People of God." By celebrating this sacrament the Church, in the communion of saints, intercedes for the benefit of the sick person, and he, for his part, though the grace of this sacrament, contributes to the sanctification of the Church and to the good of all men for whom the Church suffers and offers herself through Christ to God the Father.

\textit{A preparation for the final journey.} If the sacrament of anointing of the sick is given to all who suffer from serious illness and infirmity, even more rightly is it given to those at the point of departing this life; so it is also called \textit{sacramentum exeuntium} (the sacrament of those departing). The Anointing of the Sick completes our conformity to the death and Resurrection of Christ, just as Baptism began it. It completes the holy anointing that mark the whole Christian life: that of Baptism which sealed the new life in us, and that of Confirmation which strengthened us for the combat of this life. This last anointing fortifies the end of our earthly life like a solid rampart for the final struggles before entering the Father's house” (1520-1523).

\textsuperscript{44} Catechism of the Catholic Church. www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM. Accessed May 2016.
The sacrament is intended to provide a way for someone who is seriously ill to gain strength to “overcome the difficulties”, sanctify suffering by reframing it as “a participation in the saving work of Jesus”, grant prayerful support through the Church which “in the communion of saints, intercedes for the benefit of the sick person”, and prepare one for death through one’s “final struggles before entering the Father’s house”. From the perspective of Fr. Sariego, one could see that the use of a relic like a glove has the potential of being understood as a ‘magical amulet’ where one hopes for this-worldly healing without seeing the bigger picture of one’s life as part of a sacramental relationship within the Catholic Church.

One may recall John’s statements from the prayer group meeting where he sought to clarify, for those who conceive of The Glove in more magical terms, that it should be understood as a “sacramental” and that it is “God’s will” if one is to be physically healed after being blessed with The Glove. According to the Church, sacramentals are: “sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy” (1667). There are a great number of different sacramental - from holy water, scapulars, and rosaries, to blessings from priests over people, places, and meals – though the catechism differentiates these from the veneration of relics, which are discussed in a section on “Popular Piety”:

“Besides sacramental liturgy and sacramentals, catechesis must take into account the forms of piety and popular devotions among the faithful. The religious sense
of the Christian people has always found expression in various forms of piety surrounding the Church's sacramental life, such as the veneration of relics, visits to sanctuaries, pilgrimages, processions, the stations of the cross, religious dances, the rosary, medals, etc.

These expressions of piety extend the liturgical life of the Church, but do not replace it. They "should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them" (1674-1675).

Thus, if the veneration of relics can “extend the liturgical life of the Church” as long as it can “harmonize” with that liturgical life, then it is important for John to articulate in what way a blessing with The Glove can be understood as continuous with the traditions of the Church and not a magical process. Calling it a sacramental allows The Glove to be handled in a way one might handle a scapular – with faithful care – but gives John the ability to bring The Glove into contact with others the way one faithful person might freely pass out a scapular to another person. Though, when reading Fr. Sariego’s statement about the use of relics by the groups as part of healing the sick, it is clear there is a disagreement.

While the story I recounted from Arthur’s testimony reads as an unexplained phenomena, the testimonies from Sal and Leti Martelli about their miraculous experiences are different. In their cases, a variety of prayers and spiritual efforts were made to advance healing, and the ascribed role of intercession is continuous with taking a holistic view of the process that includes medical treatments and behavioral effort and physical care on the part of the sick person to improve their health. For Sal, he located Padre Pio’s role as “stalling the PET scan testing that delayed the operation he was to
receive”, while Leti thought that Padre Pio’s visitation could have been more of a reminder to “Give time, time” and to let go of anxiety – Pray, Hope, and Don’t Worry. These stories give credence that the interpretation on the part of a faithful person who has experienced a “miracle” will differ along a spectrum from asserting the occurrence of a miracle in more magical terms to those who take a broader view to understand what has happened.

No Glove

I learned about a second Padre Pio Prayer Group that meets on the second Wednesday night of every month at a different location in the eastern United States. In mid-2011, I began to attend this monthly Padre Pio Prayer Group meeting. I attended these meetings regularly for approximately 18 months, from mid-2011 through early 2013. As I came to learn from the very first meeting, these are quite different than the other gatherings. The group has about 14 members, of whom about 10-12 regularly attend the meetings, with a roughly 50/50 male to female and a mix of different ages, from those in their 40s to those in their 70s. The Mass is held in a small chapel. The group had only been in existence for about one year at the time and was structured to closely follow the Padre Pio Prayer Group Statutes. The group’s charitable cause is to volunteer for a monthly bingo at a local Veteran’s Association. Upon arriving at my first Wednesday evening meeting, I was given a handbook for the group. The handbook includes special prayers to say before and after Communion during the Mass; a complete written version of the Glorious Mysteries (the version of the Rosary recited on
Wednesdays), which is recited as a group after the Mass; prayers to be spoken as a group at the beginning and closure of the meeting, excerpts from the Statutes of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups; and a directory with contact information for each of the members of the group.

The homily given during my first meeting, which was typical of subsequent meetings, was short and spoke directly to the readings and the gospel selections for the Mass. The prayer after Communion included in the Handbook, “Stay with me Lord” from Padre Pio, is recited at the end of the Mass:

“Stay with me Lord”

Stay with me, Lord, for it is necessary to have You present so that I do not forget You. You know how easily I abandon You.

Stay with me, Lord, because I am weak and I need Your strength, that I may not fall so often.

Stay with me, Lord, for You are my life, and without You, I am without meaning and hope.

Stay with me, Lord, for You are my light, and without You, I am in darkness.

Stay with me, Lord, to show me Your will.

Stay with me, Lord, so that I can hear Your voice and follow You.

Stay with me, Lord, for I desire to love You ever more, and to be always in Your company.

Stay with me, Lord, if You wish me to be always faithful to You.

Stay with me, Lord, for as poor as my soul is, I wish it to be a place of consolation for You, a dwelling of Your love.

Stay with me, Jesus, for it is getting late; the days are coming to a close and life is passing. Death, judgment, and eternity are drawing near. It is necessary to renew my strength, so that I will not stop along the way, and for that I need You. It is
getting late and death approaches. I fear the darkness, the temptations, the
dryness, the cross, the sorrows. O how I need You, my Jesus, in this night of
exile!

Stay with me, Jesus, because in the darkness of this life, with all its dangers, I
need You.

Help me to recognize You as Your disciples did at the Breaking of the Bread, so
that the Eucharistic Communion be the light which disperses the darkness, the
power which sustains me, the unique joy of my heart.

Stay with me, Lord, because at the hour of my death I want to be one with You,
and if not by Communion, at least by Your grace and love.

Stay with me, Jesus. I do not ask for divine consolations because I do not deserve
them, but I only ask for the gift of Your Presence. Oh yes! I ask this of You!

Stay with me, Lord, for I seek You alone, Your Love, Your Grace, Your Will,
Your Heart, Your Spirit, because I love You and ask no other reward but to love
You more and more, with a strong and active love.

Grant that I may love You with all my heart while on earth, so that I can continue
to love You perfectly throughout all eternity.

Amen!

After the Mass ended, the group went into a U-shaped room behind the altar with
sets of pews against three walls. The wall without pews was the backside of the altar,
from where one could enter through two doors on either side. There the group prayed a
full cycle of the rosary in the dimly-lit, intimate room, set well for a contemplative and
solemn mood and suitable for Eucharistic Adoration. In unison, the group began the
rosary, with individuals in the group identified in advance as to who would lead the
recitation for each of the Mysteries of the rosary.
After the rosary, the group went into the basement of the chapel, where there is a meeting room with tables and chairs set-up for the group. After a congenial round of hellos and introductions, the meeting begins with a prayer to Padre Pio:

**Prayer to St. Pio at the beginning of the Meeting**

Saint Pio of Pietrelcina, You were generously endowed by God, The Giver of all good gifts, With the gifts of the Spirit, Signing your body as a living witness to the saving Passion and Death of Jesus, His Son.

Many looked upon the reflection of the Crucified Jesus in your body and experienced anew God’s saving mercy.

Through your ministry, God reconciled penitents to Himself and invited them to taste His sweetness in the Holy Eucharist.

Through your powerful intercession before God, pray for us, that we may follow Your example of prayer and penance and come to follow more closely our Risen Lord so that one day we may rejoice with you in that kingdom where God calls all his faithful children to live in the light of His love and eternal peace.

Pray for us Saint Pio of Pietrelcina that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray:

God of mercy and love, you called St. Pio of Pietrelcina to extend the mystery of the cross visibly into the lives of sinners and sufferers, that they might be converted to believe in the Gospel. Through his intercession, strengthen all believers in the willingness to take up the cross daily and follow Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

Amen.

The secretary for the group, Nancy, is in charge of taking notes at a given meeting and hands out typed versions of those notes at the following meeting. After reviewing the notes as a recap from their previous gathering to see if anybody has any questions or has any amendments, the meeting then transitions to a 1-page meditative reading from
Padre Pio on a specific topic or virtue provided by the director of the group. Topics that were explored in the first meeting I attended and future meetings included love and charity, providing comfort to others, “be like children”, what it means to be a Christian, among many others. Sometimes the kick-off for the meeting might be a specific quote from Padre Pio or the Bible. Here are examples that were provided during different meetings:

“The cross will never oppress you; its weight might cause you to stagger, but its strength will sustain you”

“A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance” - Proverbs 15:13

This then leads into discussions reflecting on people’s personal experiences connected with the topic, making references to difficulties and joys within one’s life and others within the Church community. Sometimes the conversation can move into a discussion of problems in society or politics, but usually the group tries to stay close to topics and issues related to devotion and spirituality. The discussion usually lasts about 30 minutes or more, depending on the energy of the group.

The meeting then shifts to corporate prayer, where members share their intentions and ask the group to pray for specific individuals who are physically or spiritually suffering. The meeting concludes with the Prayer of Pope John Paul II to St. Pio:

Prayer of Pope John Paul II to St. Pio, which concludes the meeting

Padre Pio, teach us also, we pray, humility of heart, so that we may be among the humble to whom the Father in the Gospel promised to reveal the mysteries of His
Kingdom. Obtain for us the eyes of faith that will help us recognize in the poor and suffering, the very face of Jesus. Support us in our hours of trouble and trial and, should we fall, let us experience the joy of the sacrament of forgiveness. Teach us tender devotion to Mary, mother of Jesus and our Mother. Accompany us on our earthly pilgrimage toward the blessed Homeland, where we too, hope to arrive to contemplate forever the Glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen

The spiritual director for the group, who also officiates Mass, is Father Nunzio. A man in his 40s, Father Nunzio is a soft-spoken and reflective spiritual director for the group, providing careful and down-to-earth guidance in meeting discussion. He walks and talks slowly, often enduring pain with frequent headaches due to physical and health difficulties. On many occasions, he would come late to the meetings after Mass, or leave early if he wasn’t feeling well. The director for the group is Douglas, a man also in his 40s who earlier in his life endured a tragic accident when he was carjacked and shot many times, including bullets to the head. When he was being rescued, he was asked about a back seat passenger by his rescuers that they thought was there, but nobody had been riding with him in the car. When enduring the aftermath of the accident, holy oil was placed on his damaged eye and intercessory groups prayed for him. He considers himself lucky to be alive and believes in the power of intercessory prayer.

The group has a positive spirit, though it is clear there are differences in relationship with the Catholic tradition on a liberal/conservative line that is acknowledged by the members. These differences are, for the most part, tolerated in the service of the greater good which they are each trying to achieve in their lives. In addition, throughout the time I attended the meeting, the group was always open to
changing aspects of their activities within the bounds of the Statutes, from considering whether they should switch their charitable cause from the Veterans organization to another place, to considering holding special events to introduce people in the area to Padre Pio and to encourage them to join the group. In general, the group was flexible and open to new possibilities for how to conceive of their time together as a group. Two important changes did occur which significantly modified the original flow of the meetings that I had first attended.

First was a change to the place for the recitation of the rosary. Douglas stated during a group meeting that some people felt “uncomfortable” with holding the rosary in the back room behind the altar. In order to accommodate this concern, the rosary shifted to being said in the chairs in the chapel with everyone facing forward, otherwise not facing each other. The recitation of the rosary continued from there in future meetings in the chapel, but it greatly changed the environment within which the rosary took place.

Second, when I began attending meetings, Douglas would lead the meeting discussion by providing a quote or a reading from Padre Pio for group reflection and discussion. This seemed to work well for the meetings that I attended which employed this structure. Though, in order to get all group members involved in contributing to the discussion, the group leadership wanted to experiment with a change in format where individual members would be responsible for presenting at a given meeting (around once a year) and were asked to volunteer to sign-up, choosing a topic pertaining to the Church. The implementation of this experiment proved successful. Topics and approaches that
individual members presented on ranged from Mary, family, and abortion, among others. Members didn’t always incorporate Padre Pio into the presentations, but according to Father Nunzio and the requirements of the Statutes, it was necessary for the presentations to be “catechetical”.

As part of this change in format, I volunteered and was permitted to lead the discussion for a meeting in October 2012, even though I am participating in the group as a researcher. Entitled, “Thoughts and Emotions during Prayer”, I wanted to explore the thoughts and emotions that members have had during their prayer experiences. In sharing quotes from the Catechism and Padre Pio on meditation and prayer, exploring both positive and negative thoughts in praying, I posed two sets of questions to the group:

What thoughts and emotions do you experience just before, during, and after praying? Are these thoughts and emotions the same if you are praying in a group as opposed to praying alone? What about when you are praying the rosary as opposed to other forms of prayer?

Have you ever experienced difficulty in praying or felt that God was not accessible to you? If so, how have you persevered through these experiences to feel that God is present, listening, and answering your prayers?

Father Nunzio responded by acknowledging that he liked that I posed the positive and negative aspects of prayer, because sometimes one’s experiences can be good and other times one can feel “bone dry”. Douglas talked about the difficulty he has in praying for all of the people who ask him to pray for intercession. Nancy talked about how when she does her prayers, she doesn’t feel strong emotions or joy in them. Instead,
she has strong emotions when she experiences nature, such as seeing a beautiful bird, a sunset, places like the Grand Canyon – this to her is a kind of prayer.

Megan spoke about how difficult it was for her to pray when her son was sick last year. She just couldn’t pray, but felt better that others were praying for her and her son. She spoke about the importance of community and relying on others. She also spoke about her trip to Assisi, Italy, where she visited the cloistered order of The Poor Clares. They sang prayers behind a screen (one couldn’t see them) and it was like “hearing heaven”.

Joanne, a woman in her early 50s who was in the process of becoming a secular Franciscan and had recently spent significant time with religious orders in other parts of the country to determine what kind of religious life she wanted to pursue, was very animated to talk about the difference between praying in a group vs. praying alone. For her, group prayer is difficult because it is harder to concentrate with “differences in cadence and rhythm”. Prayer is easier for her when conducted alone, but she thinks it is “more valuable to God when tolerating differences” in group prayer. She also spoke about a previous experience she had in a religious order where they sang the Seven Hours in soft, almost angelic voices. On a different note, she remarked how it is easier for her to pray while walking and moving. She recounted a story of someone who had stopped her and asked her to pray for him, but he couldn’t obviously have known that she was already praying while walking.
Similar to other meeting discussions, the conversation in response to the questions I had posed was thoughtful and oriented to engage one’s life experiences. One member even talked about whenever she prays for a new job, she gets one, and she is now on her fourth job in 10 years. The responses included above are illustrative of the kinds of comments that occur in the meeting, illustrative of a focus on spiritual formation in alignment with the Statutes. While the group does not have access to a relic of Padre Pio and talk of miracles tends not to occur, there was a discussion during one meeting as to whether they might try to arrange a special visit for someone to attend the meeting who had a Padre Pio glove so that the person could talk about the experiences they have had with it. In my time attending the meeting, this did not happen.

**IR Analysis of Padre Pio Prayer Groups**

For Padre Pio Prayer Groups, the common event is the monthly meeting which is comprised of a recitation of the rosary, a Mass, and a group meeting where joint prayer and discussions/presentations can be made in the spirit of Padre Pio, including prayer for the relief of the suffering for those afflicted with difficulties, often health maladies, in accordance with codified Statutes that generally regulate what is a group, a group’s official recognition in the Church, and what it should be doing. The meetings take place in the common spaces of a church, a basement in the cases of the two groups I attended, at a time when there are typically not others in the church (Saturday mornings and Wednesday nights, respectively), so there is a natural barrier to outsiders, including fellow Catholics in the community. Through the ritual recitation of the rosary and
performance of a Mass, there is a shared mood and focus of attention through formal rituals, but the nature of the group solidarity and generation of emotional energy differs between the groups in how they engage as a group after formal rituals.

For “The Glove” group, the symbol of social relationship is clearly The Glove, which serves as the orienting sacred object that informs the structure and flow of the non-regulated portions of the monthly meeting. After the rosary and Mass, the meeting begins with a procession, a long line of individuals who wait to be blessed with The Glove, and the stories of healing or hoped for healing shared by group leaders and special guests usually deal in some way with The Glove. It even serves as the name of the newsletter for the group. The founding of the group by Joan and Michelle, who each received gloves as relics upon a special visit to the Vatican and established the group while having the relic on hand, has greatly affected what it means for this group to be a Padre Pio Prayer Group. In addition, since the group was founded in the early 1970s, well before the Statutes were codified by the Church in 1986, the habitual entrainment of the group was routinized many years before official rules were put in place. It’s not that the “The Glove” group violates any of the “norms” per se in the meeting, since they generally abide by the structure of the groups in terms of the leadership structure, the activities of the monthly meeting, and charitable work and prayer in service of those who are suffering. Though, the focus on the miraculous in how they orient the group is not what is intended, as both indicated by Fr. Sariego’s public statement, as well as the Statutes, which state that “the Groups shall consider the study of Catholic doctrine…as part of their spiritual formation”. For “The Glove” group, study or discussion of Catholic
doctrine was not enacted as part of their spiritual formation. Instead, enacting intercessory and ritual prayer in service of healing was the focus of spiritual formation, with The Glove as the central symbol for generating collective effervescence to keep alive the power of miraculous healing for a group that has grown old through the years of dedication to and inspiration from Padre Pio.

Michelle is the living representative with the efficacious connection to the miraculous history of Padre Pio as one of his “spiritual daughters” who has had an energetic life to spread the message around the world about the importance of the Capuchin friar, and John is the “saint” who is willing to travel when he is capable to someone in need who would like to be blessed with The Glove. Despite these charismatic figures at the center of the action, there are very few new group members that have been recruited in recent years, having instead to rely on the many regulars and their family members to volunteer and sustain the group amidst an overall decline in attendance. There is also the difficulty of being able to replace such charismatic figures. When confronted with Michelle’s chronic illness, canceled meetings, and the need to transfer leadership of the meeting over to other group committee members, attendance continued its downward trajectory along with a steady decline in positive emotional energy for participants.

The increase in disruptive social chatter is a potential indicator of this loss of emotional energy. Since the monthly gathering is also a positive social experience to see people at the meeting (“like a family”), as many of the attendees are from different
Catholic parishes in the region, it is to be expected that group participants will want to connect and talk during the meeting. This is especially the case since conversation or discussion is not built into the meeting structure and the seating arrangement is such that people are sitting across from each other at tables which are not positioned to face the front of the room where the podium is positioned. Thus, a reasonable amount of low-level conversation could be expected, with an additional accommodation that a number of the participants are older and hard of hearing, but the increase in the incidence and loudness during presentations by multiple speakers was unusual, marked by the righteous anger on display and the public rebukes that were uttered by the group leaders to the members. One could understand these disruptions as similar to ‘booing’ at a sporting event, indicative of the ability of a highly bonded audience to express their feelings and challenge the expected courtesies, mirroring the group’s challenge of Church authority by its use of The Glove, or the disinterested fatigue from the repetition of a kind of storytelling that prompts the group to ‘tune out’ from the flow of the meeting. More cynically, one might think that some participants could be there for the free food and the opportunity to ‘get stuff’ in the chance-off, but this would diverge significantly from Father Jones’ depiction of the group as the “cream of the crop”. Ultimately, it could be said that the form of participation for most group members in the meeting, following the formal rituals of the rosary and the Mass, is one of being an audience bonded by the spirit of Padre Pio, routinized in a low-intensity meeting pattern, that hopes to hear or see something special and provides hope in the face of aging and suffering.
For the “No Glove” group, the orienting symbol of social relationship is the formal structure of the group, as enacted by the Statutes, to further their spiritual formation and prayer lives as inspired by Padre Pio. With a handbook to guide the structure and flow of the meeting and formal prayers enacted at various junctures of the gathering, the space for discussion in the group is focused on spiritual formation through meditation on writings from Padre Pio and Catholic doctrine, and encourages group members to share their personal experiences and struggles in life from a spiritual perspective. It is a group that goes “by the book”, so to speak. The ability to generate collective effervescence in a more organic fashion is difficult, since the shared mood and mutual focus of attention is on the structured flow of the meeting rituals and prayers, there is not a shared parish community from which the members can draw, and there is no charismatic anchor to draw members into the group as a mechanism to experience something special. With the change to have individual members offer presentations to the group, the month to month experience in the meeting discussion is highly dependent on the quality of a given presenter.

The choice to change the space for the recitation of the rosary from the U-shaped room to the main chapel could be seen as a lost opportunity to create that special experience within the meeting structure that could generate more positive emotional energy. The dimly-lit room provides a sacred and solemn ambience that allows the group to experience the recitation of the rosary in an intimate way, enhancing the shared rhythm of mutual entrainment to increase the chances that members will experience collective effervescence. Deciding to move away from this format, preferring instead to sit forward
facing the altar in the chairs of the well-lit chapel, the group has chosen not taken advantage of the physical uniqueness of the ritual space.

Despite the differences in the two groups, what each shares is a commitment to prayer conceived as a spiritual weapon, consonant with Padre Pio’s eponymous quote and Fr. Sariego’s elaborations. If prayer is the “key to God’s heart” according to Padre Pio, then “The Glove” group enacts this by actively encouraging members to pray the rosary often and testifying to its transformative potential. As God’s activity and will in this world are alternately spoken about in emotional terms (God is “mad”) and in a miraculous healing context, the combined bond of rosary and The Glove provides protection from evil forces among us and serves as a tactile conduit for facilitating healing forces via intercessory prayer within oneself and other. For the “No Glove” group, prayer as a weapon is conceived in a discursive manner, enumerating the special prayers enacted that are specific to Padre Pio and conceiving of the meeting as a time for all to share their perspective on cultivating their spiritual lives with a commitment to intercessory prayer. From the perspective of the “battle” that Fr. Sariego elaborates, each way has the potential to embolden the faithful and to keep in check the forces that act upon the group members in a secular world.
CHAPTER 4

Said Nursi and the Nur Movement: Battling for Belief

In Anatolia Junction, a journalistic accounting of the author’s “voyage to High Anatolia in the footsteps of the Muslim preacher, revivalist and ascetic Bediüzzaman Said Nursi” in the 1990s (Reed 15), Fred Reed provides an imaginative reflection on the symbolic meaning of Said Nursi, as he lies dying in a hotel room in Urfa in 1960 while throngs of people clamor to enter the building to pay him respects before he passes away as government authorities try to forcibly remove him:

“The paradox of Turkey’s secular regime stood etched against the sharp edged glare of reality. He whose claim on the peoples’ hearts exceeded that of the embattled Prime Minister was, judged against the official criteria of the Republic, a non-person, a reactionist relic, a cantankerous, disorderly throwback to an un lamented past. A dying man who exercised no power, who commanded no battalions, who owned nothing but the prayer rug and battered tea-pot that his companions now carried as they laid him down on the narrow bed that all but filled the room” (31).

The reflection above encapsulates the struggles and journey that Said Nursi endured throughout his life as a person committed to protecting and renewing Islamic belief in a way that is in accordance with the lived virtues of religion, responsive to the needs of everyday people, and intellectually oriented to providing the resources for thinking and reflection that accords with the advances of modern society as an inevitable challenge to the secularism that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had implemented. This chapter will provide a
biographical accounting of Nursi’s life – chronologically proceeding through his self-styled life stages of the “Old Said”, the “New Said” and the “Third Said” – along the way showing how Nursi’s perspective was shaped and how the Risale-i Nur was produced and distributed, leading to a mass movement within Turkey amidst political suppressions both during and after his death.

In this retelling, I will largely focus around two texts – Sukran Vahide’s Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (2005) and Serif Mardin’s Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1989) – for two respective reasons. First, Vahide’s account is the most comprehensive English-language biography of Nursi, synthesizing Nursi’s official, multi-volume biography in Turkish by Necmeddin Sahiner with numerous other scholarly and historical sources. Given that Vahide is one of the leading translators of the Risale-i Nur into English, her translational style and voice carries significant weight in shaping the reception of Nursi’s work to much of the Western world. Close attention to Vahide’s text will be utilized throughout the chapter, as her biographical work framing Nursi’s intellectual and life-course development will be greatly relied upon for explicating the background and seeds from which the Risale-i Nur and the Nur movement planted and grew.

Second, after almost three decades, Mardin’s portrait of the Nurculuk remains one of the few, but also the best and most insightful sociological resource for understanding the cultural and social dynamics of Nursi’s thought and his movement, adroitly attending
to how it responds to the concerns of everyday life in the secularized environment of twentieth-century Turkey\textsuperscript{45}. Mardin treats Islam as a social practice within a “Weberian frame”, instead of a “Foucauldian” frame (Mardin 14), looking to scholars such as Ernest Gellner, Anthony Giddens, Michel de Certeau, and Victor Turner to understand the power dynamics of the idiomatic development of the Nurcu movement within the particularities of the Turkish context of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mardin takes seriously the “believer’s conceptualization of what religion means to him in relation to his everyday life” in his analysis, which he states “cannot be dismissed as an epiphenomenon which ‘masks’ a more basic dynamic of religion” (17), and he seeks to bring attention as well to the “unconscious”, “psychological processes” of the Nurcu followers to shed light on the “inner drives” involved in the development of the movement (16). While attending to reasons from a social structural perspective as to why Nursi’s movement would have influence in this context, such as the emergence of the “communications revolution” (15), he leaves aside an analysis of why the movement would gain traction from a “charismatic” perspective:

“…the charismatic appeal of an esoteric style as items in the power that builds up a faith movement such as the one I study, still remain somewhat mysterious, and I have not attempted to decipher them but take them as irreducible elements of the religious experience. The clue to these paradoxes may be that ‘poetry’ and

\textsuperscript{45} Hakan Yavuz, in his introductory essay to a special 1999 issue of the journal Muslim World, which sought to uncover “the intellectual roots of the Islamic movement in Turkey” (Yavuz, “Assassination” 207), praises Mardin’s work, and differentiates it from orientalist approaches to understanding Islamic movements: “Studies of Islam and Islamic movements in Turkey have not escaped the overcontextualization and essentialism of the dominant orientalist discourse. Most of these studies follow Daniel Lerner’s The Passing of Traditional Societies and Bernard Lewis’s The Emergence of Modern Turkey. Serif Mardin, the doyen of Islamic studies in Turkey, and Nilüfer Gole are the only two scholars who did not subscribe to this approach. Both have made major contributions with their locally sensitive and theoretically guided works” (193). See Yavuz, M. Hakan. “The Assassination of Collective Memory: The Case of Turkey.” Muslim World, vol. 39, no. 3-4, July-October 1999, pp. 193-207.
‘mystic marks’ are more integral parts of the ‘common-sense world’ than many would admit” (14).

While each source has its weaknesses – Vahide’s text exhibits a strong hagiographical sensibility and Mardin has received some criticism for his portrayal of Nursi’s ideas - writing the story of the Nur movement in conversation with these two texts provides a thorough view of the contextual development of Nursi’s life, thought, and the movement that it generated based on the information available to date. The chapter will conclude with a brief historical overview of the Nur movement since Nursi’s passing and a consideration of the role of dershanes in advancing the movement to illustrate how these social gatherings inculcate disciplinary practices and shared norms to construct a particular form of Muslim consciousness. Within the purview of this dissertation utilizing interaction ritual theory to contextually understand disciplinary practices, the intention is to provide the historical and scholarly resources to bring forth

---

46 The 2005 volume from SUNY Press is an edited version of her first book, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: The Author of the Risale-i Nur (1992), published by Sozler, which is a Nur-based imprint that also publishes her translations of the Risale-i Nur.

47 Metin Karabasoglu, a leading authority of the Risale-i Nur in Turkey, criticizes Mardin’s couching of the Nur movement as an ideological response to modernity, consistent with a number of other secular scholars of Islamic movements: “This secular viewpoint of Islam and Muslims has been a feature of some studies conducted on the Risale. Serif Mardin, for example, takes this stance in his famous study of the Nur movement. He places his discussion within a broad historical and social context, which is, according to him, a direct product of the impact of modernity on the Ottoman Empire. According to Mardin, “Bediüzzaman’s message was shaped by the modernizing world into which he was thrust” [quoting Mardin, p. 37]. There is no place in Mardin’s study for theological concepts such as sincerity in worship, devotion, God’s approval, knowledge of God, and love of God” (Karabasoglu 263). In a footnote, Karabasoglu provides further criticism, but a fair take on the impact of Mardin’s book: “Although Mardin’s book reflects a reductionist attitude and the fact that he relates such unsound allegations as “Newtonian worldview,” and “deistic mood” to Nursi, it represents a serious contribution to understanding the Nur movement. It must also be admitted that Mardin’s work is a pioneering one in Turkish academia, which reveals strong Kemalist biases. However, his book has encouraged many Turkish academicians to recognize the Risale as a legitimate course of study” (289n). See Karabasoglu, Metin. “Text and Community: An Analysis of the Risale-i Nur Movement.” Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, edited by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, SUNY Press, 2003, pp. 263-296).
the ‘charismatic’ aspects that shape the conscious experiences of believers in order to better elucidate the micro-level dynamics of the Nur movement, seeking in the conclusion of the dissertation to complement Mardin’s analysis with reflection on more recent theoretical currents and debates in sociology and anthropology.

**Old Said**

Born in 1878\(^{48}\) in the small village of Nurs in eastern Anatolia, Said Nursi was the fourth of seven children from a humble Kurdish family. Mirza, Said’s father, tended to a plot of land along with his wife, Nura, while many of their seven children embarked on education in traditional Islamic sciences, including one of Said’s sisters. ‘Sufi’ Mirza, as Said’s father was known, exposed his children to the teachings of the “revivalist Naqshbandi/Khalidi” Sufi order, whose medreses and tekkes were prevalent in Nursi’s region of eastern Anatolia, which emphasized “scholarly learning” and “virtuous activity”, rather than the “quest for mystical knowledge” (Vahide 4-5). In time, the region would go on to produce many teachers and students of Islam as a result of the widespread influence of this Sufi order, but Said distinguished himself at an early age as particularly apt for a life of scholarship. Said exhibited a high capacity for learning and memory in his study of the religious sciences of his time, beginning his studies of the Qur’an at the age of nine, and traveling with his older brother Abdullah – already certified as a “Molla” – to learn from different teachers in the medreses surrounding the

\(^{48}\) There is some disagreement as to the exact year of Nursi’s birth, with different publications citing 1876, 1877, or 1878 as the correct year based on how the recording of his birth year translates into the Gregorian calendar from the Rumi or Hijri calendars. Based on a recent publication, I have settled on 1878. See Markham, Ian S. and Suendam Birinci Pirim. *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought, and Writings*. Ashgate, 2011, p. 3n.
region of Nurs. A “pugnacious” child, “prone to quarreling with both his peers and elders”, Said would sometimes get into fights with other students and would often voice disagreement with his teachers, peers, and his brother, challenging their interpretations of the Qur’an (6-9). Led by his “fierce independence” and “almost foolhardy courage”, Said eventually left his brother to venture by himself to neighboring villages and medreses, which was “extremely dangerous due to the lawlessness of the times”, pursuing his studies at a more advanced rate (9).

By 1891-92, when Said was 13 or 14 years old, he had already completed the entire course of study current in medreses, a course that would take the average student “fifteen to twenty years” to complete (10). Frustrated by the many commentaries and super commentaries that a student needed to master in the traditional course of study, he instead ignored many of them and selectively attended to sections of these commentaries since he considered many of them to be a waste of time (ibid.). Though, it is said that Nursi had the capacity to independently study, without the aid of a teacher, and master some of the most difficult texts, hundreds of pages in length, within “twenty-four hours” (11). As he became immersed in the writings of the Illuminists, Ghazali, and other ascetic exemplars, Said planned to live the life of a Sufi ascetic, donning the clothes of a dervish. Serif Mardin points to his exposure to the illuminist Ishraqi school of mystical thought at this time as being consequential on the later development of Nursi’s ideas, which explicitly used the imagery of light, whereby knowledge of God is achieved through “flashes of illumination”: 
“Two aspects of Said Nursi’s thought explain the role of illuminism played in his thinking. For one, illumination was a road to knowledge of God which bypassed the academicism of his teachers and could surmount their charisma as Halidi leaders. Secondly, the concept of God as Light of Light, as an emanation from His Being, which was reflected in all aspects of being, was one which he seems to have used in preference to the Naksibendi’s strict monism at this time. Illuminism, in fact, had a potential for a more populistic vision of the Godhead, and one eminently suited to his goal of making the idea of the divine comprehensible to persons, who, like himself, did not have time to waste in complex and time-consuming intellectual initiation. The backdrop of mysticism of Anatolian Islam predisposed a message based on the idea of emanation to meet with a sympathetic response” (Mardin 70).

Upon receiving his diploma – and becoming Molla Said – he returned to his brother after an eight-month period of time, whereby Said proclaimed to his brother to have read “eighty books”, including many not on the medrese syllabus (Vahide 12). When Abdullah tested his knowledge, he was “left in admiration and astonishment” and accepted his younger brother as his master (ibid.). When rumors began to circulate that Said was a “child veli or saint-prodigy”, he decided to forgo the clothes of a dervish or even that of a religious scholar and instead opted for the dress of a Kurdish chieftain to conceal the level of his knowledge and the depth of his spirituality, marking his symbolic deviation from the traditional Sufi path (12-13). Thus, while Said began to teach Arabic sciences, have his own students, and become involved in scholarly debates at a young age, he did not desire to be a Sufi shaikh in the same way. As Said left his brother and ventured out to other towns and medreses, coming into contact with ulama in his region and other Mollas, his feats of learning were honored by Molla Fethullah Efendi, who gave him the name Bediüzzaman, or “Wonder of the Age”, which stayed with Said throughout his life (13).
Nursi wasn’t just known for his scholarly exploits, but also his physical acumen and daring courage. He greatly enjoyed wrestling – he routinely wrestled students in the medreses and was not able to be beaten (19); he would challenge friends in physical feats, such as when he jumped over a water canal (14) and walked on the parapet of the gallery of a stone minaret that was over 60 feet high, built on the summit of an extinct volcano (21); and always carried a dagger, in order to deter those defeated by him in scholarly debate who would seek to physically challenge him (14). As Said Nursi’s fame grew in the region due to his courage, scholarly capacities, and strict commitment to an observant Muslim lifestyle, he was eventually patronized by the governor of Bitlis as a religious advisor at around the age of twenty and stayed with him for two years as a guest in his residence. During this time, Nursi expanded his knowledge of the religious sciences, seeking to comprehensively master logic, Arabic grammar and syntax, tafsir, Hadith, and fiqh. He “committed to memory around forty books in two years”, including several works of kalam, and memorized most of the Qur’an (24-25). Nursi was then extended an invitation in the mid-to-late 1890s to stay in the residence of the governor of Van, Iskodralı Tahir Pasha, who was much respected by Sultan Abdulhamid II, followed developments in science, and had his own extensive library. It is here that Said Nursi, in taking advantage of these resources, including journals and newspapers, learned the Turkish language and embarked on a self-study of secular subjects, such as “history, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and philosophy”, as well as becoming more deeply exposed to current events (27-28). Much like his experiences in medreses, Said was often challenged in his self-taught scientific
knowledge by teachers of these subjects in Van and routinely won; he even authored a treatise on algebraic equations (28).

During this time, it is said that Nursi memorized “approximately ninety books” that he considered essential in the secular sciences and he began to cultivate his notions for the necessity of educational reform, whereby the Islamic and natural sciences should be taught together in order to strengthen the truths of religion (28-29). While Nursi’s learning broadened and deepened as he became a trusted advisor to Tahir Pasha – where he “appears to have been accepted almost as one of Tahir Pasha’s family” – and was often dispatched to help resolve tribal disputes in the region over the next decade, he also witnessed the growing Westernization and secularization that many in the elite and government classes had been adopting, leaving behind Islamic practice and often viewing it as a problem for making social and cultural progress in the Ottoman empire. In order to combat this sensibility, Nursi began to develop his ideas to establish a new university in eastern Anatolia – what he called the Medresetu’z-Zehra modeled after al-Azhar University in Cairo – in order to address the “widespread ignorance and backwardness of the region” (29) and create the foundation for a new way of teaching and advancing the connection between Islamic and secular knowledge.

In 1907, Nursi moved to Istanbul in an attempt to advance the cause of this university within the court of Sultan Abdulhamid. Introduced by a letter from Tahir Pasha, by then governor of Bitlis, the Sultan did not directly receive Nursi, though he eventually settled in the Fatih section of Istanbul, the religious heart of the city, taking a
room in a hostel noted for leading intellectual figures of the time (38). He stayed there for approximately eight months, making a name for himself amongst the religious and secular elite by challenging and besting scholars, while being dressed in the clothes of the “backward” provinces. He had posted a sign on his door to his room that read: “Here all questions are answered, all problems solved, but no questions are asked” (39). He attracted a great deal of attention in Istanbul, becoming a controversial figure who was kept under surveillance by the police authorities. In May or June of 1908, Nursi presented (in a manner not known) to the Sultan’s palace a petition in support of opening three educational institutions in Kurdistan in alignment with his ideas to teach the religious and modern sciences in order to address the “primitive state” and mass illiteracy of the Kurdish peoples (43). The presumptuousness of this act, which implicitly criticizes the education policy of the Sultan, led Nursi to be arrested and sent to a mental hospital for examination, and then to a prison once it was clear that he was of sound mind (43-44). In July 1908, amidst the Revolution of the “Young Turks” led by the Committee on Union and Progress (CUP), whereby Sultan Abdulhamid was challenged and eventually toppled, Nursi was clandestinely freed from prison by constitutional sympathizers and brought to the town of Salonica (51). One of the leaders of the CUP, Cevdet Bey, was Tahir Pasha’s eldest son, with whom Said Nursi had worked closely during his years in Van. On the third day of the Revolution, Nursi gave the first of what would be many speeches and addresses, entitled the “Address to Freedom”, whereby he announced his support for constitutionalism, stressed a conceptualization of freedom based on Islamic principles and Shari’ah, and sought to unite the Ottoman Empire
through education, work, and giving up “ostentation and extravagance” (54). With an analogy to Japan, Nursi communicated his vision for preserving Islamic principles and practices – including a reconciliation between medrese scholars, Sufis in the tekkes, and secular scholars – while incorporating the best of knowledge, technology, and industry from the West in order for the Ottoman Empire to compete with other “civilized” nations (54-55).

While Nursi’s connection with the CUP was largely based on overlapping interests in supporting constitutionalism, freedom, and education, the more secular bases of the party became apparent, inspiring the creation of a society – the Muhammadan Union – that revolted against the CUP. The Muhammadan Union rebelled against the CUP in March 1909, whereby Nursi was arrested, put into prison, and court martialed. While the Muhammadan Union leaders were hanged, Nursi was acquitted of the charges against him in May 1909 – he maintained his support for constitutionalism and was not part of inspiring the Muhammadan Union uprising – but in time he left Istanbul and traveled back to Anatolia by 1910, disillusioned with its “deceptively civilized exterior” and lack of commitment to the principles of Islam (80). At the time, Nursi wrote:

“If civilization provides such a favorable ground for honor-destroying aggression and dissension-causing slander, cruel thoughts of revenge, satanic sophistry, and carelessness in matters of religion, let everyone witness that in place of this seat of malice known as the felicitous palace of civilization I prefer the wild nomad tents of the high mountains of Kurdistan, the place of absolute freedom…I thought that writers’ conduct should be worthy of literature, but I see some ill-mannered newspapers disseminating hatred. If that is how manners should be, and if public opinion is thus confused, bear witness that I have renounced such literature. I shall have no part in it. In place of the newspapers, I shall study the heavenly bodies and tableaux of the world in the high mountains of my native
land...Yes, I prefer the wild life to civilization that is thus mixed with despotism, depravity and degradation. This civilization makes individuals impoverished, dissolute, and immoral, whereas true civilization serves mankind’s progress and development and the realization of man’s potential. In this regard, therefore, to want civilization is to want humanity” (80-81).

From 1910 to 1911, Nursi traveled through different towns and advanced the message of constitutionalism amongst the tribes of eastern Anatolia, spreading his reformist ideas on education and sharing with the populace how rights created under the constitution are good for advancing Ottoman unity between Turks, Kurds, and Arabs, while supporting an interpretation of constitutionalism as being undergirded by Islamic principles, even if the role of Islam in the Empire under CUP rule was not clear. Nursi had an optimism about the future of Islam and how it can cure the ills of society and politics when joined with a constitutional government, protecting the freedom of all people under its rule. These ideas are succinctly outlined in Nursi’s 1911 “Damascus Sermon”, which he delivered at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus to almost 10,000 people, including one hundred ulama (94). Believing that “the future shall be Islam’s and Islam’s alone, and the truths of the Qur’an and belief shall be sovereign”, Nursi identified “six dire sicknesses” plaguing Western civilization which can be remedied by progress in Islam while adopting Western technology:

“Firstly, the coming to life and rise of despair and hopelessness in social life. Secondly, the death of truthfulness in social and political life. Thirdly, love of enmity. Fourthly, not knowing the luminous bonds that bind the believers to one another. Fifthly, despotism, which spreads like various contagious diseases. And sixthly, restricting endeavor to what is personally beneficial” (95, quoting Nursi’s sermon).
The sermon was a call for hope, societal transformation, and renewal within Islam – a recognition of Islam as the “social cement” (Mardin 87) of Ottoman society that served as the bedrock of nationhood – at a time of great upheaval that had deep political implications if it were to be enacted. Though, it was not Nursi’s intention to encourage believers to follow the path of politics in order to realize this vision: “Beware, my brothers! Do not imagine that I am urging you with these words to busy yourselves with politics. God forbid! The truth of Islam is above all politics. All politics may serve it, but no politics can make Islam a tool for itself” (Vahide 99). Instead, Nursi advocated a path of communal brotherhood through the virtuous bonds of Islam and shared efforts to advance learning in order to overcome the political problems both within the Ottoman Empire and the challenges from those outside the Empire. While Nursi’s efforts in the upcoming years prior to World War I would largely be focused on advancing the prospects for building his vision for a university in eastern Anatolia, his years as part of the political efforts to support the CUP and the Young Turks taught him the “uses of social mobilization” (Mardin 37) which the Young Turks had largely incorporated by learning from Western movements.

In 1911, Sultan Mehmed Resad, who succeeded Abdulhamid under the CUP rule of the Empire, agreed to support Nursi in his efforts to build a university in eastern Anatolia, accepting Nursi’s application for 19,000 gold lira and giving 1,000 gold lira as an advance (Vahide 102). While Nursi began the early stages of building his school in Van, including a banquet celebration to honor its founding, construction on the school stopped once the promised payments from the Empire never materialized. As the broader
Ottoman situation became embattled, weakened politically and financially by losing battles in the Balkans in 1912 and 1913, the government officially notified Nursi in 1913 that it would be unable to pay what it had promised (107). Meanwhile, Nursi began working on a Qur’anic commentary, which was eventually published as *Isharat al-Ijaz fi Mazann al-Ijaz* (Signs of Miraculousness) and his medrese collected weapons to protect itself and its students as conditions deteriorated in Van with increases in terrorist attacks in the eastern Anatolian region. By 1914, World War I had been declared, and Nursi enlisted in the army as a voluntary regimental mufti (religious functionary) together with his students (111). They were posted in Van, and then sent to the front at Erzurum. According to Nursi, he performed all of his military service as a volunteer “just for the honor of it” (ibid.).

Despite his status as a religious functionary, Nursi was actively involved in battle, leading a militia against Russian and Armenian soldiers on the Pasinler front by day during the frigid winter of 1914-1915, routinely disregarding and narrowly avoiding enemy gun shots to ride his horse around the trenches to boost troop morale, and teaching the soldiers about religion by night (114). During this time, Nursi continued his work on *Signs of Miraculousness*, whereby his students would write down his dictations. In 1915, Nursi continued his leadership and his ability to accurately shoot on horseback, rallying depleted forces in and around Van to stave off Russian and Armenian soldiers. Upon protecting a village near his childhood home of Nurs, Nursi showed compassion by rounding up all of the Armenian women and children and handed them to the Armenian forces, since it would be contrary to Islam to harm innocent civilians (116-117). By the
winter of 1915-1916, Russian and Armenian forces closed in on the outnumbered Ottoman forces in the area, capturing Erzurum in February 1916 and, after mass casualties of Ottoman soldiers in Bitlis, Nursi and a group of volunteers loyal to him were captured by the Russians in March 1916. Suffering a broken leg in the fighting and eventually decorated by his country for his valiant fighting to protect Bitlis as long as possible so that others might be able to flee to safety, Nursi was eventually sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in the province of Kosturma in northwestern Russia along the Volga River, where he was from 1916-1918 (119-125).

Placed within a prisoner group of ninety officers along with one of his students as an assistant, he was able to secure a room for the prisoners to serve as a mosque and convinced the Russian authorities to allow them to conduct the required prayers amidst the harsh conditions of the camp. While Nursi commanded a degree of notoriety amongst the prisoners, the freedoms he was able to win did not extend to religious instruction, though Nursi would routinely flout the constriction and teach the prisoners at night, earning the ire of the Russian army overseeing the camp. In refusing to give deference upon an inspection visit to the camp by Nicholas Nicholayavich, the czar’s uncle and commander-in-chief of the Russian forces on the Caucasian front, since he was not a man of religion, Nursi was sentenced to death in a court-martial for insulting the Russian army. Prior to his planned execution, Nursi requested fifteen minutes to perform his prayers, upon which the commanding Russian general, seeing that his actions toward the czar were sincere in alignment with his commitment to religion, commuted the sentence and apologized to Nursi (127). In the Spring of 1918, amidst the turmoil of the
Bolshevik Revolution, Nursi was able to escape from the prisoner of war camp, where he traversed through Russia to Poland, Germany, Austria, and eventually to Istanbul within a several month period of time with “miraculous ease” (128). Prior to his escape, Nursi recounts having experienced a “temporary awakening”, whereby he decided that he wanted to spend his life “in caves” and away from “mixing in social life with people”, choosing “solitude” (128-129).

Upon his return to Istanbul in 1918, Nursi was given a “hero’s welcome” (132) for his escape and military exploits, earning a war medal, easing into the elite of Istanbul society, and appointed in August 1918, without his permission, as the nominee of the army for the learned Islamic council, the Daru’l-Hikmeti’l-Islamiye, a small body of prominent ulama recently established in association with the office of the Seyhu’l-Islam who would oversee Islamic affairs in the last years of the Ottoman Empire. Although he requested permission to be relieved of his duties on many occasions due to being shaken and in ill health from his captivity, the dual opportunity to keep an Islamic presence in public life while the Ottoman Empire was in decline, while also serving as a mechanism to counteract the un-Islamic practices of the occupying Western forces once World War I concluded, kept Nursi involved in the work of the council. Although later Nursi stated that the council, which was disbanded in 1922 with the official fall of the Ottoman Empire, lacked any real power because it couldn’t put an end to “immoral conduct”, such as the consumption of alcohol and gambling brought by the occupying powers in consort with the secular forces in Ankara (141), Nursi was able to openly oppose British policies that sought to divide the unity of Turkish people, including the creation of an autonomous
Kurdistan (146), and Western influences that sought to create a triumphalist Christian narrative.

During this time, Nursi was also going through a profound spiritual transformation. Even though his “temporary awakening” signaled the beginning of a change in direction, which accords well with his earlier disenchantment with “civilization” in 1909, his desire for solitude did not abate upon his entry into the religious elite, whereby he would usually choose to stay in residences away from the city center, affording him expansive hilltop views of the region and the space to slowly convalesce from the physical harshness he had endured while in captivity. While Nursi had continued to immerse himself in the sciences, philosophy, and politics of the day, writing and publishing twelve works, including the influential *The Six Steps*, which articulated six ways that the “British and the Greeks were sowing discord and dissension in the Muslim community” (150) and caught the attention of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, he published *Signs of Miraculousness* soon after he arrived in Istanbul and continued to struggle with his future directions amidst the decline of the Ottoman Empire.

**New Said**

From 1920-1921, Nursi underwent a “strange revolution of the spirit” (163-164), a “crisis of conscience”, hearkening the transition from what he termed the “Old Said”, who was deeply immersed in the world of politics and the philosophical sciences, to the “New Said” who concentrated solely on religious matters in order to find the “ultimate truth” of “ultimate reality” by focusing on the Qur’an (Mardin 92-93). This transition
was spurred by what he saw as the attack on religious belief by both Turkish reformers and the European, secular ideals they sought to transport into Turkey. The process of spiritual awakening, a result of reflection on physical nature and the nature of human reality, led Nursi to conclude that his earlier convictions, which directed him to utilize European science and philosophy to “reinforce” or “strengthen” Islam, was misguided, feeling that such endeavors had “dirtied his spirit”, creating an “obstacle to spiritual progress” (Vahide 164). In addition, he took as trusted textual resources for reflection the work of two Sufis, Abdul Qadir Geylani’s Futuh al-Ghayb (Revelation of the Unseen) and the Maktubat (Letters) of Naqshbandi Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, which convinced him of the importance of daily Islamic practices and to take the Qur’an as his “sole master” for guidance and understanding of God (165-166). The outcome of this spiritual transformation was that Nursi was to proceed in his future activities and writings “through an alliance of mind and heart”, whereby he was enlightened with how he could combine the guidance for living an Islamic life through the Qur’an with the insights gained in mystical reflection, which “cured his wounded spirit and heart” and “rescued him from doubts and skepticism” (167).

Two significant consequences unfolded from this process. First, Nursi became a critic of the tactics and intellectual underpinnings of what would later become codified as Kemalism, urging the greater public to act in accordance with the Qur’an, which resulted in his becoming a serious threat to the new, secular Republic. Second, at a more fundamental level, his understanding of the causes of natural phenomena changed. While he was considered a master at understanding many of the secular sciences that had been
introduced into Turkey up to that time, Nursi came to see that natural causes and effects were the “product of the direct unmediated intervention of God” as the “creative force of divinity” (Mardin 93-94). Many of Nursi’s writings within the “New Said” period utilized scientific idioms and metaphors from biology and botany to explain this new understanding and to impress on Muslims that pursuing knowledge of the secular sciences need not conflict with a Qur’anic perspective of reality.

Near the end of his life, Nursi commented on the journey that he had embarked upon in the “Old Said” period and the transformation that had occurred in his change to become “New Said”:

“Sixty years ago, I was searching for a way to reach reality that was appropriate for the present age. That is, I was searching for a short way to obtain firm faith and a complete understanding of Islam that would not be shaken by the attacks of the numerous damaging currents. First I had recourse to the way of the philosophers; I wanted to reach the truth with just the reason. But I reached it only twice with extreme difficulty. Then I looked and saw that even the greatest geniuses of mankind had gone only half the way, and that only one or two had been able to reach the truth by means of the reason alone. So I told myself that a way that even they had been unable to take could not be made general, and I gave it up…Then I had recourse to the way of Sufism and studied it. I saw that it was truly luminous and effulgent, but that it needed the greatest caution. Only the highest of the elite could take that way. So, saying that this cannot be the way for everyone at this time, either, I sought help from the Qur’an. And thanks be to God, the Risale-i Nur was bestowed on me, which is a safe, short way inspired by the Qur’an for the believers of the present time” (Vahide 167).

After Nursi had undergone this transformation over the course of many months, Turkey had fought and won its independence from the colonizing forces in October 1922, whereby the sultanate was then abolished in November 1922, ending the Empire. Mustafa Kemal rose to autocratic power as the leader and president of the assembly in the
new Republic. In that same month, Nursi was officially welcomed in a ceremony in the assembly in Ankara. While he spoke to the politicians to encourage them to “set up a form of government based on the Qur’an and the Shari’ah”, he was “dismayed to find a lax and indifferent attitude toward Islam and their religious duties among many of the deputies in the assembly” (169). This led him to write a “ten-point circular” that was distributed in January 1923 to all of the deputies, stressing the importance and “necessity of performing the prescribed prayers” (ibid.). This document proved to be influential amongst the politicians, whereby sixty deputies were convinced to start performing the prayers regularly, which necessitated that the assembly needed a larger room to serve as a mosque from the one that had been allotted in the change of power (171). After seeing the aftermath in the days after Nursi’s exhortation to the political representatives to increase their Islamic practice, Atatürk is recounted to have “shouted angrily” at Nursi: “We are in need of heroic hojas like you. We called you here in order to benefit from your elevated ideas, but you came here and immediately started writing things about the prayers and have caused differences among us”. Nursi responded, “Pasha! Pasha! After belief, the most elevated truth in Islam is the obligatory prayers. Those who do not perform the prayers are traitors, and the opinion of traitors are to be rejected” (171).

Rather than shun Nursi, Atatürk instead sought to “placate him and win him over so as to take advantage of his influence”, offering Nursi a position as “general preacher” of the Eastern provinces with a salary of 300 liras a year, a deputyship in the assembly, a residence, and other perks (ibid.). Nursi turned this down, instead preferring to pursue the building of his long-awaited school in Van that had been vacated in the outbreak of
World War I. In February 1923, a bill was introduced into the assembly, signed by 167 deputies including Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, that proposed the founding of the Medresetu’z-Zehra and an allocation of 150,000 liras in that year’s budget for the project (172). In April 1923, Nursi left Ankara for Van in eastern Anatolia to begin his efforts to build the school and embark on a life of solitude and teaching. While the funds never materialized and the bill never passed, held up in the education and Shari’ah committee by late 1923 and eventually rejected in 1925, Nursi’s journey by choice into a life of solitude and religious practice and reflection, devoid of politics, unwittingly turned into a prolonged and forced exile.

Nursi lived in Van until 1926, whereby he began to give lessons (ders) to students and started the writings that were the precursors to the Risale-i Nur. During this time, Nursi became absorbed in worship, spending hours in prayer on his knees and contemplation (tefekkur) in high places such that “his toes became raw” (179). Nursi and his students turned a ruined monastery on Mount Erek into a mosque and also built tree houses because they are favorable positions for “reading the book of the universe” (ibid.). While Nursi was establishing the practices of contemplation, teaching, and a life of solitude in eastern Anatolia divorced from politics, living a frugal and simple life, the increased power of Atatürk and the problem that Islam posed to his leadership created a continued period of tumult in the years following independence. The caliphate was abolished in 1924, officially making the new Republic a secular state and making the religious life of Turkey subject to the regulation of the government. To advance positivist beliefs in a secular, republican government wedded to the pursuit of science,
Atatürk effectively removed religion from the public sphere and sought to remove its influence from the greater society, including the abolition of religious education, religious dress, and Sufi lodges (*tekkes*) in 1925. An uprising against the government was mobilized in eastern Anatolia by Shaikh Said of Palu, a Sufi Naqshbandi leader who brought together Kurdish tribes that led to an official revolt in February 1925, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives. Although Nursi declined to participate in this revolt and did not support it, all of the religious leaders in the area were summoned in March 1925 and eventually sent into exile to different towns in Western Anatolia once the revolt was subdued by the government.

This would begin a period, stretching from 1925-1950, where Nursi was under the continued surveillance of the government, seeking to make sure that he did not have any mechanism to begin an insurrection against the state or act upon politically-intentioned motivations that could damage the secular Republic. He began this journey of exile in the town of Burdur in mid-1925, where he would give lessons every day in the mosque, refusing to give up his turban and gown even though it was a criminal offense, attracting crowds wanting to listen to his teachings on the Qur’an (185). Since this raised the suspicions of the local authorities, Nursi was sent to Isparta in 1926, which had undergone major transformations, seeing the emigration of the long-standing local Greek community as part of a population swap with Greece after the War of Independence and withstanding Italian occupation, with the new leaders in the region emerging as allies of Kemal’s Republican People’s Party (Mardin 154). Nursi stayed here from 1926-1934, specifically in the mountain town of Barla by Lake Egirdir, which had no roads for cars
and could only be reached by horse, donkey, or on foot (Vahide 189). While this picturesque region was perfect for the kind of quiet life of solitude and reflection with nature that Nursi had sought, the authorities allowed him to receive only occasional visitors and attempted to scare off those that approached him (ibid.). Though, it is here that he began in earnest the writings that would become the multi-thousand page work of the *Risale-i Nur* and develop a following that would endure long after his death. This region, unbeknownst to the secular government who had thought it a remote place to keep watch and control over Nursi, would serve him well as a platform. According to Serif Mardin, Isparta was like a “Western version of Bitlis”, an isolated region that had specialized in religious training during Ottoman times, with a number of former *medreses* and *tekkes* which served as an effective “institutional base” that was fertile to receive Nursi’s teachings amidst the aggressive infiltration of a secular government that would come to suppress and publicly ridicule religion (Mardin 151). Though, the local population was not comprised of the intellectuals with whom Nursi had been used to teaching; instead they were largely “peasants, craftsmen, small traders, and their sons” (156), where “less than 9 percent” were literate (Vahide 202).

Given these circumstances, Nursi set out in his new writings to “prove the superiority of the Qur’an and its civilization and that it was only through the Qur’an that human beings individually and collectively could find fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness; at the same time he replied to the positivist view and demonstrated that materialist philosophy was essentially irrational and untenable, and destructive of both humanity and society” (193). The struggle to advance this cause would not be a political
fight, but would ultimately be a “method” of “revitalizing and strengthening” faith or belief (iman):

“By the time he arrived in Barla he had developed such a method, by expanding the ‘inner way’ he had found during the birth of the New Said into a general way of proving and elucidating the Qur’anic teachings on the ‘truths of belief’. This new method was also derived from the Qur’an, and brings together its truth and scientific facts, as well as satisfactorily refuting such bases of materialist philosophy as nature and causality. It is a method of reflective thought (tefekkur) on or observation of the phenomenal world by which beings are considered for the meanings they express, rather than for themselves. It makes wide use of allegorical comparisons, which ‘like telescopes’ bring distant truths into sharp relief, making them easily comprehensible, and also makes extensive use of logic and reasoned argument. These and other features of Nursi’s writings made them readily accessible to all sorts of people, whatever their level of understanding” (Vahide 193).

Thus, the intended accessibility of Nursi’s new method for strengthening belief relies on both stylistic conventions to communicate to audiences who may not be versed in philosophical and scientific knowledge, as well as the focus on bringing forth meaning through reflective thought. The latter focus on locating the meanings held within the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition is key for Nursi’s approach to ethics, since he not only wants to encourage people to reflect on nature and engage in religious practices, such as the prayers, but he also wants them to think about the meanings behind those practices to understand them as “moral obligations”, rather than just ritual requirements, in order to find happiness in the modern world (Mardin 224). The emphasis on meanings allows Nursi to connect the importance of both science and ethics to the “unicity of God” as the creator of the universe and the normative, moral order, which, according to Serif Mardin, displays Nursi’s “percipience” at recognizing that “meaning has become central in an age
of intensified communication”, which for Mardin, ultimately “secularizes’ religion” (ibid.).

The small number of students that Nursi was able to attract in Barla under surveillance was enough for him to pursue the writing of the *Risale-i Nur* under the guidance of this new method of Qur’anic interpretation that he had devised. Despite the limitations of the educational background of his students, Nursi was able to utilize them as scribes, calling them “heroes of the pen”, whereby he would dictate at high speeds and they would be able to write down his speech at equal speeds (197). Copies of the original were then made by the scribes and passed from village to village in a clandestine network beginning in the Isparta region, eventually traveling throughout Turkey. This model of handwritten manuscripts and informal distribution would be how the *Risale-i Nur* would be disseminated and digested for decades to come – it is estimated that the number of handwritten copies of the *Risale-i Nur* by the 1950s was approximately six hundred thousand (204). In addition, unlike traditional settings for teacher and student in the *medrese* or the *tekke* where there is formality and distance, Nursi “considered himself to be a student of the *Risale-i Nur* the same as them” (201) and openly consulted his students in the process not just of transcribing but also in the writing of the *Risale-i Nur*.

---

49 Vahide mentions the important role that women played in helping to translate the text: “Some took on their husband’s work to leave them free to either write or serve the *Risale-i Nur* in some other way. Some assisted their husbands in writing. Many wrote out copies by simply tracing the letters. Many others now learned to read and write for the first time and wrote out copies of the treatises themselves. Others read the *Risale-i Nur* themselves and then read it to other women in the vicinity. Undaunted like their husbands at the intimidation, they found their strength from the firm belief they obtained through reading and listening to the “lessons” of the *Risale-i Nur*” (205). I quote this at length because there is virtually no information available in English about the role of women in the Nur movement. While the Nur community practices traditional forms of gender separation, female-based Nur reading groups exist. Their history and presence is silent in the literature.
Nursi didn’t just relate to those who had gathered around him in Barla, but had maintained relations with a number of his former students from years past, with an “unceasing flow of letters” bypassing the authorities, eventually numbering about 3,000 which would come to comprise the Letters as a part of the Risale-i Nur itself (ibid.).

During his years in Barla, many sections of what would eventually be collected as The Words and The Flashes were composed and disseminated, including handwritten duplication in “hundreds of homes” at a time when official print publication of religious treatises had been banned (210). Nursi drew the ire of local authorities since they had “failed to stifle” (208) his endeavors, as the law would allow them to intervene if Nursi had posed a political threat to the regime or if he specifically violated a religious regulation. By 1931, Nursi had received repeated harassment from officials, including raids on his small mosque and efforts to bar him from holding reading groups (ibid.). In 1932, as part of the elimination of Ottoman Arabic which had been replaced by the modern Turkish language in 1928, Kemal had enacted a law that required the call to prayer to be made in Turkish. When Nursi executed the call to prayer in Arabic on a day in July 1932, he and his fellow students were ambushed by police authorities at gunpoint and arrested, though they were released after questioning (ibid.). Although Nursi had completely withdrawn from any political involvement and a number of his treatises – both in The Words and the Letters – attested to his students and readers to

50 For more background on the Kemalist ban on the Arabic call to prayer, which held from 1932-1950 as part of the attempt to “create an Islam unaffected by the Arabic language and Arab cultural traditions”, see Azak, Umut. “Secularism in Turkey as a Nationalist Search for Vernacular Islam: The Ban on the Call to Prayer in Arabic (1932-1950).” Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée, no. 124, November 2008, pp. 161-179.
avoid politics and keep in service to strengthening religious belief, the harassment continued as the readership and influence of Nursi’s writings grew.

By July 1934, Nursi requested in a letter to one of his students in Isparta that he leave Barla due to the oppressive harassment. When the letter was passed along to the Isparta governor, the next day Nursi was moved to Isparta, but he was still kept under close surveillance by police authorities (212). In April 1935, Nursi had the opportunity to attend Friday prayers in Isparta, but when he was noticed by the crowds, “thousands of people poured into the streets to see him”, whereby the political officials “panicked” and claimed to Ankara that “Nursi and his students have taken to the streets. They are storming the Government Building” (215). Actually crafted as part of a “plan” to crack down on Nursi and his students, the authorities arrested Nursi and more than one hundred people in Isparta and across other towns in Turkey who were charged as being “reactionaries”, constituting a political association and plotting to damage the security of the state, and with violating the Republic’s principle of secularism, including a charge of teaching Sufism. Nursi and his students were held within a prison in Eskisehir.

---

51 In 1935, the Fourth Congress of the People’s Republican Party officially codified the six “principles” of Kemalism – nationalism, secularism, republicanism, statism, reformism, and populism – to guide the party and Turkey. The Kemalist principle of secularism, a laicist version that treats it as “above and outside politics”, drawing the boundaries of “public reasoning” (Yavuz and Esposito xiv), necessarily excludes religious reasons from public discourse: “The Kemalist doctrine was informed by the dominant European authoritarian ideologies in the 1930s and perceived modernization as Westernization. In practice, Kemalism became the ideology and practice of eliminating class, ethnic, and religious sources of conflict by seeking to create a classless, national (unified as Turkish), and secular (cleansed of any religious sign or practice in the public sphere) homogenized society. Thus, fear of differences became the guiding principle of the Kemalist state” (xx-xxi). Laicism was strongly enforced and became the “hegemonic ideology” of the Turkish Republic, as well as the “identity of the ruling elite…with a built-in code of violence to exclude anyone who does not fit the state’s definition of a ‘laik Turk’” (xxii). See Yavuz, M. Hakan and John L. Esposito. “Islam and Turkey: Retreat from the Secular Path?” *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, edited by M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, Syracuse UP, 2003, pp. xiii-xxxiii).
pending trial on the charges in “appalling” conditions – Nursi was put in solitary confinement, all of the inmates only had access to makeshift lavatories, the prison cells were filled with bedbugs and cockroaches, and they were kept for a stretch of twelve days without food (216-217). Though, the inmates did their best to turn the prison into the “School of Joseph”, adhering to religious practice as they could and discussing the *Risale-i Nur* amongst themselves and with other inmates. Amidst an environment of political pressure that sought to undo Nursi’s influence and potentially authorize his death, Nursi had to prepare his own defense, which focused on refuting the charges that he had created a political organization and that his writings constituted a political maneuver against the state. In his defense, Nursi stated:

> “Respected sirs, is it at all fair, is it at all reasonable, to consider the *Risale-i Nur*, which discloses and explains hundreds of questions related to belief…to be a biased and harmful work that exploits politics? What law requires this?...Also, since the secular republic remains impartial according to the principle of secularism and does not interfere with those without religion, of course it also should not interfere with religious people on whatever pretext” (221).

On the charge that he had sought to create public disorder, Nursi stated:

> “The *Risale-i Nur*, which consists of the sciences of belief, establishes and ensures public order and security. Yes, belief, the source of good character and fine qualities, certainly doesn’t disturb public order; it ensures it. It is unbelief that disturbs it, because of its bad character” (222).

On the charge that he was teaching Sufism, Nursi stated:
“As I have stated in numerous treatises, this is not the time of Sufism; it is the time to save belief. Many people enter paradise without following the Sufi path, but none enter it without belief. It is therefore the time to work for belief” (223).

The above statement accords with the teachings to his students that the *Risale-i Nur* is “not training in the Sufi way (*tarikat*), but instruction in the direct way to reality (*hakikat*)” (ibid.). On the charge of creating a political organization, Nursi demanded to see any proof to verify that such an organization exists, instead aligning his intended audience for the *Risale-i Nur*, which should be considered a “scholarly work” and protected within the Republic, to be all Muslims in the country:

“Our business is belief. Through the brotherhood of belief, we are brothers with 99 percent of the people of Isparta and this country, whereas a society or organization is the alliance of a minority within the majority. Ninety-nine people do not form a society in the face of one man” (ibid.).

While almost all charges against Nursi were dismissed, he was convicted on one charge of violating the secularism principle for having provided a scholarly defense of Qur’anic verses, prior to the establishment of the Republic while serving on the *Daru’l-Hikmeti’l-Islamiye*, concerning women’s dress and inheritance. Nursi was “arbitrarily” sentenced to one year in prison, to be followed by one year compulsory residence in the town of Kastamonu; fifteen of his students were sentenced to six months in prison (225). Counting the time served already in the lead up to the trial, Nursi was released by March 1936, serving eleven months of the sentence.
Nursi would live in Kastamonu, in the Ilgaz Mountains just south of the Black Sea, for more than seven years. Living under much of the same surveillance and conditions that he had endured in Barla and Isparta, Nursi was “virtually confined” to his living quarters, only going out once or twice a week to walk in the mountains, during what would be the “most oppressive” days of enforcement of the Kemalist ideology stemming from the Republican People’s Party rule, even after the death of Atatürk in 1938 (228-229). Nursi continued to work on the *Risale-i Nur* during this period, writing much of what would become *The Rays* and *The Flashes*, as well as special collections for young people (*A Guide for Youth*) and women (*A Guide for Women*).

One of those works, *The Supreme Sign*, which would later be included as the Seventh Ray, proceeds through the eyes of a traveler “questioning the universe about his Maker” (233). This text, consistent with other sections of the *Risale-i Nur* that discuss nature, brings forth a Qur’anic interpretation of the universe in the light of modern science. As previously mentioned, taking account of his knowledge of the sciences and his reflection on nature, a key aspect of Nursi’s work across many sections of the *Risale-i Nur* in combating materialism and positivism was an approach that saw compatibility between the pursuit of science and the knowledge that it generated, since he saw it as a powerful force for the future of humanity. Serif Mardin notes: “On one occasion during his exile in Kastamonu students of the local lycee visited him and asked how they could elicit the most favorable setting for the worship of God. In answer, he advised them to concentrate on their studies of science” (Mardin 203). The connection between nature
and worship is key for Nursi in articulating how the Qur’an and modern science could be connected:

“By framing the system of nature in a mytho-poetic setting, in the way Muslim mysticism made it possible, by stressing the creative power of God, Said was able to create the feeling that the contents of the Qur’an opened up a view of the universe in movement and that this could be used to build a new image of the cosmos. Through affective resonances which fastened on the evocative power of the style of the Qur’an, such a new resource was made available to persons who, in the past, would have been passive participants in the ‘miracle’ of the Qur’an. Said’s theses, expressed in the heavily arabicized style of the theosophers, was not so much an explanation of the system of nature as a call to consider the potential for creativeness that God had infused into the world” (207).

Thus, Nursi was able to go beyond the traditional notion of construing the study of the Qur’an as a worshipful act, expanding the scope of study of nature through science as worshipful in light of the Qur’an. Nursi sought to “create a native feeling for science” by utilizing “religious symbols” derived from the Qur’an, since it uncovered the divine “plan” that was consistent with our capacities to recognize the divine’s continuous creativity in the world: “According to Said Nursi, there exists a homology – due to their common origin in a divine source – between the processes of nature and those that open up the perception and understanding of nature in man. This is the way in which a man grasps the processes of nature and has in him the ability to understand them” (213). The image of the cosmos that Nursi projected in his writings of systemic regularity is “mechanistic” and “Newtonian” (Vahide 234; Mardin, 209), but he was able to use this image, in connection with a Qur’anic understanding, to show how “lifeless matter”
(Mardin 213) played a role in the continuity of divine action in the universe as part of its design.

Progress on the Risale-i Nur and its dissemination was challenged by the continuing crackdown coming from the authorities. Nursi and those who transcribed and distributed clandestine copies of the text during the years he was in Kastamonu were under regular pressure, enduring a number of raids to their homes by the authorities seeking to find copies of the Risale-i Nur. During this time, Nursi’s work was gradually becoming more known and respected throughout Turkey, as based on the feedback that Nursi received from those in correspondence in Isparta and Kastamonu, despite the continuing harassment (Vahide 246). In one of the letters, Nursi writes how even the “illiterate elderly”, who learned to write through transcribing the Risale-i Nur, as well as “harvesters, farmers, shepherds, and nomads” were “putting aside their own pursuits and working for the Risale-i Nur” (ibid.). In tandem with this growth of commitment, the persecution on Nursi continued, which included being poisoned multiple times through tainted food (250-251). In August 1943, one of Nursi’s students from the Denizli region was arrested and copies of the Risale-i Nur were found. In September 1943, Nursi had been poisoned again and endured multiple searches, where copies of the Risale that were buried in a strongbox had been found (251). Nursi along with a number of his students were arrested in late September 1943, sent to Ankara by bus, and then by train to Isparta, where they were put in a Denizli prison before he was to stand trial.
Once again withstanding rough conditions – bedbugs, lice, the provocations of prison officials, and solitary confinement – the charges on Nursi, a man now in his late 60s, and his students were virtually the same as before – allegations of organizing a political organization, running a Sufi order, threatening the security of the state by opposing the governments’ reforms and arousing the religious sentiments of the population. Nursi’s defense was similar as well, but two differences in this experience stand out. First, the prosecutor in Denizli set-up a committee – two local schoolteachers – to review the Risale-i Nur and analyze whether the text constituted a threat to the state. Upon hearing of their report, which contained “shameful misrepresentations” (261) of his writings, Nursi requested and was granted, in March 1944, that a committee of experts review the Risale-i Nur to determine whether his writings were politically provocative, constituting a political movement to subvert the state, and indicative of forming a Sufi tarikat. In April 1944, the First Ankara Committee Court released the report generated by three scholarly experts, exonerating “90%” of Nursi’s writings, since they “did not part at all from the way of scholarship and principles of religion”, with no evidence to suggest that Nursi had engaged in the “exploitation of religion, the founding of a society, or that there was a movement that would disturb the peace” (266). Nursi was given the opportunity to rebut the scholarly objections that the committee raised with the other portions of his writings, which in themselves were not threatening to the state.

Second, the court case gained notoriety in the media, giving prominence to Said Nursi and the Risale-i Nur. Up until this time, Isparta, Kastamonu, Van and other areas where Nursi had lived were deeply aware of him and constituted the geographical areas
for his movement. Now, Nursi had become well known in Denizli and beyond. In June 1944, when the court fully acquitted Nursi and his students, throngs of people greeted Nursi, and he was put up in a fine hotel in town for a month and half. Though his acquittal did not end the mandated police surveillance as part of his exile, approximately “five hundred” people per day were able to visit with Nursi at this time (267). The authorities permitted each set of visitors to stay for a short period of time, but Nursi had many handwritten copies of the Risale-i Nur to hand out to visitors upon their arrival to greet them. Nursi’s acquittal in Denizli, and the accompanying vindication of the Risale-i Nur, was the moment when his movement started to gain legitimacy throughout Turkey.

After his stay in the hotel in Denizli, Nursi settled in August 1944 in the small town of Emirdag in Western Anatolia. Emirdag became Nursi’s home base for the greater part of seven years. While his acquittal gave him and his work greater prominence and legitimacy, the court’s decision was a “bombshell”, raising the ire of Nursi’s secularist enemies and causing continued persecution and “vindictive treatment” (277) by police officials, especially when he turned down financial perks and offers from the government shortly after his release from prison (271-273). Whenever he had the opportunity to come into contact with the local population in Emirdag – shepherds, workers, farmers, etc. – he would tell them, “This work you do is of service to others; so long as you perform the prescribed prayers five times a day, all of it will become worship and benefit you in the hereafter” (274). Although Nursi went through bouts of severe illness and weakness from old age, Nursi continued to write, with the Risale-i Nur approaching completion during this period. Now that there was no legal obstacle for the
publication and free distribution of the *Risale-i Nur*, demand for copies of the text was high. At this time, the text was still being produced via handwriting in Ottoman Arabic, but two duplicating machines, some of the first to enter Turkey, were purchased by Nursi’s students in 1946/1947 to assist in the printing process (275).

As Turkey was largely neutral during World War II, having only joined the war on the side of the Allies in 1945, it did not witness the carnage that had occurred in many of the nations to the north and west of the country. Nursi and his students saw the growing influence of communist thinking in Turkey during World War II, and were concerned about its potential atheistic influence in the country following the war. Taking into consideration both the potential for mass duplication of the *Risale-i Nur* and the forces that were at work in the Turkish nation, Nursi consented to have the *Risale-i Nur* duplicated and printed in the Latin-based Turkish alphabet, something he had resisted ever since Atatürk instituted it in the late 1920s, so that a greater number of the population could read it (278). At this time, Nursi also would regularly petition government officials to the cause of the *Risale-i Nur*, and would raise the problem of communism and unbelief. While there was a brewing conflict between the forces of democracy and communism within Turkey, combined with the desire for the Republican People’s Party to maintain power amidst its decline with the founding of the Democrat Party in 1946, Nursi and his students again became the specific object of persecution. By early 1948, while the *Risale-i Nur* was being widely distributed and read, Nursi and his students became subject to a “series of entirely unlawful raids, assaults, and harassment” attempting to incite response, publicly indicated by a speech that the Turkish president,
Ismet Inonu, gave in late 1947 in Afyon, stating “it is reckoned a disturbance connected with religion will break out in this province” (281). By late January 1948, Nursi and his students were imprisoned once again, this time in Afyon.

The charges levied against Nursi and his students were all essentially the same, even though Nursi and the *Risale-i Nur* had been previously exonerated. While the charges around organizing a Sufi *tarikat* and a political organization were cleared, another scholarly review by experts in Ankara pointed to concerns that they had about the Fifth Ray, which was a treatise interpreting allegorical Hadiths about the end of times. This section of the *Risale-i Nur*, which had actually been drafted many decades previously when Nursi was a member of the *Daru’l-Hikmeti’l-Islamiye* but only revised and compiled as the Fifth Ray while he was in Kastamonu and openly published after the Denizli court exonerated the *Risale-i Nur*, contained discussions about evil, the Antichrist, and atheism, which could be interpreted in light of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the work of his government. Nursi was placed in solitary confinement for eleven months, with little to no contact with his students who were also imprisoned. Nursi was able to recycle much of his defense from the previous trials, but he was “denied all sorts of legal rights” during the trial, including being “frequently denied the right to speak in the court” and little support in the preparation of his defense, as he had no ability to read the official Court documents written in Turkish with the Latin alphabet (298). As the trial gained significant public interest, especially in the wake of the previous proceedings at Denizli, Nursi was defiant in the trial. On one occasion, as the time for one of the required prayers was passing, Nursi was angry that he had not been permitted to go and
perform the prayers. He said to the prosecutor: “We’re here in order to protect the rights of the prayers. We are not guilty of anything else!” by which he then immediately walked out and performed the prayers in a secretary’s office (299).

In December 1948, the court found Nursi guilty of “exploiting religious feelings and inciting the people against the government”, sentenced him to two years in prison, for which he would eventually serve a total of 20 months, including the 11 he had already served since January 1948 (300). Although Nursi was released in September 1949, the case stayed in the legal system, as the conviction also brought the legal confiscation of the *Risale-i Nur* and the official suppression of its distribution by the authorities. Despite winning appeals of the Afyon decision, Nursi continued to fight the legal battle for the right to distribute the *Risale-i Nur*, which was not fully exonerated until June 1956.

**Third Said and the Proliferation of the Nur Movement**

In 1950, the People’s Republican Party lost to the new Democrat Party in the general elections, ending the rule of Kemal’s party. Now in his early 70s, Nursi’s exile was over, though the government and police authorities kept a close watch on Nursi amidst his growing popularity and freedom of movement. During the years of 1950 through his death in 1960, Nursi spent most of his time in Emirdag and Isparta, but would make visits to Istanbul, Ankara, and elsewhere around the country as warranted. While Nursi’s original self-styling of a Third Said indicated his desire to “withdraw entirely from the world and leave the running of all the affairs of the *Risale-i Nur* to his leading students”, Nursi instead entered a period of much greater publicity, overseeing the growth
of the movement and watching it begin to take a role in shaping the life of Turkey (305). This time also saw Nursi more closely connected with politics, supporting the Democrat party as the “lesser of two evils”, corresponding with the new President, Adnan Menderes and Democrat leaders, and providing guidance on policies so that they could be in alignment with Islamic ethics, though he did not involve himself directly in political work and forbade his students to do so as well (306). While the Democrat Party was still bound to the principles of Kemalism, it was against communism and “sympathetic toward Islam and religion”, seeking to “redress the wrongs of the twenty-five years” of the People’s Party rule in order to better reflect the “will of the nation” (ibid.). In the wake of World War II, Nursi also revised his position regarding the West, and particularly viewed the United States as “friendly” with regards to its position on matters of religion, whereby Nursi hoped that the independence gained by all of the Islamic countries could eventuate into a unified federation that he termed the “United Islamic States” (307).

At this time, Nursi was positioning toward the future, seeking to create the space for the *Risale-i Nur* and the cause of religious belief and the Qur’an to have influence well after his death. He was concerned with training students in the “way” of the *Risale-i Nur*, whereby a “moral jihad”\(^\text{52}\) of “positive action” would be enabled:

\(^{52}\) For a more detailed treatment of Nursi’s notion of jihad, see Turner, Colin. “Reconsidering Jihad: The Perspective of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi.” *Novo Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 11, no. 2, November 2007, pp. 94-111. Turner expands on his interpretation of Nursi’s notion of “metaphorical” jihad by using the “weapons” of educational reform, science, and industry such that “from the point of view of religion, the civilized are to be conquered through persuasion, not force, and
“It was peaceful struggle, a ‘moral jihad’ or ‘jihad of the word’ (cihad-i-manevi), in the face of the moral and spiritual depredations of atheism and unbelief, to instill certain belief in hearts and minds. While in many Muslim countries violent change had been brought about by revolution in which thousands of innocents were killed, the Risale-i Nur method was ‘the positive service of belief that results in the preservation of public order and stability’” (307-308).

The process of developing the sensibility of a “jihad of the word” was to be cultivated by the distribution and reading of the Risale-i Nur by large numbers of people, whereby the process of instilling Islamic principles and ethics that can be applied in daily life can be developed at the individual and communal level through “personal effort and training”, whereby individual reform and social change is effected from the “bottom upwards in distinction to social reform from the top down by means of legislation” (317). Through experiencing the massive shifts in Turkish cultural, political, and social life from the Ottoman period through to the Kemalist period, Nursi sought to “repersonalize Turkish society through the personalized stamp of the Risale-i Nur” (Mardin 12). This ‘personalized stamp’ was the style of Said Nursi, such that he sought for his followers not to focus attention on him as a person for his benefit, but how they could always meet him in “reality” via the text and spread what is comprehended to others: “I tell you certainly that each part of the Risale-i Nur is a Said. Whichever part you look at you will benefit ten times more than meeting me in the flesh, and also you will have met with me in reality” (Vahide 314). Nursi viewed the Risale-i Nur as a “collective personality”, as a “Renewer or Regenerator of Religion (muceddid), seeing himself only as a seed for the

by demonstrating through compliance with its precepts and by good morals, that Islam is elevated and worthy of being loved” (Turner 108).
flowering of the text: “I was a seed; I rotted away and disappeared. All the value pertains to the *Risale-i Nur*, which is a true and faithful commentary on the Qur’an, and is its meaning” (335). Realizing this ‘collective personality’ is a duty for all students of the *Risale-i Nur*, who strive to advance the goals of belief by renouncing the pull of egotism:

“It was in order to develop a ‘collective personality’, a characteristic of the modern age, that the students of the *Risale-i Nur* had to renounce all the demands of the ego; it was to ‘transform the ‘I’ into ‘We’, that is, give up egotism, and work on account of the collective personality of the *Risale-i Nur*. ‘The present is not the time for egotism and the personality for those who follow the path of reality (*ehl-i hakikat*); it is the time of the community (*cema’at*). A collective personality emerging from the community rules, and may survive. To have a large pool, the ice blocks of the ego and personality have to be cast into the pool and dissolved’” (244).

Just as Nursi has sought to devalue his own ego by seeing whatever value it has invested into the *Risale-i Nur*, he calls on students of the text to similarly live lives in service to the cause of belief. Thus, reading the *Risale-i Nur* and living out its meaning through religious practices, the meaning of the Qur’an, isn’t just an individual act, but is a recognition of seeing the self as part of something larger in service of belief in the divine\(^5\). The importance of the *cema’at* is key in Nursi’s conceptualization of the

---

\(^5\) Serif Mardin, in a later article talking about his portrayal of the Nur movement, comments on how Nursi makes the connection between “microstructures”, such as social relations and religious practices, to more “macro”-level societal phenomena through his understanding of the prescribed prayers: “The values of Islam bring order to daily life, at the same time binding people to one another. This connection between Islamic values and their application to the problems of the masses appears in one of Nursi’s views concerning prescribed prayer. According to Nursi, the prayers are not only the statement of a person’s belief; they are at the same time the realization of thousands of people turning in the same direction, a statement of togetherness. Thus, at this point, Nursi’s views cause us to think about the structures that make numerous individuals become a collective unity, and that sociologists define as ‘macro’” (Mardin, “Reflections”, 46). See Mardin, Serif. “Reflections on Said Nursi’s Life and Thought.” *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, edited by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, SUNY Press, 2003, pp. 45-50.
Risale-i Nur, since he was seeking not just to influence the individual believer but also to “re-introduce the traditional Muslim idiom of conduct and of personal relations” into a society that had been devastated by Kemalist reforms, combatting the forces of secularism and atheism with the new tool of the text (Mardin 13). Nursi’s focus in the Risale-i Nur on worship (ibadet), both in the cultivation of individual and group practice, had the effect of creating “lines of force” that “rationalizes life by framing it in a set of moral constraints which switch all persons who worship simultaneously in the same direction” (165). According to Serif Mardin, Nursi’s appeal to Muslims, whether those who came to know him and his text during the years of persecution or who became familiar with him afterward, was a “yearning for something which one feels is missing from the social fabric”, a sensibility that something is “absent”, much like a “man who is sitting at a table with one of the legs somewhat shorter than the others” (14). The absence that is recognized was the breaking of bonds of social relations that used to be informed by Islam for guiding daily conduct and organizing social life and civic society. Reading the Risale-i Nur as an attempt to remedy this situation is the basis of the “jihad of the word”.

Despite the increased freedoms that Nursi experienced in the 1950s, he needed to fight a number of legal battles to secure the eventual free publication of the Risale-i Nur. Nursi was summoned to Istanbul in January 1952, charged with distribution of religious propaganda threatening to the state, where the previous year 2,000 copies of A Guide for Youth had been printed by Istanbul University students in the Latin-based Turkish alphabet (Vahide 311). As thousands of spectators attended the open court proceedings
in Istanbul, which carried a potential sentence of up to five years in prison if Nursi and his students were found guilty, they were unanimously acquitted in March 1952.

While Nursi met with a number of friends and students while in Istanbul, including seeing many of the sights that were of significance to him in his younger days, he was poisoned by an Armenian militant during his stay (314). After his acquittal, he returned to Emirdag, citing ill health from the poisoning and old age. When Nursi returned to Emirdag, he was subject to “unlawful harassment” as a policeman ordered that he remove his turban and put on a European style hat (314-315). In response, Nursi wrote a petition protesting the treatment he had received, which was printed in a newspaper run by one of his students, Mustafa Sungur, in the town of Samsun. The prosecutor in Samsun opened proceedings against Nursi and he was ordered to travel to Istanbul to stand trial for his charges. Citing bad health and having refuted numerous charges in previous trials, Nursi tried to avoid traveling back to Istanbul, but he eventually went back in late 1952. While Nursi was eventually acquitted, religious newspapers were ordered to shut down after the Malatya Incident, when there was an attempt on the life of a secular journalist. As the owner of one of these newspapers, Mustafa Sungur was held in a Samsun prison and sentenced to one and a half years, though the decision was eventually overturned in appeals court (315).

Despite the continuing legal battles and harassment, the Nur movement made a concerted effort to branch out beyond Turkey during these years to create ties to other Muslim and Christian communities in Europe, Asia, and the United States. In the 1950s,
connections developed between members of the Nur movement and students of Nursi and religious representatives in Finland, Germany, Iraq, Pakistan, and the United States; copies of the Risale-i Nur were sent to al-Azar University in Egypt and to the Pope, with the latter sending a thank you letter in return to Nursi; and Nursi visited with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Istanbul in 1953, in solidarity and a spirit of cooperation with the their respective battles against atheism in the country (316-317). While Nursi and his movement were now able to branch out both within Turkey and beyond, open to engagement with Muslims and Christians in the post-World War II West, Nursi was deeply skeptical of Western civilization, since its materialist ways run counter to the morality embedded in religion. For example, in a letter that Nursi wrote during his stay in Istanbul in 1953, there are strong echoes of the sentiments that he articulated in the Damascus Sermon more than forty years prior during his ‘Old Said’ period:

“Since modern Western civilization acts contrary to the fundamental laws of the revealed religions, its evils have come to outweigh its good aspects. Its errors and harmful aspects to preponderate over its benefits; and general tranquility and a happy worldly life, the true aims of civilization, have been destroyed. And since wastefulness and extravagance have taken the place of frugality and contentment, and laziness and the desire for ease have overcome endeavor and the sense of service, it has made unfortunate humanity both extremely poor and extremely lazy…present-day civilization has made inessential needs seem essential, and in place of the four things of which he used to be in need, modern civilized man is in need of twenty…It perpetually encourages the wretched lower classes to challenge the upper classes. It has abandoned the Qur’an’s sacred fundamental law enjoining the payment of zakat and prohibiting usury and interest, which ensured that the lower classes were obedient toward the upper classes and the upper classes were sympathetic toward the lower classes, and encouraged the bourgeoisie to tyranny and the poor to revolt. It has destroyed the tranquility of mankind…Since the wonders of modern civilization are each a divine bounty, they require real thanks and to be utilized for the benefit of mankind. But now we see that they have encouraged many people to be lazy and indulge in vice” (317-318).
Nursi’s reflections on matters of civilization and politics in the 1950s bring to the fore the dangers of losing the ground in Turkey that Islamic practice gained after the fall of the Republican People’s Party in 1950, bringing him full circle from his ‘Old Said’ period and creating an urgency within Nursi to support policies that maintained these gains and broadened their potential influence beyond Turkey even if it meant that he blurred the distinction on his abolition against involvement in politics. In 1955, Nursi wrote a letter publicly supporting the short-lived Baghdad Pact, a defense agreement between Britain, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey to prevent Soviet influence in the Middle East. For Nursi, the Pact reestablished relations with the Arab world, which had not taken place since before World War I, though Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria did not join the agreement. Nursi hoped that it would push against the “racialism” taking place in the nationalist processes in the Middle East, that it would encourage “Islamic unity of a nonpolitical nature” and be a “source of strength for Turkey, particularly against communism and irreligion”, and that it could lead to the creation of “four hundred million brothers” within Islam, as well as the “friendship of eight hundred million Christians” in the West (325).

In June 1956, the Afyon Court finally dismissed all of the charges levied against the Risale-i Nur, thus making it completely licit and permissible to openly print and distribute Nursi’s life work on modern presses in the Latin-based Turkish letters. After winning the court battle, Nursi put in a request to Adnan Menderes to have it officially printed through the Directorate of Religious Affairs; though the request was met
favorably by Menderes, the government did not move forward with this request. When not traveling and attending to the affairs of the movement, Nursi spent much of his time completing and refining translations of all sections of the *Risale-i Nur* in Turkish and in Arabic so as to facilitate its spread throughout Turkey and the Muslim world (323). It is reported that, in 1957, Nursi declared: “This is the *Risale-i Nur*’s festival! My duty is finished. This is the time I have long awaited. Now I can go” (322).

Almost 80 years old, Nursi was able to see the fruit of his labors come to fruition and gain mass distribution, enduring and overcoming exile, persecution, and continuous harassment by government authorities for three decades. In the long-run for the Nur movement, this was a huge victory for Nursi and his students, securing their place as a player on the stage of Turkish religious life that endures to this day. In the short-run, the Democrats were losing ground to the resurgent Republican People’s Party in the late 1950s, as many in positions of influence and power were still loyal and did not want to see a resurgent Islam in Turkish society. In the elections of 1957, the Democrats held power but with a smaller majority; pressure, arrests, and harassment began to increase on Nursi and his students as the country began to devolve into open confrontation between the Democrat and the Republican People’s Party. Nursi’s optimism for progress outside of Turkey unraveled as well when a coup in Iraq upended the British backed leadership in 1958, severely damaging the limited prospects of the Baghdad Pact to create any kind of Muslim unity. In 1959, Nursi openly voted for the Democrats in the elections, and “urged all the Nur students to do likewise”; the Republican People’s Party, who had expected to win, “held Nursi responsible for their defeat” (330).
After the Democrat party narrowly won in 1959, Nursi advised Menderes on changes that he could make to garner greater public support, such as re-opening Aya Sophia as a house of worship, and to stave off the impending challenge from Inonu and the Republican People’s Party. Menderes did not act on these recommendations; Nursi’s health was in steep decline as of late 1959 and early 1960, as he was edging closer to death. In his will, Nursi wanted the location of his grave to “remain secret”, known only to a few of his closest students, so that people would not come to worship him, but would instead seek to know him through the Risale-i Nur:

“Like in olden times, out of the desire for fame and renown, the Pharaohs drew the attention of people to themselves by means of statues, pictures, and mummies, so too in this fearsome age, through the heedlessness it produces, egotism draws all attention to this world by means of statues, portraits, and newspapers, and the worldly attach more importance to the worldly fame and renown of the deceased through the worldly future they imagine has thus been obtained for them. They visit the deceased in this way, rather than visiting them for God’s pleasure alone and their future in the hereafter. In order not to spoil the maximum sincerity of the Risale-i Nur and through the mystery of that sincerity, I enjoin that my grave be not made known” (335-336).

Though, Nursi did have designs on the town where he wanted to die, specifically in the town of Urfa where the biblical patriarch Abraham is buried. On the night of March 20, 1960, Nursi and his students secretly left by car from Isparta, averting the surveillance around Nursi, to embark on the trip to Urfa as Nursi was in his last days. After arriving on the morning of March 21st, stopping into a mosque and then checking into a hotel, Nursi’s presence was alerted and there was a conflict between the government and police authorities, demanding that Nursi be brought back to Isparta. As Nursi was declared unfit
to travel by a government doctor, throngs of people came to pay respects – a “crowd of five or six thousand people” gathered outside the hotel (343). On March 23, 1960, Nursi passed away at three o’clock in the morning.

After his passing, Nursi was buried in the **Halilurrahman Dergah** in Urfa, which is the resting place of Abraham, and many thousands of people came to see his grave. While the public veneration of his grave was exactly what Nursi did not want, his will unwittingly came to pass, as the Republican People’s Party took back control in May 1960 in a coup. In July 1960, as part of a government plan to make sure Nursi’s grave was not known to avoid public veneration, officials coerced Nursi’s brother, Abdulmecid, to consent to have Nursi’s body transported from Urfa to an unknown location. Abdulmecid was able to accompany soldiers during a clandestine journey by plane and car when, in the middle of the night, the coffin was buried in a nondescript location near a mountainside to which Abdulmecid did not know where exactly they were, somewhere near Egirdir in the Isparta region (345-347). To this day, there is an empty grave in Urfa at the shrine of Abraham to honor Nursi, but his real resting place remains unknown.

**A Brief Historical Overview of the Nur Movement: 1960 to the Present**

There are only a handful of publications54 in English discussing the history of the Nur movement after Nursi’s death. The significant majority of publications that have

54 By this statement, I am referring to publications that offer a broad overview of the Nur movement, taking into account the multiple factions and distinctions that have occurred since Nursi’s passing. Though, given its ascendancy in Turkish civic and political life in the past three decades, a number of academic publications have emerged regarding the neo-Nur movement of Fethullah Gülen, a faction that has splintered from the main body of the Nur community, including by those that are not specialists in Islam or
been written about the Nur movement concentrate either on biographical details of Nursi’s life or the substance of the *Risale-i Nur*. The dearth of publications on the historical aspects of the movement is likely due to two factors. First, there is tremendous “difficulty in collecting concrete statistics” (Markham and Birinci Pirim 17), since the movement has no centralized mechanism or manner of public identification to determine who is part of the Nur community. Due to the particularities of the Turkish context over the decades and the threat of persecution, it has had to be protean, adaptable, and cautious of outsiders. Second, the movement has splintered into multiple factions based on differing interpretations and uses of Nursi’s work. This increases the difficulty of accounting for the differences and streams within the movement unless one has a vantage point from within the community. Two authors, Metin Karabasoglu and Hakan Yavuz, have provided needed and useful information to fill in our knowledge of the history of the movement since Nursi’s death. While Karabasoglu has written one article on the subject – “Text and Community: An Analysis of the *Risale-i Nur* Movement” (2003) – Hakan Yavuz has written several articles and two key texts – *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (2003) and *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülen Movement* (2013) – that tell the story of the movement after Nursi’s death within the historical, political, and social context of Turkey in the years after 1960. I will focus on these texts to briefly sketch the historical development of the movement, including the ascendancy and differentiation of the neo-Nur Gülen movement.

---

In the years immediately following Nursi’s death, his students suffered immense persecution by the resurgent Republican People’s Party. Between 1960 and 1965, more than 350 lawsuits were brought against Nur members by the government authorities, with more than 500 in total by the close of the decade, which contrasts with the 65 lawsuits that were brought against Nursi and his students during his lifetime (Karabasoglu 293n). Amidst handling the external pressures for continuing the movement, the community itself was confronted with two challenges: “disintegration and atomization caused by different interpretations of the text, and cohesiveness in coming together around the person considered to be the authority in the interpretation of the text” (279). As Nursi’s students jockeyed for position to take leadership of the movement, they were essentially “looking for a sheik-like figure to interpret and make Nursi’s text understandable” (Yavuz, Political Identity 172). By the late 1960s, a middle ground had been established, and a small group of his students – Zubeyir Gunduzalp, Bekir Berk, Mehmet Nuri Gulec, and Mehmet Emin Birinci – established a publishing house and a journal, Ittihad, to serve as a central publication for interpretation of the Risale-i Nur (173). By 1971, the journal had been shut down by the military court in the wake of the coup that took place that year, cracking down on religious expression and other potential avenues for public dissent, so the group decided to switch gears and begin a new publishing house dedicated to printing a newspaper, Yeni Asya. Covering public events in the day-to-day life of the country, Yeni Asya was seen as a more effective way to spread the perspective of Nursi’s ideas to a wider population in Turkey amidst the political changes. Whether in journal or newspaper form, the switch to disseminating interpretation of the Risale from the oral-
based culture via lessons within small groups in Istanbul and around Turkey to a print-based culture caused further schisms within the movement, though Mesut Toplayici, editor of the journal Kopru that was created for the dershanes (reading circles) that read Nursi around the country, stated at the time, “printing was necessary to create harmony in reading and interpreting Said Nursi’s works” (ibid.). Separately, concerns were able being raised within the movement that a newspaper-based approach through Yeni Asya for reaching a wider mass of people would entangle the movement in the political affairs of the country.

In tandem with the instability that led to the coup in 1971, political Islam began to rise in Turkey. First instantiated in 1970 as the National Order Party, this was shut down by the military, but then reborn as the National Salvation Party in 1972. The Nur community was largely opposed to this party, in alignment with Nursi’s perspective that “such formations would feed religion-based polarization within society and lead to the prevention of the communication of the fundamentals of belief to all segments of society” (Karabasoglu 281). In order to combat the challenges that were posed by the rise of political Islam, members of the Nur movement became embroiled in the political discourse of the day, especially via Yeni Asya, defending an approach to Islam that is not involved in politics. Concurrently, Yeni Asya also became a mechanism to dispute leftist-based communist discourse in the country during the Cold War, coming to be seen as a “nationalistic-religious” publication that galvanized the Nur movement into a “conservative-nationalist bloc” (Yavuz, Political Identity 174). These dynamics led to the factionalization of the Nur movement in 1970s, whereby more than ten divisions
within the movement occurred representing differences in opinion for interpreting Nursi to support the community’s involvement in politics, civil action, and ethnic (Kurdish) nationalism.

Special mention should be made regarding the most successful faction of the Nur movement emerging from the 1970s, Fethullah Gülen’s *hizmet* (service) movement. Fethullah Gülen, who became a student of Nursi’s writings in the late 1950s, developed a movement that concentrated on the “field of education and developed a line based on word and charisma rather than on the text” (Karabasoglu 283). Some of the key differences between the perspectives of Fethullah Gülen and his *hizmet* movement relative to Said Nursi and thus the main body of the Nur movement, are encapsulated as follows:

“Nursi argued that the ultimate goal for humans is salvation through *ihlas* [sincerity] or high moral conduct that pleases God. For Gülen, the goal is much more worldly: to become politically and economically successful and thus able to shape contemporary Muslim states and societies to successfully grapple with the competitive demands of modernity without discarding one’s Islamic faith. Nursi’s main task was to serve and promote the message of the Qur’an, while Gülen wants to serve and promote the welfare of this world and success of the Turkish nation and Muslim communities” (Yavuz, *Islamic Enlightenment* 32).

These differences create respective contrasts for the everyday focus of the movements’ followers: strengthening belief and the associated virtues of a spiritual life reflecting on nature and the world, cultivating one’s individual conscience with the aid of Nursi’s *Risale*, versus forms of civil service and practical action in the world that stress economic advancement, educational attainment, and social reform in alignment with Gülen’s
approach. Yavuz contrasts their differences in understanding Islam to be, in Nursi’s case, from the “inside out”, versus Gülen’s “outside in” approach, that are each responses to different cultural contexts for preserving the integrity and advancement of Islam consonant with modernity and democracy (33). As a result, Gülen “discarded the dershane tradition of the Risale and evolved around schools and student dormitories subject to official permission and inspection, and adopted a statist-nationalist posture” (Karabasoglu 285).

The differences between the main body of the Nur movement and Fethullah Gülen proved crucial in the early 1980s, as a military coup occurred in 1980, eventually leading to the establishment of a military-backed constitution in 1982, which sought to “create a more powerful state by shrinking the borders of society” (Yavuz, Political Identity 174). The main body of the Nur movement criticized the coup and the proposed constitution for being antidemocratic, using Yeni Asya as a vehicle to speak out against the state. This created more rifts within the movement, as many within the Nur community did not want an open confrontation with the state, while Gülen and a few other prominent Nur leaders backed the coup and the constitution. Under the leadership of Turgut Özal’s new post-constitution government, Gülen and other factions within the Nur movement became more independent and established their own publications and cultural foundations (175).

The elections of 1983 which led to the rise of Turgut Özal, a member of the Iskenderpasa Nakshbandi Sufi order, were the result of the mobilization of anti-
communist, anti-leftist forces that generated opportunities for religious-based actors to benefit in the new constitutional arrangements. This, combined with Özacal’s free market policies and expansion of speech, association, and assembly freedoms, created an environment that benefited all of the Nur community, even those that had spoken out against the state earlier in the decade. Between 1983 and 1990, “religious networks were mobilized to offer welfare services, communal solidarity, and mobility to those newly educated classes and businesses” (Yavuz and Esposito xxv). As a result, the Nur movement became wealthier and more diffuse within Turkish society, generating wealth not dependent on the state, creating new media publication outlets and educational institutions, and growing a membership amongst the entrepreneurial class of the country. Thus, since 1983, the “Nur movement consistently has defended the free market and the withdrawal of the state from the economic and educational spheres” (Yavuz, Political Identity 176).

With the growing influence and wealth of the Nur community throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the movement became deeply entrenched in Turkey, where, in Anatolia, “almost every town has a reading circle and even competing circles in a single neighborhood” (170). The movement has also sought to grow well beyond the borders of Turkey. Beginning in the 1990s, the Risale-i-Nur was translated into Arabic and English, and the “majority of the text has been translated into more than 35 languages including most European and Asian languages, and African dialects” (Markham and Birinci Pirim 18). The movement now has dozens of small factions within Turkey, though there are three main splinter groups, with Gülen’s hizmet movement being the largest with the
other two constituting the main body (Yavuz, Political identity 170), with the total number of adherents considered to be between five and six million people (11). Given the wide fragmentation, Gülen’s popularity and pervasiveness - including the establishment of radio and television stations, influential newspapers, and hundreds of schools within Turkey, the Central Asian countries, Europe, and the United States - de facto represents the Nur movement to the wider public, despite some of the deep differences between Gülen and the main body of the movement.

The success of the Nur movement, Gülen specifically, and the rise of a more explicit religious presence created a sense of fear amongst the secular strata of the country. This fear was on display in another military coup that took place in 1997, after the politically Islamist Refah/Fazilet Party was elected into power. Gülen appeased the military crackdown, protecting his own movement, but bringing him under even greater suspicion amongst the Kemalist military. In 1999, Kemalist television stations obtained a private video recording of Gülen, ostensibly communicating to a group of his followers the ambitions of the movement. Here is an excerpt:

“You must move within the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power centers...until the conditions are ripe, they [the followers] must continue like this. If they do something prematurely, the world will crush our heads, and Muslims will suffer everywhere...The time in not yet right...You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the power of the constitutional institutions in Turkey” (Yavuz, Islamic Enlightenment 42).

This led to the secular media launching an orchestrated campaign against Gülen, with requests from legal authorities to seek a warrant for his arrest. At this time, Gülen left
Turkey for a self-imposed exile in the United States for “medical treatment” (43), where he still resides in a small town in northeastern Pennsylvania. The heightened tensions in Turkey against all religiously affiliated groups by Kemalist authorities created an unlikely “symbiotic relationship” (217) between the Gülen movement and the Justice and Development Party, represented by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose party was elected into power in 2003. Despite policy differences on a number of issues signaling an uneasy alliance, Gülen followers were appointed to a number of positions in the bureaucracy and the movement was instrumental in re-electing Erdogan in 2007 and 2011. Since living in the United States, Gülen has shifted his public message from that of “statist, nationalist, and conservative ideas to adopt a newer universal language of liberalism, human rights, democracy, interfaith dialogue, and tolerance” (44). Yavuz states his interpretation of the Gülen movement’s current political ambitions:

“Its main political objective is to transform society by raising the moral consciousness of individuals. By raising moral consciousness, the movement hopes to cleanse the bureaucracy of widespread corruption, increase the efficiency and transparency of state institutions, reinvigorate public work ethic to serve the people in order to enhance the legitimacy of the state, and create opportunity spaces for marginalized sectors of the Anatolian population” (220).55

While Erdogan is not a member of the Nur movement, the larger community has benefitted from his leadership. The Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, one of

55 Since 2013, there has been a deep falling out between Erdogan and the Gülen movement within Turkey due to Gülenist-led efforts to bring down Erdogan’s leadership based on charges of corruption. Since the falling out, Erdogan has sought to suppress the Gülen movement, enacting legislation to close many Gülen-led organizations in the education and media sector, and has become President of Turkey, looking to amend the constitution to establish himself with the power of an executive-level President. As of April 2017, Erdogan has succeeded in sidelining Gülen’s movement and modifying the constitution to consolidate unprecedented levels of power within the executive branch since the time of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.
the leading cultural and academic organizations associated with the main body of the Nur movement, was able to obtain and renovate the sixteenth-century Ottoman Rustem Pasha Madrasah in the historic Fatih section of Istanbul. The structure also houses a recently created museum to Said Nursi, telling the story of his life and containing significant historical documents and objects. One of these items is a book, the 2014 publication by the Directorate of Religious Affairs of Nursi’s *Signs of Miraculousness*, the first time the Turkish government has officially printed part of the *Risale-i Nur*. In the museum display, the cover is opened to the title page with several handwritten messages and signatures from notable people, including one from R. Tayyip Erdogan.

The failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016 by the military to unseat Erdogan, which resulted in the death of approximately 240 people with thousands more injured, has been blamed by Erdogan specifically on Fethullah Gülen and those faithful to him. As a result, tens of thousands of people connected to the movement in some way have been detained or arrested, institutions and schools connected to the movement have been shut down in Turkey and in other countries, and Erdogan is applying pressure on the United States to extradite Gülen to Turkey. While the proof of Gülen’s direct involvement has not yet been publicly produced, the situation has prompted the main body of the Nur movement to publicly denounce Gülen and his movement. Below are excerpts from a posting dated July 23, 2016 on the Web site for the Istanbul Foundation for Science and

---

56 From the Foundation’s Web site regarding the madrasa: “It was recently restored by the Fatih Municipality in 2009 and in 2012, and it was assigned to the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture to be used for cultural and scholarly purposes”. See http://www.iikv.org/en/the-history-of-rustem-pasha-madrasah.
Culture made by Mehmed Firinci, President of the Foundation and a living student of Nursi, entitled “A Necessary Response to the Recent Incidents Affecting Turkey”:

“It has come to light that Fethullah Gulen – head of the seemingly religious Gulen organisation – is responsible for fomenting unrest and facilitating these acts of terror. His organisation has unique characteristics which enabled it to infiltrate by stealth various government departments and state sectors, thus gaining strength and power. Indeed, it is understood that this organisation aimed to act illegally from the outset.

We, as students of the Risale-i Nur and as representatives of the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, cannot accept the association of Gulen’s name – or his actions – with that of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi or with service to the Risale-i Nur in any way, shape or form. It has thus has become imperative to make this statement as a means of briefing and informing the public.

Gulen has exploited and utilised the writings of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, yet he has done so in a manner that is completely at variance with Nursi’s work and spirit. Gulen’s actions show that he is among those whose main aim is oriented single-mindedly towards the material world. In addition, in these times we have been asked time and time again why the Risale-i Nur and Said Nursi’s name have been allowed to be periodically referred to and exploited in a manner that has led to the conflation of real Risale-i Nur service with the kind of service promoted by Gulen.

Let us make it immediately clear that Gulen has worked hard to gain power and influence. His movement has made it known clearly that they have not pursued the noble causes as set out in tradition, but instead have clung to base and worldly works and ends.

It is indeed the case that the Risale-i Nur and its messages of Qur’anic faith and God-consciousness are most effective against the gravest diseases of our century, namely materialism and secularism. Gulen has exploited this, using it in a different manner and for his own purposes. By doing so he has acted in a manner contrary to that which Said Nursi taught and advocated. He has gathered people to his group in a way which suggests that it is little more than a personality cult. Blindly, many have become bound to this single individual, whose group has, sadly, served to raise a corrupted, misguided generation of people. For years, Gulen has deceived and exploited the whole nation through the multiple arms of his organization”.

The Dershane: Social Vehicle for the Cultivation of Heart, Mind, and the Backbone of a Movement

For the main body of the Nur movement, Nursi’s status as a saint-like figure was and continues to be palpable, but his desire for the text of the Risale-i Nur to become the center of the movement after his death was central to the viability of what Nursi was attempting to affect in putting the focus on belief and the meaning of the Qur’an. In the process of writing the Risale-i Nur while in exile from 1925-1950, Nursi would meet with his students under the limited conditions of his surveillance and imprisonment, but it was not until the 1950s, when Nursi had a greater degree of movement and copies of the text were more readily available in the Latin-based Turkish letters that the group-based lesson and discussion model signaled the creation of what was to become known as the dershane:

“It was at this time that Nursi started holding readings and study (ders) of the Risale-i Nur as a group. This practice was followed by Nur students all over the country and became the hallmark and central feature of the Nur movement. Nursi and his students held these readings after the morning prayers, and very often they would continue for as much as five or six hours. All present would read out loud in turn from one of the books of the Risale-i Nur, and Nursi would explain and illustrate it.” (Vahide 320).

The first Risale-i Nur study center (dershane) is thought to have been created in Istanbul in 1953, where groups of Nursi’s students lived and would gather together to meet with Nursi. The students would also host their own communal readings and group prayers in the house, which secretly had duplicating machines to produce copies of the Risale-i Nur,
and in many places around the city to “groups of people from all walks of life” (322). Throughout the 1950s, Nursi encouraged his students to create *dershanes* - special apartments or one-floor buildings - all over Turkey, which became easier to do once the court decision in 1956 allowed the official printing of the *Risale-i Nur*. While discussion groups regularly occur in *dershanes*, which in time became dedicated university-level student dormitories, they are also regularly held in the homes of Nur students and followers. *Dershanes*, and the reading groups (*ders*) that formed in homes all over Turkey, became the mechanism by which the movement was able to perpetuate itself throughout the years, creating living conditions for young adults to spend a significant amount of time reading Nursi while attending to otherwise secular university studies, and in tandem creating networks of older adults, families, and communities that are nourished by regularly reading the *Risale-i Nur*.

In-line with Nursi’s sensibility regarding the ego and his wish that the community of Nur readers would focus on reading the text to illuminate religious truths, there are several features of Nur reading groups that articulate with advancing this goal as they have formed over the decades since Nursi’s passing. First, there is generally no individual in a reading group that is to have authority for interpreting the text and no individual who is specifically responsible for the spiritual development of the members. In short, there is no spiritual director, though the person who leads the discussion “tends to be the most educated person present and is given more respect that the others” (Yavuz, *Political Identity* 166). During prayer times, “it is not the elderly or those who have memorized the Qur’an better who lead the prayer but rather that person whose
interpretation of the Nurcu texts generally is considered to be the most authoritative” (ibid.). Even within the more structured environment of the *dershane*, reading groups are organized “horizontally, not hierarchically”, as they generate “solidarity, participation, and integrity” amongst group members (Yavuz, “Study Circles” 309). Group members take responsibility for each other as part of a community engaging in religious practice within an environment of mutual reading and reflection. This is important for attempting to interpret Nursi’s text, since the *Risale-i Nur* “does not use the popular idioms and simple language of the press; this, in turn, makes the understanding of his writings difficult, if not impossible. One therefore needs to join a reading circle (*dershane*) to fully understand the argument of Nursi…Nursi’s style of writings presupposes a collective reading and listening” (308). Along the journey of engaging in this reading and listening, group members are often asked to consider Nursi as their “intimate companion and friend”, including telling stories about his life and honoring those who are “living disciples” – students of Nursi who are still alive and who had the opportunity to learn directly form him (310).

Second, there is an “open and flexible” character to both the nature of interpreting the *Risale-i Nur* at the individual level, as well as at a structural level for community formation (Karabasoglu 274). Nursi did not consider the *Risale-i Nur* to be the “final word”, since it is not the only way that one can come to belief and uncover the truths located within the Qur’an. Nursi had a pluralistic approach: “The follower of any right outlook has the right to say, ‘My outlook is true, or the best,’ but not that ‘My outlook alone is true,’ or that ‘My outlook alone is good,’ thus implying the falsity or repugnance
of all other outlooks” (ibid.). The openness of interpretative access to the *Risale-i Nur* is modeled at the level of group participation, which is generally considered to be at one of three levels, visualized as “concentric circles” of membership, where even Nursi conceived of himself as a student. “Students” are people who “know their vital duty, their life’s work, to be the service and dissemination of the *Risale*”; “brothers” are people who “perform the five daily prayers of the Muslims and do not commit the seven grievous sins, together with truly and earnestly working to disseminate the *Risale*” even though they do not consider it to be their central focus; and “friends” are people who “earnestly sympathize our work and service” and oppose “injustice, innovations, or misguidance” (274-275). The three levels described above are descriptive of one’s level of access and are not part of any official status within the movement. In fact, “there are not initiation rites and there is no formal organizational structure”; as such, a “precise count of the membership is, thus, impossible” (Mardin 26). Taking this into account, it is possible for the significant majority of Muslims, and even many who are People of the Book, to participate in the Nur movement on some level.

Third, the cultivation of the heart and mind of participants is an explicit goal and conscious process at both the individual and communal level, especially within the life of a *dershane*. The lifestyle within a *dershane* is “ascetic”: “spartan living conditions, simple food, a rigid study program, and obedience to the teachings of Islam. The task of *dershanes* is to inculcate Islamic values and norms in society through conversational reading and prayers” (Yavuz, “Study Circles” 298). These living conditions, especially experienced as a dormitory while one is single or otherwise studying at university,
enables the young adult to dialectically approach what one is learning both within the classroom and about the nature of the world, living separately from one’s family, to see how it applies toward constructing a modern life and disposition that is consonant with Islam: “reading becomes a way of understanding and discovering (not creating) the self and developing a moral position to cope with social issues and diversity. An act of reading becomes an act of self-discovery” (Yavuz, Political Identity 163). Hakan Yavuz calls this the “process of forming modern moral subjectivity through the utilization of Islamic idioms and practices” (304). Within an Islamic pretext, a dershane member is learning how to develop one’s mind and live in an environment that encourages “freedom of thought”, which Nursi considers to be the “sword of civilization and source of all creative forces” (303). Through reading and reflection on the Risale, whether living in a dershane or as part of regularly participating in a Nur reading group, one enacts a process that is intended to transform and deepen belief, which is intended to translate into ethical behavior and creative thought to live in the modern world. Serif Mardin call this process the “immanentization of ethics” (Mardin 228) that takes place in these reading groups, shaping one’s opinions and the trajectory of one’s actions in everyday life, mediated by one’s understanding of Islamic truths and the forms of consensus that emerge in group discussion. Hakan Yavuz calls dershanes “new public spaces” constituting an “informal education system” which seeks to “vernacularize” modern sensibilities and attitudes within an Islamic frame, creating a space where Muslims can “build their personality, and redraw the boundary between science and religion, and state and society” (Yavuz, “Study Circles” 298-299). Yavuz expands on this by stating that the Nur movement has used the
network of reading circles as a “stepping-stone in the construction of a new counterpart”, citing Charles Hirschkind’s term, to delimit the creation of an alternative public, fully informed by religion, ethnicity, gender, and class, that defines a “different normativity and a sense of the ‘good life’” (Yavuz, “Public Sphere” 13).

An outcome of dershanes and reading circles is their ability to “facilitate the formation of multi-faceted close networks of relationships among followers, who are able to form a bond of trust and civility among themselves”, bound by “belief-based practices” that constitute individual and communal identity (Yavuz, “Study Circles” 306-307). As a result, dershanes and reading circles are a significant source of “social capital”, since they foster norms of “honesty and reliability”, leading to “better business relationships” that have accounted for the “economic prosperity” of Nur communities in Turkey (308-309). This form of social trust has been key throughout the decades for sustaining the movement, as the political situation has shifted over time, necessitating a mechanism for establishing and maintaining personal, professional, and religious relationships outside the regulatory eyes of the state. As the Nur movement has proliferated and fragmented over time, dershanes and reading circles are generally established along class, gender, ethnic, and regional lines, creating dense networks that generate both significant bonding and bridging capital, especially when relocating and traveling within and outside of Turkey. Thus, whereas the Nur movement began amongst the largely rural populations of Turkey, according to Hakan Yavuz, the progression of the movement over the decades has led to the formation of an urban-based, “new counterelite in Turkey” which has provided “greater visibility to the new Anatolian bourgeoisie” (308).
While it is not possible to determine exactly how widespread *dershanes* are due to the lack of a systematic accounting of these groups within the movement, as of the early 2000s, Yavuz estimates that there are more than “five thousand” circles in Turkey, including “fifty three *dershanes* in the Central Asian Republics, fifty-seven in Germany, seven in Holland, four in Austria, two in Belgium, and one in Sarajevo” (Yavuz, “Public Sphere” 13). Tracking the presence of *dershanes* by using as a proxy subscription information to the Nurcu journal, *Kopru*, to which many *dershanes* subscribe, Yavuz has been able to show the growth trajectory of *dershanes* in major cities within Turkey. In 1970, there were only a total of 49 *dershanes* in eight major cities of Turkey with journal subscriptions, with almost half clustered in Istanbul. By the year 2000, there were more than 900 with journal subscriptions, with the greatest concentrations in Istanbul, Konya, and Adapazari (Yavuz, *Political Identity* 168). Beyond Hakan Yavuz’s account of *dershanes* within the Nur movement, there have been virtually no peer-reviewed publications offering an account of Nur *dershanes*, but there have been two dissertations\(^\text{58}\) that offer some insight into life inside the movement and reading groups from different perspectives, as well as an ethnography of the Naqshbandi movement that provides insight on perceptions of the Nur movement from an outsider religious perspective\(^\text{59}\).


\(^{59}\) See Silverstein, Brian. *Islam and Modernity in Turkey*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. In his experiences talking with Naqshbandi movement members and attending group meetings, Silverstein cites two reasons why members did not choose to join Nurcu reading groups: they were “put off by what they felt to be the secrecy of everything about them” (Silverstein 128) and, they do not have a “clear known source” (*silisile*),
When considering the intended focus of the movement on the text of the *Risale-i Nur*, the freedom to engage in its interpretation, the factions that have developed as a result of this interpretive multiplicity, the continued ambiguity of the relationship of the movement to the political sector despite its nonpolitical pretense, and the specific form of community that has evolved through the institution of the *dershanes* and reading circles over time, it is useful for framing Metin Karabasoglu’s identification of one of the central problems of the Nur movement in the post-Nursi era: “the inadequate internalization of the community-based implications of the ontological foundations of the *Risale*” (Karabasoglu 287). Let’s return to the concept of charisma that was introduced at the outset of this chapter, as it relates to the way that Nursi transformed the Sufi practice of passage from one charismatic leader to another to perpetuate the Nur movement:

“The printed word, i.e. Said’s *Risale*, thus took over from the traditional pattern of a charismatic leader selecting another charismatic leader to succeed him. Since the *Risale-i Nur* was to carry this charisma, his followers and their successors, using his book as a guide, were to work for themselves instead of concentrating on the Master. In other words, they were thrown upon their own resources. This internalization was, once more, a shift in the direction of setting for persons an inward world of morality and ethics, albeit within the frame set by the *Qur’an* and its interpretation by Said Nursi” (Mardin 181-182).

The next chapter, which provides an ethnographic description of a *dershane* in the United States and an interpretation of Nursi’s writings on prayer, intends to complement the analysis of the Nur movement from this chapter to shed light on how the charismatic aspects particular to the Nur movement translate themselves to understanding the

such that the teachings and practices of these groups (as well as some other Sufi groups in Turkey) are not clearly traceable back to the Prophet (111-112).
potential for conceptualizing the social and communal dimensions of one’s internalized relationship with the divine in alignment with Nursi’s spiritual ideals.
CHAPTER 5

Reading Nursi

For approximately two years, from fall 2010 to spring 2012, I regularly attended weekly Nur reading group meetings in a house in the eastern United States that serves as a *dershane* for up to 6 male students who are enrolled in graduate education or English-language programs. There is a flux of students, both from Turkey as well as from countries near Turkey, who stay in the house from year-to-year, and sometimes within the year. The students who stay in the house are usually pursuing degrees in scientifically or mathematically oriented fields. Most have experience living in undergraduate dormitories within Turkey or their home countries that were organized by the Nur movement. The house is owned by a Turkish businessman who rents the house to male students, who are all part of the Nur movement. Generally, the students from Turkey who find their way to a *dershane* in the United States or other countries leverage interpersonal connections to locate such a living arrangement, as there is a lack of systematic organization for Turkish students to find such accommodations. All members are “brothers” – there is no spiritual director or head of the house. In clarifying who has responsibility for making sure that proper Islamic practice is upheld in the house, I was told by one of the house members that “they hold each other accountable to following

---

60 The stories about the group meetings I attended are based on my field notes. I did not tape record while I was in the field, so all quotes and paraphrasing have been reconstructed from the experiences I recorded in field notes.
prayers and Muslim practices”. While the members occasionally attend nearby mosques, there is no specific mosque that is connected with the Nur community in the area of the house. Attending a mosque is not seen as a compulsory part of living in the house and, generally, it is thought that one gains more in deepening in the Islamic faith through reflection on Nursi’s writings in the dershane environment than becoming part of a mosque community – whether in Turkey or in another country.

The daily rhythms of the house are organized to live a communal lifestyle consistent with Islam in the style of the Nur movement – there is a main communal gathering space where salat may be practiced with indication of direction for qibla; a clearly visible digital clock, pictures of the Ka’ba and other inspirational text and calligraphy from the Qur’an, and group meetings many nights to read and discuss the writings of Nursi. Women are generally not allowed to come inside the house, but mothers and sisters are allowed to stay in the common area if they need a place to sleep while they are visiting one of the brothers from overseas as they get settled. Shoes are not allowed to be worn inside the house and cleaning the house is a shared responsibility. Dinners are also shared meals, with different brothers taking turns cooking, which are eaten while sitting on a carpeted floor in the communal gathering space – a plastic cloth is placed on the floor on which all food is served and consumed, which is then quickly cleaned and cleared away once the meal is completed. All food that is cooked and prepared is halal. In the house, there is no television, but each brother does have a cell phone and there is an internet connection in order to practically carry out one’s school-related responsibilities via computer. The different course schedules and responsibilities
for each of the brothers mean that they are not all together for much of the day. There are
not any formal organized social activities outside the house like one would have for a
larger dershane in Turkey connected with a university environment, but they all attempt
to gather together each evening for dinner and group meetings.

In learning how this house differs from those that these students may have lived in
while in Turkey or other countries, members have told me that while in Turkey, the group
meetings can be much larger for a dershane in Turkey and are typically more lecture
style. As a result, many times when discussion is appropriate, members tend to be quiet
rather than conversant since they are usually in the position of listening. Though, more
recently in Turkey, house meetings are becoming prevalent where discussion of Nursi’s
writings can occur, and more public meetings are occurring once or twice a week where
there is a mix of university and high school students, as well as older adults. Once
students grow out of the university setting, reading groups tend to form amongst
individuals within a similar job or profession, with gatherings taking place up to two to
three times per week.

Another difference is the presence of an internet connection. When staying in the
Turkish houses, the brothers are encouraged not to waste any time – they should always
be spending their time constructively. While students in the Turkish dershanes attend
classes like everybody else in their university, they only attend social events and
functions sponsored by the house. The presence of internet and the lack of house-
sponsored social activities present a real challenge to them in the United States, since
they can easily be led to waste their time or engage in activities at their university or through the internet that are not true to how they should be spending their time. One of the house members posed a difference between a regular Nurcu, who may be a follower of Nursi but will typically spend more time watching TV or engaging in other leisure pursuits, versus a ‘student of Nursi’ who will dedicate more time to reading and reflection and will less often watch TV or browse the internet.

For the meetings that are held, which are usually conducted in Turkish for the exception of meetings held once or twice a week in English that I attended, many copies of Nursi’s writings are readily available in book form (with separate copies for Turkish and English), as well as Turkish and Arabic versions of the Qur’an. These are passed out at the beginning of the meeting to whoever is attending. The composition of these meetings is usually the members of the house with guests who live in the Philadelphia area, including Turkish Muslims from the community, non-Turkish Muslims who are new to Nursi, and American converts to Islam whose route to Islam has been greatly facilitated by reading Nursi’s commentaries on the Qur’an. These guests are typically professionals, aged 25-50, who are familiar with the dershane due to personal history of living in a house or who have mutual acquaintances in the region connected with the Nur movement.
A member of the house is responsible for coordinating the meetings and selecting the readings, though the selection of the readings can reflect the interests of the group.\footnote{Upon learning of my research interests in prayer and worship at the outset of our interactions, a number of readings were selected by the meeting coordinator on the topic of prayer and worship while I was in attendance.} The English-language meeting is led by a member of the house and may include some of the other brothers, but the main attendees are others in the community who want to read Nursi, most of whom are not formally connected with the Nur movement. These meetings have sometimes been structured as small, intense reading groups of 3-4 people, while a series of meetings was held to invite fellow Muslims from universities in the region to introduce them to Nursi, sometimes numbering 20-25 attendees. The typical English-language meeting would have on average about 12 people in attendance. In my time attending the English-language meetings at the dershane, I was able to participate in each of these kinds of meetings, seeing the difference in style and tone when introducing Nursi to those who might be new to his writings, versus those that are more focused study sessions. For example, the meetings I attended in the summer of 2011, when a number of the house members returned to their home countries, were organized as small reading and discussion sessions (and held outside weather permitting) on Nursi’s 30th Word – Second Aim, a fairly technical section of the Risale-i Nur that concerns the nature of particles in the universe, causality, and how one can observe the Creator in nature.

The communal room where meetings are generally held is constructed with red couches lining the four walls of the room, with bookcases in two of the corners. Meeting attendees sit on these couches while reading and discussing Nursi’s writings. There is a
large open space in the middle of the room, which is where prayers are conducted. Since the meetings are held in the evening, the Maghrib or ‘Isha prayers are conducted either before or after the meeting, depending on the time of the year. All Muslims in the house who are about to pray make ablution either in the kitchen or bathroom sink, and then begin prayers together in the communal room. The participants gather close together in rows, side-by-side, with a member of the house taking responsibility for leading the prayer in the role of an imam, positioned in front closest to the qibla wall. In honor of Nursi, the prayer leader may wear a turban for the duration of the prayer reminiscent of the kind that Nursi wore during his time. The leader is responsible for saying the prayers rhythmically, setting the pace and leading the series of ritual movements, and passing out prayer beads at appropriate times during the prayer. While all who pray fully conduct the required prayer at this time, some break away when completed and others make additional raka’ats or voluntary prayers as appropriate for the given prayer time. Activities in the common room do not re-commence until all have completed their prayers.

A usual meeting consists of an approximately 90-minute to 2-hour discussion of Nursi’s writings. Typically, the group is working through a specific section of Nursi’s writings over a number of weeks and the meeting picks up where the previous one left off. The readings have been selected by the brother in charge of coordinating the meetings, who is prepared to lead discussion on the given topic. At the beginning of each discussion, a prayer is recited by the meeting coordinator that consists of a set of three
phrases, the "basmala-hamdalah-salwalah", which is a tradition in the Islamic world to be recited before lectures:

Basmala: "Bismiallahirrahmanirrahim" = “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate.”

Hamdalah: "Alhamdulillahi rabbil alemin" = “All praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds”.

Salwalah: "assalatu wassalamu ala seyyidina muhammadin wa ala alihi wa sahibi ecmain" = “and grant blessing on our master Muhammad, and to all his family and companions”.

Once the prayer has been recited, an individual is selected to read the section under discussion for the meeting. The individual reads the full section for the evening’s discussion, which is then followed by a pause in the group to digest the reading. The group proceeds to re-read each paragraph within the section and then discusses them one at a time. The discussions revolve around explicating sections of text that are not readily understandable, defining key concepts that Nursi has utilized, and reflecting on aspects of the text that relate to Nursi’s overall style of commentary on the Qur’an. Occasionally, specific references to suras in the Qur’an are read to illuminate the readings, as well as other aspects of Nursi’s writings that may be helpful for understanding a particularly difficult concept. One doesn’t proceed to the next paragraph in the sequence until all questions have been addressed. Discussions can vary from fairly elementary discussions on the text, especially when the group of attendees is large and less familiar with Nursi, to intense discussions that resemble a graduate school seminar for those with greater familiarity with Nursi’s body of work. When the meeting concludes, the meeting
organizer recites a phrase from Qur’an 2:32: "Glory be unto You! We have no knowledge save that which You have taught us; indeed, You are All-Knowing, All-Wise". This Qur’anic phrase, which is the response of angels to Allah when he notifies them about the creation of Adam, is one that Nursi used to conclude lectures and many of the individual sections of the Risale-i Nur, which is unique to his style in the Islamic tradition of Qur’anic commentary.

Meeting participants sometimes struggle with Nursi’s ideas and may acknowledge how they might seem to differ from other styles of understanding Islam, but Nursi is highly respected and seen as a trusted brother along the path to illuminating proper belief. His writings and commentaries on the Qur’an provide a pathway to delve into deeper areas of faith and understanding that uncover the metaphysical nature of the human person and the nature of God’s creation in a way that seeks to be persuasive to the everyday Muslim, as well as a sophisticated response to atheist and materialist philosophies that are seen to be corrosive to belief in the divine. Spending significant time with Nursi’s writings is a particularly attractive mechanism for educated students to have a way to question what they may be learning or encountering in their otherwise secular educational programs and institutions. In Turkey and other countries from which the members originate, dershanes exist within universities in an ostensibly secular university student environment, some of which are hostile to their ideas and presence.

These regular meetings are central to the dershane community structure and keep one focused on remembering Allah through prayer and worship by cultivating a
disposition of learning, discussion, and proper Muslim practice, while also creating a
relaxed social environment of fellowship and civil discourse. The *dershane* members,
being students, are dressed informally and sit in relaxed positions during meeting
discussions. Sometimes, cell phones interrupt the discussion and members leave the
room to have a short conversation. Discourse is usually congenial and meant to be
pedagogically oriented, with Nursi’s writings serving as the teaching tool for illuminating
proper Muslim understanding. When the formal discussions are concluded, Turkish tea is
served as well as sweet snacks for informal conversations. These informal conversations
are meant to be quite social, sticking to how one is doing and talking about the events of
one’s day, but one can also talk about struggles and difficulties in one’s life. Typically,
the conversations break down into several smaller groups within the larger group
attending, but the informal conversation is shared by the entire group when attendees are
small in number. One is also free to strike a conversation that is meant to delve more
deeply into Nursi’s writings in order to understand them better, typically following from
an issue discussed in the formal meeting that the individual would like to explore further.

Talking over tea is meant to be a relaxing way to end the day as a group and to be
a welcome way for guests to depart the meeting. Sometimes, the conversations over tea
can last longer than the main meeting itself and can stretch into the early hours of the
morning when discussing a particularly involved topic, especially if the issue is related to
the place of Islam in today’s culture. Normally, matters of politics or current events are
not a permissible subject for the *dershane* discussions or social time, since the focus
should be on matters of faith or should be easygoing social conversation.
On one occasion, one of the non-Turkish Muslims in the group, who regularly attended the meeting but does not live in the house, is an Egyptian student who lives in Cairo. On this particular night in early February 2011, the Egyptian student did not come because he had been glued to the television and was in fairly constant conversation with family and friends back home amidst the early stages of the Arab Spring. At this point, the demonstrations were taking place peacefully in Tahrir Square, but nothing had turned violent yet and the imminent fall of the Mubarak regime was not foreseen. At around 11pm, the core group of people was remaining and I casually asked two people who were sitting next to me, one who is the coordinator for the meeting and the other who is an American convert to Islam, what they thought about the demonstrations. The American, who converted to Islam within the past few years and recently spent significant time in Egypt and Saudi Arabia trying to find a pious Muslim community that lives in accordance with the precepts in the Qur’an, said that the media is putting too much focus on the rioters and that life as usual is probably taking place in Cairo – he had witnessed a number of regular demonstrations in Tahrir Square in the recent past and thought the current one was just a larger version of those – they eventually die out until spurred on by some public event to enliven new demonstrations. In his opinion, he said that change in government is not enough – what people really need to do is reform themselves.

The American continued to say more forcefully how most Muslims don’t live in accordance with the teachings of the tradition. While he has been open to reading Nursi, he then criticized the Nur movement, using stereotypes that have been levied by some within Turkey calling people who follow Nursi “philosophers” that are learned but don’t
necessarily follow the teachings in life. This began a heated discussion, one might even call it an argument, on the proper way to live and act as a Muslim. The coordinator of the meeting began to defend the Nur movement by emphasizing that the way of the Prophet is to have a disposition of learning and to follow the teachings in faith – “doing” isn’t necessarily the proper way. He also emphasized the particularities of the Turkish context, where Muslim ways of life were obliterated by the Kemalists, but the emphasis on learning is a core Muslim concept that is understood across the Muslim world.

The American, recoiling from the criticism that he levied against the Nur movement, segued the discussion into a more general set of problems that he sees in the Muslim world, problems which the Nur brothers would see as well. He spoke in generalizations about Islam and Muslims that he has experienced in a variety of contexts. For example, he stated that Muslims do what is obligated, but do little else. Muslims typically find a way to justify or explain away their actions – they will tell stories of certain imams who interpret elements of the Qur’an in a way that differs from accepted norms in Muslim countries, but explain away a particular action that should not be tolerated. The subject here turned toward generosity and compassion. Aside from making zakat or doing things that are obligated during ritual events, he stated that most Muslims don’t help out other people in need – they typically turn away from circumstances where generosity, compassion, or empathy would be demanded. He recounted a story about a friend of his in Egypt, when they were driving together and saw somebody who needed help on the side of the road. The American was going to pull over and his friend stopped him, asking “why are you doing that?” The group involved in the
discussion concurred on this point, explaining this by saying that most Muslims don’t know the Qur’an and that many are led astray by certain imams who steer them away from the core message of the Prophet. The American also spoke about how unwelcoming and inhospitable an environment the mosque is, since one is basically afraid of doing something wrong when inside or conducting rituals. When one enters a mosque, he says, “one is accosted, not welcomed”. He contrasted this to entering Christian churches, where he says “All are welcome”. Instead, he stated that “all are not welcome” in Islam.

After several months of attending the English language meeting, this American eventually stopped coming, as conversations kept occurring that were contentious and not in a spirit of dialogue, as he would routinely express explicit disagreement with Nursi’s approach to understanding Islam. In contrast to these more heated exchanges, examples abound of more open-minded exchanges on the nature of faith and belief during tea-time conversation. The brothers were always particularly interested in asking me questions to learn more about America, the place of Christianity within the U.S., and the place of Muslims in U.S. society.

While I had the opportunity to enjoy numerous conversations during the social time with the brothers from the house and meeting participants, one must grapple with Nursi’s writings in order to understand the kinds of discussions that happen as part of the center piece of the gathering. Since I regularly attended meetings over an extended period of time, I engaged in close readings of a number of key selections from Nursi’s
writings, largely focusing on The Words: On the Nature and Purposes of Man, Life and All Things, which constitutes the first and largest part of the Risale-i Nur. Written while exiled in Barla and containing 33 “Words”, which are each separate chapters focused on specific topics relating to issues of belief, the text offers an array of different analogical stories and theological discourses to offer “proof” of the truths contained in the Qur’an. One of the leading English-language translators for the Risale-i Nur, Sukran Vahide, distinguishes the text from other Qur’anic commentaries, which usually expound on the perceived meanings and revelatory import of all of the Qur’an’s verses, calling the Risale a “manevi tefsir”, placing the text in a spiritual and meaning-based (manevi) context that “explains and proves the verses containing the Qur’anic teachings about the essential truths of belief” (Nursi, The Words 806). The text takes selected Qur’anic passages, or even short phrases, and offers a reading of their meaning that creatively approaches a myriad of subjects, from traditional topics such as Divine Unity and the Divine Names, to reflections on science, nature, philosophy, and the cultural currents of Nursi’s day, conveyed through parables and a variety of conceptual neologisms to provide a deeper understanding of Islam, while also seeking to relate to a wide audience of Muslims in Turkey as they grappled with the shift from an Ottoman to a secular, Kemalist context. The text alternates between Words (chapters), and sometimes within a Word, from language that is relatable to everyday Muslims, especially when communicating through parables and analogies, to more abstruse and technical language for which someone deeply versed in Nursi’s oeuvre may be preferred to provide guidance to understand the meaning.
In order to gain a greater familiarity with this dynamic, I will offer a close reading of several sections of Nursi’s text. First, I will explore his writings on the nature of the human person by offering a reading of the Thirtieth Word – First Aim, which explores the nature of man’s ego, since it provides a concentrated window into Nursi’s thought and perspectives on the human person. Second, I will explore his writings on prayer and worship by offering readings of sections from the *The Words* - specifically, the 3rd, 4th, 5th, 21st, 9th, and 11th Words - as well as the 24th Letter and other parts of Nursi’s writings to illustrate the connection between the practice of prayer and the nature of the human person.

**The Thirtieth Word – First Aim: Who am ‘I’?**

The Thirtieth Word is divided into two parts. The “First Aim” proceeds as a reflection on Qur’an 33:72:

“We did indeed offer the Trust\(^{62}\) to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it being afraid thereof. But man assumed it; indeed, he is most unjust, most foolish.”

Nursi conceives of the existence of the ‘I’, or the ego of individual human beings, as one aspect of the Trust, allowing the human being to be conscious of their obligations to God and providing the pathway toward understanding one’s true self. Nursi calls the ‘I’ the

---

\(^{62}\) The Arabic term, *ama*\(\text{na}^\), should be understood here as the “covenant between human beings and God” (Eggen 64), shaping the responsibilities and obligations of human beings that have been voluntarily taken up by them through their free will, which in its fulfillment leads to salvation. See Eggen, Nora S. “Conceptions of Trust in the Qur’an.” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 56-85.
“key to the locked talisman of creation” that is “attached to his self”, entailing the capacity to open the closed “doors of the universe” to disclose the nature of the Creator and the universe (558). The ‘I’, being an “enigmatic…extremely complicated riddle”, has been entrusted to human beings so that they might recognize God:

“The All-Wise Maker gave to man as a trust an ‘I’ which comprises indications and samples that show and cause to recognize the truths of the attributes and functions of His dominicality, so that the ‘I’ might be a unit of measurement and the attributes of dominicality and functions of Divinity might be known. However, it is not necessary for a unit of measurement to have actual existence; like hypothetical lines in geometry, a unit of measurement may be formed by hypothesis and supposition. It is not necessary for its actual existence to be established by concrete knowledge and proofs” (ibid.).

The ‘I’ as a “unit of measurement” that does not have “actual existence” can be a difficult concept to grasp. In order to provide greater clarification, Nursi tries to clarify how it is that human beings think that the ‘I’ has existence, and in what way the ‘I’ is connected to the divine. Since knowledge of the attributes of God has no limits, Nursi states that it is necessary for the human being to draw an imaginary limit in order to comprehend itself. This imaginary limit creates a “fictitious dominicality, ownership, power, and knowledge” over oneself that says, “Up to here, mine, after that, His” (ibid.).

The distinction between self and the attributes of God created by this imaginary limit provides the mechanism whereby the human being can understand the Creator’s dominicality over creation. This prompts Nursi to analogize the ‘I’ to a mirror63, a

---

63 In the 33rd Word, Nursi delineates three ‘Aspects’ for how human beings are mirrors to the divine: 1. By seeking God through supplication and need as a “point of support and point of assistance in the conscience”; 2. By pursuing “partial knowledge” through one’s “power, senses of sight and hearing, ownership, and sovereignty”, which are “samples” of divine dominicality; and 3. By reflecting the Divine
metaphor that he uses in many places in the text to understand the light-reflecting character of the human being:

“...the ‘I’ is mirror-like, and, like a unit of measurement and tool for discovery it has an indicative meaning; having no meaning in itself, it shows the meaning of others. It is a conscious strand from the thick rope of the human being, a fine thread from the raiment of the essence of humanity” (559).

A mirror shows what it reflects, but does not actually own or contain what is shown or the meanings of what is disclosed. The meanings that the ‘I’ reflects as a “strand” and “thread” of humanity has two faces – one which “looks towards good and existence” that “accepts what is given, itself it cannot create” recognizing itself as being in a state of dependence, while the other face “looks towards evil and goes to non-existence” which “has the power to act” (ibid.). When one looks toward good, the knowledge gained by the ‘I’ in human existence “abandons its imaginary dominicality and supposed ownership” and returns praise to God for learning about His creation – “It achieves true worship” (ibid.). But, if the ‘I’ is forgetful of that reality and “believes that it owns itself”, then it “betrays the Trust”, gives rise to “all ascribing of partners to God, evil, and misguidance”, and “divides God Almighty’s sovereignty between them and other causes” (560).

Names, “the imprint of which are upon him”, such as exhibiting mercy, compassion, and generosity (719). The concept of the mirror as a metaphor for the soul that Nursi is appropriating is present in Sufi writings, such as in Farud ud-Din Attar’s The Conference of the Birds (Manteq at-Tair) and in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s The Ring Settings of Wisdom (Fusus al-Hikam), as symbolic of the goal along the process of moving from duality to non-duality in the transformation of consciousness along the mystical path. For a discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of the process of ‘polishing the mirror’, see Sells, Michael. “Ibn ‘Arabi’s Polished Mirror: Perspective Shift and Meaning Event.” Studia Islamica, vol. 67, 1988, pp. 121-149.
When the ‘I’ is in this latter position, it is in “absolute ignorance”, regardless of whether it “knows thousands of branches of science” (ibid.). Here, Nursi turns to a discussion of the two mighty trees in the Qur’an – the tree of Zaqqum (i.e., – evil) and the tree of Tuba (i.e., – good) – to illuminate the difference between philosophy in its various forms, such as “atheism, Materialism, and Naturalism” on the one side and the “line of prophethood and religion” on the other side (560-561). When philosophy is “obedient” and “of service” to religion, then the “world of humanity has experienced a brilliant happiness and social life”, but when separated it leads to evil and misguidance on the part of philosophy (561). Nursi conceives of the two faces of the ‘I’ as the “root and pivot and as a principal seed of those two trees”, identifying the face of the good with prophethood and the face of evil with philosophy (562). The first face is the “origin of sheer worship” that recognizes its “ownership is illusory” and believes the aim and duty of humanity is to be “moulded by God-given ethics and good character”; the second face thinks that the ‘I’ “owns its own life” and considers the duty of the ‘I’ to be “perfection of the self, which originates from love of the self” (562-563). In-line with this second face, Nursi criticizes Plato, Aristotle, Ibn Sina, and al-Farabi since they state that the “ultimate aim of humanity is to liken themselves to the Necessary Being” (563), and more generally, Nursi criticizes philosophy since it has “given nature the power to create” by “attributing effects to causes” (566), instead of attributing everything in creation to God. Nursi utilizes a metaphor from the different states of matter – air, liquid, and solid – to describe the process by which the ‘I’ becomes more substantial when directed by the face of philosophy:
“A further result of the rotten foundations of the line of philosophy is that although the ‘I’ has, in itself, an essence as insubstantial as air, because the inauspicious attitude of philosophy regards it as relating only to itself, it is as if that vapour-like ‘I’ becomes liquid; and then, because of its familiarity and preoccupation with materialism, it hardens. Next, through neglect and denial, that ‘I-ness’ freezes. Then, through rebelliousness it becomes opaque, losing its transparency. Then it becomes denser and envelops its owner. It becomes distended with the thoughts of mankind” (ibid.).

Before concluding the First Aim of the 30th Word by recounting an “imaginary journey” that resembled a “dream or vision” to illustrate the dead ends of Naturalism and Aristotelian thought, Nursi states that atheistic thinking has led to all forms of idol-worshipping: “IN THE MICRO COSM, THE ‘I’ IS THE IDOL, LIKE THOSE IN THE MACRO COSM SUCH AS NATURE” (567).

Salat: The Prescribed Prayers as the Pillar of Religion to Cultivate One’s Mirror

As The Words and other writings that comprise the Risale-i Nur seek to provide a comprehensive view of Islam for modern life, the topics of prayer and worship - its importance and meaning for the believer – play a central role in the text, especially within the cultural context of atheism, materialism, and secularism as illustrated above. In the first nine Words, which are shorter in length than later Words and are focused more around parables and analogical storytelling rather than engaging the reader in more technical philosophical and theological language, the topic of prayer and worship is illustrated through metaphor. In the Third Word, Nursi tells the story of two soldiers,

---
64 Themes that will be discussed regarding Nursi’s conception of prayer and worship, including the connection between his central “mirror” concept for the ‘I’ and the process of prayer and worship as a reformation of the soul, can also be found in Law, David R. “Reflections on Prayer and Social Justice in the Thought of Thomas Merton and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi.” Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi, edited by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 197-218.
both having an order to travel to a distant city, who encounter a fork in the road. A man at the fork tells them the following:

“The road on the right causes no loss at all, and nine out of ten of those who take it receive a high profit and experience great ease. While the road on the left provides no advantages, and nine out of ten of its travelers make a loss. But they are the same as regards to distance. Only there is one difference: those who take the left-hand road, which has no rules and no one in authority, travel without baggage and arms. They feel an apparent lightness and deceptive ease. Whereas those travelling on the right-hand road, which is under military order, are compelled to carry a kit-bag full of nutritious rations…and a superb army rifle…which will overpower and rout every enemy” (29).

One soldier chooses the left-hand road, leaving the military, suffering greatly along the way, and punished once reaching his destination. The other soldier chooses the right-hand road, successfully navigating the path and receiving a reward at the end. Nursi explains that the road in the story is the “road of life”, which comes from the “Spirit World” and passes through to the hereafter, and denotes those who choose to “submit to the Divine Law” versus those who represent “rebelliousness” and “follow their own desires” (30). The kit-bag and the rifle symbolize “worship and fear of God”, which may seem like an “apparent burden” for the soldier, but ultimately create an “ease and lightness in its meaning that defies description” (ibid.). Nursi closes this brief Word by stating, “Like that of the hereafter, happiness in this world lies in worship and being a soldier for Almighty God” (31).

Nursi begins the Fourth Word with a statement that is essential to Islam – “The prescribed prayers are the pillar of religion” – and proceeds to tell a parable about a ruler who gave 24 gold pieces each to two servants and sent them to settle one of his farms, at
a distance that would take a journey of two months. The ruler says: “Use this money for your tickets…and buy whatever is necessary for your house there with it” (32). One of them spent a small amount of money along the route to the transport station, one day’s travel distance away, and successfully invested in business endeavors along the way such that “his capital increased a thousandfold”, while the other wasted his funds on “gambling and amusements”, with one gold piece remaining when he arrived at the station (ibid.). The successful servant counseled the other to use that last gold piece on a ticket so that he would not have to walk and starve along the trip to the farm, and that their master “may take pity on you and forgive you your faults” (ibid.).

Nursi explains that, in the story, the ruler is God, the successful servant is the one who performs the prescribed prayers, while the other servant is one who neglects his prayers. The station is the grave and the 24 gold pieces represent the hours in a 24-hour day, while the ticket, costing one gold piece, represents the hour a day that one should devote to performing the prescribed prayers: “what a loss a person makes who spends twenty-three hours on this fleeting worldly life, and fails to spend one hour on the long life of the hereafter; how he wrongs his own self; how unreasonably he behaves” (33). While acknowledging that his own soul “does not like to pray”, Nursi states that “the spirit, the heart, and the mind find great ease in prayer. And it is not trying for the body. Furthermore, with the right intention, all the other acts of someone who performs the prescribed prayers become like worship” (ibid.).
In the Fifth Word, Nursi tells another story to illustrate the appropriateness of performing the five daily prayers, of two soldiers serving in a regiment together, one who is “well-trained and conscientious”, while the other is a “raw recruit and self-centered” (34). The conscientious soldier “concentrated on training and the war”, while the other who paid attention to his “stomach” and his physical well-being, would “leave the regiment and go to the market and do shopping” and did not heed training or the war: “That is the state’s business. What is it to me?” (ibid.). One day, the conscientious soldier says to the other:

“Your basic duty is training and fighting, brother. You were brought here for that. Trust in the king; he will not let you go hungry. That is his duty. Anyway, you are powerless and wanting; you cannot feed yourself everywhere. And this is a time of mobilization and war; he will tell you that you are mutinous and will punish you. Yes, there are two duties which concern us. One is the king’s duty: sometimes we do his fatigue duties and he feeds us for it. The other is our duty: that is training and fighting, and sometimes the king helps us with it” (ibid.).

Nursi explains that the war is “worldly life”, that the regiments constitute “human society”, and that the specific regiment in the story is the “community of Islam in this century” (35). The conscientious soldier is the “devout Muslim” who performs his obligations, while the other is a “degenerate wrongdoer who is so immersed in the struggle for livelihood that he casts aspersions on the True Provider, abandons his religious obligations, and commits any sins that come his way as he makes a living” (ibid.). Nursi calls the training and instruction that the soldiers receive as “foremost the prescribed prayers and worship” and that the war is the “struggle against the soul and its desires, and against the satans among jinn and men, to deliver them from sin and bad
morals, and save the heart and spirit form eternal perdition” (ibid.). Of the two duties that are mentioned in the soldier’s quote, the first is “to give life and sustain it”, while the other is to “worship and beseech the Giver and Sustainer of Life” – both duties encompass a sensibility that is to be cultivated where one should “trust in Him and rely on Him” (ibid.). The duties that humans have been given signal that our “nature and spiritual faculties show that he is created for worship” (ibid).

While the prescribed prayers play a central role in the practice of Muslims, the parables recounted above cast the performance of the salat as key to achieving happiness in this world and in the hereafter, as a form of training to fight a spiritual war in service of moral cultivation and defense from evil, and as a discipline that creates a sense of ease for the believer. They also place the importance of the prescribed prayers front and center into the contemporary context of materialism and secularism within which Nursi’s audience would have been struggling amidst great societal change. The described effects and purposes of the prescribed prayers enable them to be conceived beyond just a worshipful obligation that needs to be completed as part of the requirements of the Islamic faith, but opens a pathway to understand prayer at a deeper level, further connecting the human being to that for which the human has been created and constituting the conditions to be a faithful Muslim in a challenging situation.

In other sections of The Words and in the Risale-i Nur, Nursi returns to the topics of the prescribed prayers and worship to delve into these deeper perspectives. In the Twenty-First Word – First Station, Nursi provides a response to a person, who was a
“man great in age, physique, and rank” that once said to him: “The prayers are fine, but to perform them every single day five times is excessive. Since they never end, it becomes wearying” (276). In these words, Nursi recognized that they resounded with his own “evil-commanding soul” that was “receiving the same lesson from Satan” through the “ear of laziness” (ibid.). Thus, Nursi penned five ‘Warnings’ to his own soul, and that of others, as to why it is important to engage in the prescribed prayers.

First, worldly life is brief, so enacting the prescribed prayers as a “merciful act of service” allows one to gain the “true happiness of eternal life” (ibid.). Second, the prayers, far from encouraging one to be bored or weary, should enliven one, since they “attract the needs of your companions in the house of my body, the sustenance of my heart, the water of life of my spirit, and the air of my subtle faculties” (277). In emphasizing the life-giving nature of the prayers, Nursi states that, “it is only through the window of the prayers that a conscious inner sense and luminous subtle faculty can breathe, which by its nature desires eternal life and was created for eternity and is a mirror of the pre-Eternal and Post-Eternal One and is infinitely delicate and subtle” (ibid.). Third, one must cultivate patience in worship, just as one needs to cultivate patience in “refraining from sin” and in the “face of disaster”, so difficulties in praying should be greeted with a “serious effort to continue with a new eagerness and fresh enthusiasm” (277-278). Fourth, in comparing the effort one might make to work hard when intimidated or incentivized by the promise of receiving money, Nursi contends that, since God promises a “recompense like Paradise and a gift like eternal happiness”, one would deserve a “severe reprimand and awesome punishment” if the prayers are
performed “unwillingly, like someone forced to work, or by being bored, or by working in half-hearted fashion” (278).

Fifth, to those who might say that that they don’t have time to pray amidst the “multiplicity of your worldly occupations” or too preoccupied in the “struggle for livelihood”, one needs to understand that one’s “basic duty is not to labour like an animal, but to strive for a true, perpetual life, like a true human being” (278-279). For Nursi, if one abandons the prescribed prayers in favor of focusing on this-worldly endeavors, then “all the fruits of your effort will be restricted to only a worldly, unimportant, and unproductive livelihood” (279). Instead, if you “allow your spirit to relax and take a breather” and engage in the prescribed prayers with sound intention, one will discover “two mines”, as analogized through the cultivation of a garden: “a share of the praises and glorifications offered by all the plants and trees”; and the produce that is eaten from the garden will “become like almsgiving from you” under the condition that one’s work is “in the name of the True Provider and within the bounds of what He permits, and see yourself as a distribution official giving His property to His creatures” (ibid.).

When Nursi references the metaphor of a mirror and a “conscious inner sense and luminous subtle faculty”, as well as the garden reference whereby humans are to see themselves as “distribution” officials, we see his perspectives on prayer clearly within the lens of his notion of the self as described in the Thirtieth Word – First Aim. The prayers thus become like an “almsgiving” that both offers worship to the divine and illuminates
our true selves, allowing us to understand our place in the universe. For Nursi, this extends to an understanding of the temporal responsibilities of the human being as being in the “present day” – “each new day is the door to a new world” – whereby one is cultivating one’s mirror in a “private world” that is “dependent on the person’s heart and actions”:

“Like a splendid palace reflected in a mirror takes on the colour of the mirror; if it is black, it appears black; if it is red, it appears red. Also it takes on the qualities of the mirror; if the mirror is smooth, it shows the palace to be beautiful, and if it is not, it shows it to be ugly. As it shows the most delicate things to be coarse, so you alter the shape of your own world with your heart, mind, actions, and wishes. You may make it testify either for you or against you. If you perform the five daily prayers, and through them you are turned towards that world’s Glorious Maker, all of a sudden your world, which looks to you, is lit up. Quite simply as though the prayers are an electric lamp and your intention to perform them touches the switch, they disperse the world’s darkness and show the changes and movements within the confused wretchedness of worldly chaos to be a wise and purposeful order and a meaningful writing of Divine power. They scatter one light of the light-filled verse, God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth (24:35) over your heart, and your world on that day is illuminated through the light’s reflection. It will cause it to testify in your favour through its luminosity.” (280).

With the prescribed prayers being an “electric lamp” that allows you to shine a light and shape your “private world”, the believer is encouraged to perform them so that the reflection off one’s mirror may illuminate the spirit, heart, and mind in service to Allah.

Metaphors from the natural world that we have seen thus far to describe the context of prayer practice, including physical (plants, trees, and gardens), visual (light), and temporal (hours in a day), are utilized to full effect in the Ninth Word65, whereby Nursi

---

seeks to describe “one of the many instances of wisdom” in the specific times associated with the five daily prayers (51). For Nursi, each of the prayer times marks the beginning of an “important revolution”, such that each time is a “mirror to the Divine disposal of power and to the universal Divine bounties within that disposal” (ibid.). In the Ninth Word, Nursi communicates the meaning and wisdom of the prescribed prayers in five ‘Points’, which highlight the nature of the relationship between the human being and the Divine.

First, the “meaning” of the prescribed prayers is the “offering of glorification, praise, and thanks” to God, whereby these three things, which are “like the seeds of the prayers” and “present in every part of the prayers”, are specifically emphasized in the repeated utterance, thirty-three times, of “Glory be to God”, “God is Most Great”, and “All praise be to God” (ibid.). Second, the “meaning” of worship is that the “servant sees his own faults, impotence, and poverty, and in the Divine Court prostrates in love and wonderment before dominical perfection, Divine mercy, and the power of the Eternally Besought One” in order to seek “forgiveness” and make known “his own need and the needs and poverty of all creatures through the tongue of entreaty and supplication” (52). Third, just as the human person’s private world is a “miniature of the greater world”, the prescribed prayers are a “comprehensive, luminous index of all varieties of worship, and

---

eighteen thematic “pillars” that aim to constitute the “spiritual architecture” and “defining features of Nursi’s worldview” which the author believes are essential for scholarly investigation of the Risale-i Nur (Turner, Qur’an Revealed 5). This is the first scholarly volume which seeks to present a comprehensive lens on Nursi’s thought. A number of the key ideas forming this volume were presaged in his earlier article – Turner, Colin. “The Six-Sided Vision of Said Nursi: Toward a Spiritual Architecture of the Risale-i Nur.” Spiritual Dimensions of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi’s Risale-i Nur, edited by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, SUNY Press, 2008, pp. 23-51.
a sacred map pointing to all the shades of worship of all the classes of creatures.” (ibid.). The indexical quality of the prescribed prayers, much like the metaphorical appropriation of the mirror to understand the human being, displays all of the features involved in understanding the tone and situation of worshipful action toward God.

Nursi proceeds to liken the specific prayers and their associated times of day with the changing of the seasons and the development of human life – from spring time and birth to winter and death - in the Fourth Point to illustrate the “vast clock of Almighty God” (52). The early morning Fajr prayer reminds one of “early spring” and the “moment of conception in the mother’s womb” (ibid.); the time for the Zuhr prayer past midday points to “midsummer, and the prime of youth, and the period of man’s creation in the lifetime of the world” (53); the ‘Asr prayer in the afternoon is like “autumn, and old age” (ibid.); the Maghrib prayer at sunset recalls the “end of autumn, and man’s death, and the destruction of the world at the commencement of the resurrection” (ibid.); and ‘Isha at nightfall brings to mind the “world of darkness”, “winter”, the “Intermediate Realm”, and the “remaining works of departed men dying and passing beneath the veil of oblivion, and this world, the arena of examination, being shut up and closed down forever” (ibid.). As night passes into day, it reminds one of the “Morning of the Resurrection”, and the new beginning that starts each day attests to the “certain” reality of the next life (ibid.). As Nursi analogically illuminates the nature of the five prayer times and their meaning, he states that the “prescribed prayers, which are an innate duty and the basis of worship and an incontestable debt, are most appropriate and fitting for these times” (ibid.).
In the Fifth Point, Nursi continues to reflect on the meaning of the five prayer times from the perspective of articulating the human person’s disposition as one proceeds through the day, especially as one considers the transience of human life, as well as one’s “weakness” and lack of “power” relative to the divine (54). At Fajr, one should “seek success and help from Him” so that one can “bear the duties that will be loaded on him” (ibid.); at Zuhr, one needs to “pause from the heedlessness and insensibility caused by toil” and “proclaim one’s wonder, love and humility” toward the divine; and at the time of ‘Asr, the human spirit, which naturally “desires eternity”, “worships benevolence” and is “pained by separation”, can begin to look beyond the matters of human life and toward that which is eternal (ibid.). The time of the Maghrib prayer is when the human spirit, which is a “mirror desirous for Eternal Beauty” (55), “renews his allegiance” and “observes the wise order in this palace of the universe” (56). In reflecting on the importance of performing the Maghrib prayer, as well as all of the prescribed prayers, Nursi calls it an “unending conversation and permanent happiness” in relation to the divine within the “transient guesthouse” of this world (ibid.). The ‘Isha prayer completes the cycle, whereby in the passage to night one experiences a “moment of unending conversation, a few seconds of immortal life” as one asks the divine to “illuminate his future” and reflects on the “awesomeness and the manifestations of His beauty in the utter destruction of this narrow, fleeting, and lowly world, the terrible death-agonies of its decease, and in the unfolding of the broad, eternal, and majestic world of the hereafter” (ibid.). In the ‘Isha prayer, the one who prays, along with the “mighty congregation and huge community of the universe” such as all of the faithful, plants, animals, the earth, and
all of the stars, responds like a “well-ordered army or an obedient soldier” to the divine command, “‘Be!’, and it is” (Qur’an 2:117) in the passage to the “World of the Unseen” in the hereafter (57). In the process of reciting the ‘Isha prayer and completing the cycle of the prescribed prayers, the human person and all things make a “sort of Ascension” (58) in being elevated above one’s lowly state.

With the reference to the Ascension of Muhammad, Nursi is intending to illuminate how a faithful Muslim can understand the practice of the prescribed prayers as a daily pathway to elevate oneself in alignment with good thoughts and actions, opening and maintaining a regular dialogue with the divine. The cyclic pattern of the prayers provides the mechanism to cultivate the mirror – joining heart, mind, soul, and behavior - within one’s private world that seeks to be connected with God. The “revolution” that the times of prayer enact – which can be understood both from the perspective of that which revolves in a temporal sense, as well as in a practical sense as a revolt against the forces of atheism and materialism – ennobles the Muslim with the light of belief while maintaining the humble place of the human person relative to the divine.

In the Eleventh Word, Nursi provides an illustration to highlight how one can become elevated via a parable, which seeks to provide for the reader a greater understanding of the “talisman of the wisdom of the world and the riddle of man’s creation and the mystery of the reality of the prescribed prayers” (133). The parable posits a wealthy king who wanted to open up an exhibit to display his wealth – “the wonders of his art, and the marvels of his knowledge” – so that he could “behold them
with his own discerning eye” as well as to “look through the view of others” (ibid.). Implicitly referencing the metaphor of a “mirror” with the desire to see through the “view of others”, Nursi states that the king set out to build a majestic palace with many dwellings, adornments, and food, and appointed a “Supreme Commander” to be the teacher within this palace to make known and help others to understand what is in the palace (133-134). Upon entering the palace, the teacher announced to the spectators that the king built the palace so as to make himself “known to you” and “loved by you”; thus, you “should recognize Him and try to get to know Him” and “love Him too by obeying Him” (134). The people who entered the palace separated into two groups – the first group had “self-knowledge”, were “intelligent”, and had hearts that were “in the right place”, while the second group were “corrupted and their hearts extinguished” and were “ill-mannered in the face of the Glorious Maker’s rules” (134-135). While the second group was “arrested” and put into a “prison”, the first group did as the king wished and, as a result, he “invited them to another special, elevated, ineffable palace” (135).

Upon explaining the parable, with the king representing the divine, the Supreme Commander representing Muhammad, the palace representing the world, the elevated palace representing the hereafter, and the two groups representing the people of belief and unbelief, Nursi continues to describe the people of belief in further detail. This “happy community” understood that they were “invested with the prescribed prayers, which are the index of all the varieties of worship, and numerous subtle duties within elevated stations” (136). The prescribed prayers, with their “various formulas and actions” that point to “duties and stations” which are enacted in the “absence” of the
divine, allow one to weigh the beauty of creation while in the palace of this world (136-137). Nursi goes on to describe what happens next to this “happy community”:

“...after looking at the universe and works and performing the duties in the above-mentioned stations through transactions in the object of worship’s absence, they rose to the degree of also beholding the transactions and acts of the All-Wise Maker, whereby, in the form of a transaction in the presence of the person concerned, they responded with knowledge and wonder in the face of the All-Glorious Creator’s making Himself known to conscious beings through the miracles of His art, and declared: ‘Glory be unto You! How can we truly know you? What makes You known are the miracles of the works of Your art!’” (137).

The “transactions” described above represent the sincere responses of thanks, praise, wonder, appreciation, humility, love, etc., on the part of the faithful when enacting the prescribed prayers, which point to the divine whether they be in his absence while they are in the palace of this world or in his presence upon contemplation within the “elevated, ineffable palace”. Nursi goes on to describe the elevation of the faithful:

“They ascended to a rank above all creatures by which, through the auspiciousness of belief and assurance and ‘the Trust’, they became trustworthy Vicegerents of the Earth. And after this field of trial and place of examination, their Munificent Sustainer invited them to eternal happiness in recompense for their belief, and to the Abode of Peace in reward for adhering to His religion of Islam...For the desirous, mirror-bearing lovers of an eternal, abiding beauty who gaze upon it will certainly not perish, but will go to eternity. The final state of the Qur’an’s students is thus. May Almighty God include us among them, Amen!” (138).

The transactional nature of the prescribed prayers enacts a relational bond of trust between the divine and the human person, whereby the faithful Muslim desires to be connected to the beauty and magnificence of the divine via prayer and that sincere desire
for connectivity is rewarded in the hereafter with eternal life. With this in mind, Nursi distills for the reader the “two main aims” associated with the senses and faculties that have been endowed to the human person through creation by the divine to experience that connectivity: the first is so that one can become aware of the “bounties” from the creator in this life, “causing you to offer Him thanks”; and the second is the recognition of “all the sorts of the manifestations of the Divine Names manifested in the world and to cause you to experience them. And you, by recognizing them through experiencing them, should come to believe in them” (139). The prescribed prayers attune all of one’s faculties – whether it be through the five physiological senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch or more spiritual senses that are aware of the character of one’s mirror – to experience a sincere relationship with the divine as one’s aim in this world. Upon reflecting on the “aims” of one’s life, Nursi goes on to consider the “nature”, the “form”, the “true meaning”, and the “perfection” of one’s life:

“It [the nature of your life] is an index of wonders pertaining to the Divine Names; a scale for measuring the Divine Attributes; a balance of the worlds within the universe; a list of the mighty world; a map of the cosmos; a summary of the vast book of the universe; a bunch of keys with which to open the hidden treasuries of Divine power; and a most excellent pattern of the perfections scattered over beings and attached to time. The nature of your life consists of matters like these.

Now, the form of your life and the manner of its duty is this: your life is an inscribed word, a wisdom-displaying word written by the pen of power. Seen and heard, it points to the Divine Names. The form of your life consists of matters like these.

Now the true meaning of your life is this: its acting as a mirror to the manifestation of Divine oneness and the manifestation of the Eternally Besought One. That is to say, through a comprehensiveness as though being the point of
focus for all of the Divine Names manifested in the world, it is its being a mirror to the Single and Eternally Besought One.

Now, as for the perfection of your life, it is to perceive the lights of the Pre-Eternal Sun which are depicted in the mirror of your life, and to love them. It is to display ardour for Him as a conscious being. It is to pass beyond yourself with love of Him. It is to establish the reflection of His light in the centre of your heart” (141).

The paragraphs above provide a summary for Nursi of the proper way to view the ‘I’ – its nature, form, meaning, and pathway to perfection – in the light of the fruits of belief resulting from prayer and worship. For Nursi, one can only come to understand one’s ‘I’-ness if one truly knows how one has been created and the purposes to which human life is directed. The concept of the “mirror” becomes the central metaphor upon which the practice of prayer is to be understood, whereby the prescribed prayers habituate oneself toward creating a reflective/reflexive consciousness in the contemporary world that enables a loving, conversational relationship with the divine.

**Salat and Du’a: Mutual Forms of Relational Dependence and Orientation to the Divine**

In Nursi’s text, the discussion of prayer is largely focused on the prescribed prayers (*salat*), but the notion of supplication (*du’a*) also plays an important role in understanding the nature of human transaction with the divine. The humble position of the human person in prayer is illustrated by Nursi when he turns his attention beyond the prescribed prayers to broader forms of supplication and intercessory prayer. In order to further explore the link between this form of prayer and worship, Nursi addresses the
issue in the Letters, the second major text of the Risale-i Nur, which is divided into thirty-three ‘Letters’ comprised of a compilation of reflections that Nursi wrote to his students to clarify a number of questions and issues. The Letters tends to be oriented more toward practical and social matters of concern to the Nur community, whereas most of Nursi’s writings focus on the foundations of belief.

In the First Addendum to the Twenty-Fourth Letter, Nursi outlines “Five Points” to provide a more finely delineated notion of prayer (du’a) and worship in reflecting on the Qur’anic verse: “No importance would your Sustainer attach to you were it not for your supplication” (Qur’an 25:77). In the First Point, calling supplication the “spirit of worship and the result of sincere belief” (Nursi, Letters 357), Nursi identifies three kinds of acceptable supplication. The first is via the “tongue of latent ability”, which is the capacity within created entities to grow as based on their potential (353). This is not just a capacity for human beings, but also animals and plant life, as is the marshalling of forces, such as “water, heat, earth, and light” for the growing of seeds (ibid.). The second is via the “tongue of innate need”, which gives all living creatures the “things they need and desire, which are beyond their power and will, from unexpected places and at the appropriate time” (354). This form of supplication also rises to the divine from animals and plant life alike, which does not manifest as a specific request but creates the context for the sustaining of life.

The third kind is “supplication of conscious beings arising from need” (ibid.), which Nursi further specifies as two kinds. One is closely related to the tongues of latent
ability and innate need, but specific to the human context, for the forms of progress of which humans are capable in the material world: “The greater part of human progress and most discoveries are the result of a sort of supplication”, such as the “wonders of civilization” (ibid.). The other is the “well-known” supplication by “action” and “word”, with action referring to such activities as “ploughing” that one consciously enacts to grow and sustain life and word referring to specific verbal requests (ibid.). It is here, when Nursi begins to speak about the supplication by word of conscious beings arising from need that he expounds on the commonly accepted notion of du’a in the remaining four Points. In the Second Point, Nursi reflects on the role of Muhammad as an “intercessor”, imploring the reader to “follow his Practices”, since he is “connected with the happiness of all his community and shares every sort of happiness of each member of it, and he is anxious at every sort of their tribulations” (355). Sincere blessings made for Muhammad are always acceptable since they have “universality, extensiveness, and continuousness” with the divine (ibid.). In the Third Point, Nursi reflects on the circumstances of a prayer being acceptable to God for things that people request. Here, Nursi states that such a supplication is “either accepted exactly as desired or what is better is granted” (356). In this sense, all prayerful requests are fulfilled by receiving that which is requested, receiving something else that is better in this life, or receiving it in the hereafter. Nursi provides a telling analogy for those who may be dissatisfied in not receiving what was requested in this life by illustrating a sick person and a doctor:

“A sick person should not cast aspersions on the wisdom of his doctor. If he asks for honey and the expert doctor gives him quinine, he may not say: ‘The doctor
did not listen to me’. Rather, the doctor listened to his sighs and moans; he heard them and responded to them. He provided better than what was asked for” (ibid.).

In the Fourth Point, Nursi more compassionately summarizes the plight of the sick person, who may be understood as all human beings, since the “most immediate fruit” of supplication is knowing that “there is someone who listens to his voice, sends a remedy for his ailment, takes pity on him, and whose hand of power reaches everything. He is not alone in this great hostel of the world; there is an All-Generous One Who looks after him and makes it friendly” (ibid.). Nursi expands on this in the Fifth Point, when he states that the act of supplication affirms that there is a God who “knows the most insignificant things about me, can bring about my most distant aims. Who sees every circumstance of mine, and hears my voice. In which case, he hears all the voices of all beings, so that He hears my voice too. He does all these things, and so I await my smallest matters from Him too. I ask Him for them” (357).

In taking stock of the connection between the prescribed prayers (salat) and personal prayers of supplication (du’a), one can see that they both entail forms of relationship and conversation: one (salat) is explicitly a form of training and cultivating one’s mirror to reflect the nature of the divine in one’s spirit, while the other (du’a) proceeds as part of one’s capacity – via ability and need – to consciously rely on the divine for growth and happiness. Each proceeds from a position of dependence, but also requires a form of relational action on the part of the human person to orient one’s mind and spirit to understand divine action as part of processes in the world. For Nursi, it is
this deepening of understanding in faith that prepares one’s capacities in life and allows one to develop a proper perspective on the relative weight of this world in comparison to the hereafter. Viewing the world and the self through the lenses of prayer and worship, one sees all human forms of happiness and progress in knowledge – including science and technology – as ultimately guided in and through supplication to the divine and properly situates the place of the “I” in that process. Unfolding in the story of human life, commitment to Islam and the teachings of the Qur’an, while cultivating the mind and spirit through prayer and worship is the ultimate “test” for the faithful:

“Religion is an examination, a test, proposed by God so that in the arena of competition elevated spirits may be distinguished from one another. Just as materials are plunged in the fire so that diamonds and coal, gold and earth, separate out from one another, so too religion is a trial concerning the obligations placed on man by God and a driving to competition, which is what this abode of examination consists of. In this way the elevated jewels in the mine of man’s abilities become separated out from the dross” (Nursi, Words 274).

Thus, the invitation from God to the kind of relationship created through prayer and worship, mediated by a this-worldly “competition” that tests the capacities of the human person, is a journey of seeking to elevate one’s true self as a mirror to the light of the divine. The outcomes of the “examination” are attested by the degree to which one’s heart and mind are attuned to the relational conversation that takes place in and through

---

the prescribed prayers (salat), but also in seeing human action and all action in the universe as a supplication (du’ā) to the divine. Within this arena, our lives are to be viewed as a training for a competitive spiritual battle like a soldier, whereby the goal is to grow in faith and knowledge of the divine amidst the distractions and forces that would pull one away from this goal. Akin to a mystical path, but different in its orientation as fully involved in the competition of the world, the believer is involved in an intentional process of divine conversation and reflection through prayer that refines one’s mind, heart, and soul for guidance in action for everyday life with an eye toward the ultimate benefit of life after death. Based on this, one might be tempted to construe this pathway in an individual fashion for the faithful Muslim, but it is both individual and communal, whereby the responsibilities are equally on the soldier to develop oneself as well as to protect and share in the happiness of their fellow believers within the competitive arena of life. Nursi provides a clear reflection on this issue in the Tenth Treatise of the al-Mathnawi al-Nuri, another collection of writings within the Risale-i Nur:

67 In comparing Nursi’s conception of faith development against other Muslim thinkers, such as al-Ghazali and the Naqshbandi Shaykh Ahmed Sirhindi, along with Western theorists such as Freud, Jung, and Kohlberg, Marcia Hermansen places Nursi in alignment with Ghazali and Sirhindi in portraying development as guided by a central ideal through conflict amongst competing forces in the world: “Thus, the arena of conflict is the material or earthly realm, where the animalistic, corporeal side, or what is termed the ‘soul commanding to evil’ clashes with angelic or spiritual forces. Through moral and spiritual development, the one great teleological force toward perfection is able to prevail as these conflicts are resolved” (Hermansen 96). See Hermansen, Marcia. “Faith Development and Spiritual Maturation in the Works of Said Nursi.” Spiritual Dimensions of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi’s Risale-I Nur, edited by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, SUNY Press, 2008, pp. 81-101.

68 Lucinda Mosher offers a reading of Nursi’s al-Mathnawi, conceived as a “devotional manual”, a “compact handbook for the student embarking on the contemplative life” for reflection on the Divine Names (Mosher, “Spirit of Worship” 104). Nursi was known to wake up every morning at 3:30am and recite the Jawshan al-Kabir, literally meaning “the great armor”, which is a 100-stanza supplication on the Divine Names. While Nursi stressed that the reasons for offering this supplication are for the “fruits and benefits” of the hereafter and discouraged those from making the Jawshan a “talisman” by wearing it as a pendant, Mosher clearly thinks that Nursi regularly recited this prayer in order to use it as “armor for daily
“Know, O friend, that the believers’ solidarity and togetherness in their congregational worship and supplications has a deep meaning. Each believer resembles a brick in a firm building benefiting from the multiplied strength of innumerable fellow believers in their worship and supplication. When belief brings them together, each works for the whole, becomes an intercessor and supplicant for them, and asks mercy for them while declaring their innocence. Together, they extol the Prophet, their leader. Every believer takes pleasure in others’ happiness, just as a mother, although hungry, takes pleasure in satisfying her children, or like a compassionate brother who takes pleasure in his brother’s happiness. As a result, people can worship the Creator of the universe in a comprehensive way and earn eternal happiness.” (Nursi, *al-Mathnawi*, 353-354).

**IR Analysis of Nur Reading Groups**

The writings from Nursi that are presented above can be viewed in a scholarly fashion as offering an interpretation of his ideas on prayer, worship, and the nature of the human person, but they should also be seen as integral to what it means to read Nursi within a group. The significant majority of the texts analyzed above were also discussed over the course of a number of weeks within the reading group that I regularly attended. Unlike my attempt to provide a summative statement on what prayer and worship and the nature of the human person mean for Nursi, in the context of a group one is reading a few pages at a time – and sometimes just a few paragraphs at a time – within one meeting to gain insight for living one’s life in a more informed way in the light of Qur’anic truth. As there is no spiritual director for the discussion groups – all are “brothers” – a sincere process of learning within oneself and with each other is paramount for deepening one’s faith and strengthening one’s commitment to Islamic practices.

The meetings that take place within a dershane as a student and in reading groups once one leaves the university environment are constitutive to generating emotional energy for the movement. In the meetings that I attended, which are understandably different than what one would experience in Turkey, there was a great deal of animated and thoughtful discussion about Nursi’s writings, making for intense experiences of learning, solidarity, and positive emotional energy. Part of the greater animation in the meetings I attended could also be attributed to being a stranger in a strange land - Turkish students in America who need and are excited to engage a sense of camaraderie with the comfort and ideas of home. There's also the particularity of very bright students, some of whom speak English well and have come to America to study - they’re generally more verbose and confident (this was the reason given to me when I pressed my fellow participants to explain the differences between the meetings that they experience in the United States and what they experience at home). As part of being in a different cultural context, I wonder whether the casual way in which the meetings were conducted, where sometimes people would come and go depending on whether their cell phone buzzed, would occur in a Turkish context, given the strictness on the use of technology. One of the participants who commented to me, in his description of the differences between this house in the United States and previous experiences in Turkey, called this experience “dershane-lite”69. Though, more is similar than different in the two contexts which bond

---

69 An important point to note is that dershane members, whether in Turkey or elsewhere, participate in spiritual retreats as a requirement of living in the house. These retreats, which usually involve travel to a separate location, are held when academic classes are not in session for a period of time, such as a week. They involve fully enacting the 5 required prayers – including waking up at 4am and reciting additional prayers – communal meals, personal time to study Nursi, and group discussions on Nursi’s writings.
everyone together - the regular schedule of group prayer, communal meals and tea, shared ideals, friendship/brotherhood, networks of association, etc.\textsuperscript{70} The interpersonal bonds that the members share via the meetings are of central importance, since the movement has historically been under duress and persecution within Turkey, with meetings often held in members’ houses rather than in any publicly identifiable place. It is only recently, with the ascendance of the Erdogan administration in Turkey that the Nur movement is now more comfortable advertising itself within Turkey and the world\textsuperscript{71}.

It's clear that the writings of Said Nursi have a special significance in Turkish culture, since he represents the anchor of the battle against secularism and atheism that seeks to carve a path to understand and practice Islam that is peaceful, thoughtful, open to engage with the modern world and interreligious dialogue, and values the pursuit of knowledge through the sciences. The \textit{Risale-i Nur} serves as the central symbol of social relationship around which the meetings and the \textit{dershane} community is organized, providing a discursive environment that operates as a focus of attention, generates a shared mood, and encourages spiritual development and close bonds of friendship, each of which is mirrored by the sensibility derived from the content of Nursi’s writings. The meetings themselves are symbolic as well, since they harken to a time when Nursi used to

\textsuperscript{70} In August 2015, I was able to attend a Nur discussion group meeting at The Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture in Turkey, one of the leading organizations in Turkey advancing scholarship on the work of Said Nursi and supporting the progress of the Nur movement. While the meeting that I attended was a large, lecture-style meeting with close to 50 participants that was led by a living student of Said Nursi, Mehmet Firinci Abi, it exhibited many of these same characteristics that bond movement members together.

\textsuperscript{71} A group member told me that, due to the history of persecution, it was not allowed in the movement to record any official information about the meetings until 2003, lest that information might be discovered by political authorities. In addition, there is no official membership list or registration required to hold a regular discussion group.
hold meetings in secret while in exile to discuss his writings and seek to perpetuate an approach to Islam that fully conforms to the Sunni tradition, while adopting certain modes and styles from the Sufi tradition in an attempt to save Islam from the secularists. The Nur movement creates daily rituals and disciplines of life for students and adults that is combined with a cultural context bound by the persona, spirit, and writings of a charismatic figure, Said Nursi, whose actions and legacy hold a great deal of symbolic value to Turkish Muslims. When enacting the prescribed prayers, the group member who leads the prayers dons the *turban* in Nursi’s style to commemorate him and to allow him to be symbolically present in the meeting space. Thus, they are able to bring together the mechanisms that generate ritual entrainment with rich symbolic value that leads to a strong sense of solidarity and positive emotional energy for people within the Turkish culture, where these spiritual battles are still very much alive today. The movement, especially if one becomes a ‘student of Nursi’, entails a high level of commitment that produces a form of habitual entrainment that goes well beyond the required practices of the Muslim faith.

One evening, I entered into a lengthy discussion with one of the brothers on the role of emotion and prayer. I asked this person, "What is a 'good' prayer? How do you feel when you experience a good prayer?" The participant said that, every once in a while, he feels an intense sense of connection and positive feeling while he is conducting *salat*. When sincerely prostrating, he has had an image of the universe, the earth, and the planets, with the feeling and knowledge that there is a “glue” holding it together. When he experiences this, he expresses thanks to God, but he does not seek to experience this
sense of connection in future prayers and does not think himself to be special. Instead, he treats the experience as a “gift”, reinforcing the virtue of humility and the position of being a servant of God. He stated, “How can I reflect that radiation, that light of knowledge and exude it every day?” The participant’s response raises interesting questions about the idea of seeking positive emotional energy through prayer and the role it plays in his tradition. While the participant doesn’t seek to have these moments of connection, the experience accords well with the idea in Nursi’s writings that the soul is supposed to be a ‘mirror’ to the divine, allowing one to reflect the light of the divine back onto Allah, however imperfectly. The intense experience this person feels at these instances can plausibly be construed as an emotional verification that that is happening in the moment, and can increase feelings of solidarity with the divine and enthusiasm for engaging in future obligatory prayers. It is exactly this kind of process that Nursi intends to enact in the believer, training one to become a spiritual soldier prepared to deepen one’s knowledge through a form of “friendly” conversation with the divine, leading to a form of ascension that strengthens one’s soul to reflect that friendship with others and fully interact with the competitive arena of the world.
CHAPTER 6

The Vernacularization of Charisma: Toward a Theory of Prayer as an Interaction Ritual

“Rituals are occasional events. How the realness of the world as enacted in ritual is carried over into ongoing everyday life remains a problem for religious theory. So ritual is not a sufficient answer to the problem of presence. The materialization of religious worlds includes a process that might be called the corporalization of the sacred. I mean by this the practice of rendering the invisible visible by constituting it as an experience in a body – in one’s own body or in someone else’s body – so that the experiencing body itself becomes the bearer of presence for oneself and for others” (Orsi, *Heaven and Earth* 74).

The above quotation from Robert Orsi comes from his chapter “Material Children” in *Between Heaven and Earth*, a discussion of the ways in which the material reality of children in the twentieth-century Catholic ethos of pre-Vatican II, specifically focusing on practices from the 1930s and 1940s in America, was constructed and enforced by adults to make the Catholic religious world real. While Orsi has a view of rituals that understands them as “occasional events”, typified by kinds of official activities that we might denote as ‘ritual’ such as the Catholic Mass and religious celebrations, what happens when we broaden the view of ritual, such as occurs when we appropriate interaction ritual theory to view social interaction more generally, to understand the “corporalization of the sacred”? From within an interaction ritual lens, which views human beings as conscious seekers of events and interactions that will
produce positive emotional energy, the process for understanding how a religious world becomes real - how the “sacred” is “corporalized” - is contextual, bringing together not just the forces acting upon a religious practitioner from those enacting and subjecting the disciplines of a tradition – the power of pastorship to enact a dialectic of shepherd and sheep within the mind, body, and soul – but also the motivations and situations that compel one to be drawn into or advance, resist, or question the practice of those disciplines. Paying attention to this latter set of forces allows us to take a step beyond where Orsi and Asad have been able to go, but toward where they each to seek to go – with Orsi’s “radical” or “abundant” empiricism and Asad’s invocation of Mauss’s “bio-psycho-social” techniques – to provide a language, a way of speaking to a fuller picture of how cognitions and emotions have observably been shaped within the conscious life of a religious practitioner.

As an example, in “Material Children”, Orsi continues on to speak more about the formation of children through Catholic prayer practices in mid-twentieth century America:

“Prayer – praying in school, praying in church, and praying at home – served as another medium for making and substantiating the religious world adults and children constituted and inhabited together. The goal of Catholic prayer pedagogy and practice in its ideal expression (as this was articulated in countless earnest and passionate articles by teaching sisters throughout the middle years of the century) was to create children who prayed unceasingly, who experienced the world across the thrumming of prayer in their bodies, and whose praying bodies could be seen by all. Adults watched children at prayer and choreographed their movements and postures. Children’s inner worlds, their religious imaginations, and their understanding of the moral bonds among people and between heaven and earth were constituted in the corporal disciplines of prayer pedagogy. Catholic prayer disciplines worked to embody in children the Catholic scheme of
cosmic reciprocity and moral accountability. Morality was not a matter of learned rules and sanctions but of the powerfully experienced corporal connections between heaven and earth and among people on earth realized, enacted, embodied in the child *at prayer*” (102-103).

While Orsi goes on to say that the children themselves were “not passive” in this situation, whereby the prescribed practices were “not merely imposed on them” but instead were “enthusiastically embraced” by them (107), the picture that Orsi creates with this frame, however persuasive it may be, is informed by Bourdieu, whereby the cultural idioms that are enacted, enforced, and learned in this process make the body a site for the creation of an unconscious ‘habitus’ as an imposition of power by *external* forces, instead of recognizing the dynamic between *external* and *internal* forces driving the practitioner that are each no less subject to forms of conscious construction in the ubiquitous process of social interaction. When we pay attention to these dynamics, we also help to more fully describe how a religious world becomes real and efficaciously enacts the ascribed goals of such practices from the perspective of the practitioner, as well as explain the degree to which given practices succeed or fail over time in creating a reality and pursuing the ascribed goals. Hence, in Orsi’s apt description above of Catholic formation of children through prayer, it becomes difficult to describe how or why children might choose to continue with and draw strength from, struggle to maintain, gradually fade from, or outright reject such practices in their life course into adulthood without resorting to an explanation of how a given ‘habitus’ has either been relatively reinforced, challenged, transformed, or lost its unconscious hold on the practitioner, instead of taking into account the ways in which conscious energy seeking is enabled and disabled, both
the ebb and flow of emotional energy, to inform and guide the dynamic situations over
time within which we observe religious practitioners.

The preceding chapters sought to provide the ingredients for comparatively
reflecting on this issue in the context of prayer practices within a specific Catholic and
Islamic movement, how prayer is enacted and conceived within a history and a politics
that is explicitly negotiating its place amidst a cultural dynamic that is confronting real
and perceived forces of secularism. In comparatively analyzing these prayer practices in
this chapter, I will utilize Ann Taves’s model for comparison to unpack the ascribed
understandings of prayer practices and the associated goals and paths which these
practices are intended to effect through the lens of interaction ritual theory.

Below is an articulation of three propositions, locating specific paths and goals for
the practice of prayer that seem to be shared between the Padre Pio Prayer Groups and
the Nur movement, which represent three different ways of describing and explaining
prayer as a social interaction from within the specific contexts of these movements:

**Proposition 1**: Prayer practices enact communicative relationships between the
human person and an ascribed divine which can result in an embodied confidence
in the reality of those relationships.

**Proposition 2**: Prayer and worship practices can enact relationships between and
among human persons of a shared tradition, which results in the formation of
communal bonds and a forum for testifying to the power of an ascribed divine.

**Proposition 3**: Prayer and worship practices can constitute a form of training that
is intended to prepare and protect religious practitioners in spiritual battles that are
fought within the human person and among human persons throughout one’s life
in order to sustain and strengthen relationships with an ascribed divine.
In order to evaluate the adequacy of these three propositions regarding prayer practices as they apply to the Padre Pio Prayer Groups and the Nur movement, I will utilize interaction ritual theory to identify the ritual ingredients and outcomes, including the circulation of emotional energy, symbols of membership, and feelings of morality and belonging, paying attention to inter/intrapersonal and inter/intra-traditional processes to highlight both similarities and differences within the movements. As a result, this comparison seeks to demonstrate that interaction ritual theory is a key resource for understanding the cognitive and emotional forces at play in prayerful situations, both for individuals and groups as illustrated through an analysis of these two specific movements.

**Proposition 1**: Prayer practices enact communicative relationships between the human person and an ascribed divine which can result in an embodied confidence in the reality of those relationships.

Much of the substance of this proposition has been discussed and supported through a great deal of the oeuvre of Robert Orsi, but the key difference here via interaction ritual theory is the conception of “embodied confidence”. It is not inevitable that the practice of prayer, even when it is supported by a religious culture that enforces it in a disciplinary fashion or if it is habitually engaged by choice by an individual on a regular basis, will necessarily result in the realness of the divine to the practitioner. The presence of this reality can be felt in tactile ways, such as when practitioners desire to pray the rosary with beads or pray with a relic, or in a more abstract way, such as when a

---

sense of connection to God through salat is supported by a vision within the practitioner that the universe is held together by divine action. While experiences such as these can verify presence, a sense of “embodied confidence” is cultivated when habitually enacted practices such as prayer become fluent for the pray-er, not in the way of being able to unthinkingly recite a given sequence of words or produce a series of disciplined motions, but in the sense that one is able to creatively move through different situations and apply what has been gained in prayerful interaction to new circumstances. It is the way in which emotional energy circulates within the practitioner to make the divine present in one’s life, to bring the divine along with one’s everyday experience that mediates a sense of past (memory), present (aptness), and future (anticipation).

A good analogy on a less conscious level is the way in which ‘catchy’ music, when it is heard or played, can ‘stick’ and act as a meme within one’s mind, arising within oneself and connected to circumstances that can be reproduced when the music is heard again or can seemingly arrive back into one’s mind in a spontaneous fashion. A more conscious level example related to music is the desire to listen to or play the same songs over and over, stimulating confidence that one can re-experience the same emotional vibes in different places at different times, and the promise of similar feelings in the process of learning or hearing new songs. In this way, music as an artistic form meant to address a recipient and create a situation of co-presence, even when the artist and the audience are not together but connected by recording and playback devices, is real. Prayer practices enact a similar dynamic, whereby the mind and body are the
instrument, recording, and playback devices\textsuperscript{73}, for which the desire to engage in prayer is encouraged or discouraged to the degree that it stimulates a vibe for the promise of presence in reference to chains of previous interactions\textsuperscript{74}. This holds whether one is having a “good” prayer, feeling the connection and presence of an ascribed divine, or whether one is “bone dry” and feeling deserted; whether one is feeling joyous and moved to smile or grief-stricken and moved to cry, focused or distracted, prideful or maintaining requisite humility, viewing the presence of the divine as a “gift”; or whether one’s God concept is personal or impersonal. Thus, one need not be ‘confident’ to have “embodied confidence”, nor is it identical with expertise or experiencing flow. It is a feeling that memory, aptness, and anticipation can come together to realize relationship with an ascribed divine that actualizes itself not only at the level of explicit prayer practice, but also in the degree to which one’s interactions with the wider environment become

\textsuperscript{73} It is also possible to consider the effects of images, icons, and relics, where the mind and body capture visual experiences, bringing forth a sense of presence that can be applied in future situations. For reflections on the role of images in eliciting responses in a relational fashion, see Morgan, David. \textit{The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice}. U of California P, 2005 and Freedberg, David. \textit{The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response}. U of Chicago P, 1989. For a consideration of this dynamic within specifically Muslim contexts, see Elias, Jamal. \textit{Aisha’s Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam}. Harvard UP, 2012. Here is an example of the power of contemplating icons, as expressed by the Catholic writer Henri Nouwen in his \textit{Behold the Beauty of the Lord}, as cited by Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead in their book, \textit{A Sociology of Religious Emotion}: “During a hard period of my life in which verbal prayer has become nearly impossible and during which mental and emotional fatigue had made me the victim of feelings of despair and fear, a long and quiet presence to this icon became the beginning of my healing. As I sat for long hours in front of Rublev’s Trinity, I noticed how gradually my gaze became a prayer. This silent prayer slowly made my inner restlessness melt away and lifted me into the circle of love, a circle that could not be broken by the powers of the world...Through the contemplation of this icon we come to see with our inner eyes that all engagements in this world can bear fruit only when they take place within this divine circle” (Riis and Woodhead 101). See Riis, Ole and Linda Woodhead. \textit{A Sociology of Religious Emotion}. Oxford UP, 2010.

\textsuperscript{74} It may also be possible to construe meditative practices in this way, whereby the constructs of ‘relationship’ and the ‘promise of presence’ need not be construed in a theistic fashion or essentialized within a linguistic/symbolic understanding of the ‘communicative’. The particular character of an “ascribed divine” can be broadly defined, for which relationship with that reality, including an abstract sense of ultimate reality or the illusoriness of material reality, can be practically stimulated via such media as silence and stillness, or sound and vibration, in tandem with bodily comportment, even if the goal is to access nonpresence or nothingness.
imbued with a sense of that reality, permeating one’s interpretations and sense of identity within the flow of situational events. This process is akin to learning a language, but prayer’s role as both a mode of access to an ascribed divine and a way of seeing the world is foregrounded for the practitioner. Stimulating this feeling to enact relationship with an ascribed divine and to view the world through the lens of that relationship can be posed as the challenge of prayer practices.

Courtney Bender, in utilizing resources from sociology and cognitive psychology, nods in this direction when she reflects on the practice of spiritual journaling and autobiographical writing manuals - disciplines of reading and writing – in a liberal Christian tradition with an immanent conception of divinity whereby one negotiates the uncertainty of learning to “hear” and “listen” for God’s answers as part of a communicative relationship with the human person. See Bender, Courtney. “How Does God Answer Back?” Poetics, vol. 36, 2008, pp. 476-492. While I agree with Bender that different types of divinities demand different kinds of listening on the part of those who pray, and we need to pay attention to theological differences to understand the nature of a specific communicative relationship which inscribe different forms of certainty and uncertainty in how to watch for or listen to God’s responses, I would argue that the process can be described generally within an interaction ritual framework via the concept of “embodied confidence” regardless of whether one’s God concept is immanent or transcendent, theistic or nontheistic.

Tanya Luhrmann, in *When God Talks Back*, adroitly addresses these issues in discussing how kataphatic prayer practices amongst evangelical Christians belonging to the Vineyard church helps to transform adherents and make the presence of the divine real through forms of visualization. Her exploration recounts the specific disciplinary prayer practices of members within this congregation, from specific kinds of prayer to date nights with God, as a type of skill development that trains the imagination. One of the interesting findings of her research is that quantity of time spent in prayer practice correlated less with the effectiveness of these practices for making the divine real, but instead training in absorption combined with scores on the Tellegen Absorption Scale from subjects involved in her research correlated with the degree to which the prayer practices were effective for creating a sense of the divine as real. The scale, which largely “captures the ability to take pleasure in music and literature and the arts”, measures the degree to which individuals are capable of being immersed in “imaginative worlds” such as reading, movies, and daydreaming. (Luhrmann, *When God* 199-200).

When training, utilizing forms of “prayer technology” (187), is combined with imaginative “proclivity”, engagement in these types of practices “allows someone to tug

---

anthropomorphism.” *Psychological Review*, vol. 114, no. 4, Oct. 2007, pp. 864-886 and Epley, Nicholas, et al. “Believers’ estimates of God’s beliefs are more egocentric than estimates of other people’s beliefs.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 106, no. 51, December 22, 2009, pp. 21533-21538) and work specifically on prayer that highlights its social dimensions (For example, see Schjoedt, U. et al. “Highly religious participants recruit areas of social cognition in personal prayer.” *Social and Cognitive Neuroscience*, vol. 4, 2009, pp. 199-207 and Schjoedt, U. et al. “The power of charisma – perceived charisma inhibits the frontal executive network of believers in intercessory prayer.” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, vol. 6, 2011, pp. 119-127). Reflecting on the nature of feeling “called” by the divine that incorporates perspectives from positive psychology and theology, see *Being Called: Scientific, Secular, and Sacred Perspectives*, edited by David Bryce Yaden, Theo D. McCall, and J. Harold Ellens, Praeger, 2015. More generally, psychology, and specifically positive psychology, if brought into further conversation with religious studies, sociology, and theology, has the potential to offer a great deal of insight into spiritual disciplines such as prayer (beyond what it has been able to accomplish in understanding meditation) and its relationship to awe, gratitude, imagination, joy, and purpose.
on the line that our minds draw between the internal and external, the line between me and other” (222). For Luhrmann, the reality of an ascribed divine thus “reaches to each according to that person’s skill and style” (ibid.). Thus, Luhrmann sheds light on the effectiveness of paths and goals of these prayer practices as mediated by cultural invitation, disciplined enactment, and one’s capacity for focused attention in imaginary worlds that creates the kind of dispositional "embodied confidence” described above that helps to explain how the divine becomes real.

Interaction ritual theory provides a complementary theoretical language to Luhrmann’s findings\(^\text{77}\) that also brings to bear the situational factors on the micro-level of prayer practices that helps to explain, via the circulation of emotional energy within the practitioner, whether a given set of practices is energy-giving or energy-draining, successfully drawing the practitioner into the world that the practices support or not. Matters of both “skill” and “style” become important, since one who has high absorptive capacity is not drawn to habitually read just any kind of book or write in any style, listen to or play any kind of music, or be inspired by or create any form of art. I would hypothesize that there is a correlative relationship between the alignments of preferences

\(^\text{77}\) In a separate publication, Luhrmann begins to sketch an “anthropological theory of mind” around four concepts – “boundedness” – “the degree to which presence external to the mind can be understood to participate within the mind”; “interiority” – “the felt importance of inner intention and feeling”; “sensorium” – “the local way in which the senses are valorized”; and “epistemic stance” – “the way in which a claim or experience is held as true” as a way to make progress on the “puzzle of the way that culture shapes the expectation of what counts as knowing and how knowing is known” (Luhrmann, “Hyperreal God” 382). See Luhrmann, T.M. “A Hyperreal God and Modern Belief: Toward an Anthropological Theory of Mind.” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 53, no. 4, August 2012, pp. 371-395. It may be possible to bring Luhrmann’s epistemological interests into conversation with the concept of “embodied confidence” that I am attempting to articulate on a micro situational level to inform our understanding of a ritual context as to whether it may be more or less energy-giving or energy-draining, depending on the degree to which a situation articulates with the local theory of mind for a practitioner.
and proclivities at the individual level, the prayer options available to the practitioner within their tradition or learned through seeking in other traditions, and the aptitude one has in executing a practice and engaging in it in formal and natural circumstances that contributes to one’s “embodied confidence”. One need not become socially recognized or aspire to become an ‘expert’ in order to experience this alignment, but one does need to feel a sense of ‘fit’ or “attunement” on an individual level that supports the development of fluency, the circulation of positive emotional energy, and the drive of “moral sentiment” as an outcome of this alignment that seeks to engage and re-engage in practices that sustain the reality of relationship with an ascribed divine as the individual moves from situation to situation.

The particular religious movements that are the focus of this study – Padre Pio Prayer Groups and the Nur movement – do not formally seek to train the imagination through processes of visualization as in the Vineyard evangelical movement, or even pay special attention to the bodily comportment of prayer in a specific way over and above what may have been taught in one’s respective Catholic and Muslim traditions. Instead, they each offer symbolic resources as access points for understanding prayer and developing relationships with their ascribed divine. Although each movement is respectively situated within the Roman Catholic and Sunni Muslim traditions and adopts formal practices from each, the specific symbolic resources for these movements begins with understanding the value and status of their charismatic founders, Padre Pio and Said Nursi.
Padre Pio, who was both a stigmatic and a priest, would pray the rosary for hours every day, literally embodying both the physicality of Jesus’s suffering and a disciplined approach to practicing faith that is the ideal of a friar-priest. Although the particularities of his saintliness and his struggles with the Church could have made him an unapproachable wonder, he was always present and available to the Catholic community of Italy (when allowed), routinely hearing confession and celebrating Mass, willing to be photographed and knowingly permitting ardent devotion, where his following was bound by the reality of his blood amidst the circulation of images and relics. Surely, Padre Pio was the epitome of “embodied confidence”, even as he suffered physically and spiritually in his battles with the Church and the demonic. This confidence is witnessed by his belief in the connection between spiritual and physical healing, with the creation of the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza and the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, as a way to actualize and deepen the creation of relationships with the divine amongst practitioners. In the language of interaction ritual theory, Padre Pio was the energy star at the center of a devotional movement whereby he sought to confer access and status to fellow Catholics as an invitation to deepen acquaintance into the truths of the Catholic Church and relationship with the divine, even as his presence and activity was a challenge to the authority of the Church, via the disciplines of natural and formal prayer practices in service of intercession and spiritual development.

The particular history of Padre Pio’s life and approach toward prayer informs the enactment of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups within the Italian context, but it is also relevant for groups outside of Italy, as ethnographically indicated by the “Glove” and “No Glove”
groups in the United States and in the growth and presence of many new groups in other regions of the world, such as in Latin America, that are not officially recognized through the international office of the Prayer Groups. Padre Pio continues to be a force for aiding practitioners in enabling relationships with the divine, whether through contact with relics and testimonies of miracles, or through a more controlled environment that bureaucratizes Pio’s charisma in service of the catechism. For the “embodied confidence” of the practitioner, there are modes of access for fluency that fit with a more tactile sensibility or a more discursive approach, while bound through the formal prayers of the tradition and the emotional valence of seeking to create joy in oneself and others by providing love and compassion through prayer to those who are suffering. Padre Pio’s prayer, “Stay with me Lord”, which toggles between naming the divine as “Lord” and “Jesus”, signals the conjoined message of dependence on the transcendent “Lord” and the human “Jesus” as the human person seeks relationship with the divine while on earth and in the hereafter so as never to feel lonely, especially in the face of death.

As Padre Pio was an epitome of “embodied confidence” in an Italian Catholic context, Saïd Nursi could likewise be denoted as such in a Turkish Islamic context. With his deep learning in the Islamic and secular sciences of his time, his courage in the face of physical danger and exile, his battles with the Kemalist regime in Turkey, and his extensive writings based on a specific method of Qur’anic commentary that sought to uncover its meaning and relevance in a social and political context where religious faith was challenged, Nursi was ‘in tune’ with the divine. Encouraging commitment to faithfully practice salat, Nursi practiced what he preached, including a regular routine of
awaking in the early morning hours to recite the Jawshan al-Kabir, a supplication on the Divine Names. In seeking to appropriate aspects of Sufism in a way that could be relatable to all Muslims in Turkey and beyond while adopting traditional Kurdish dress, Nursi was both a popularizer and a contrarian, expressing an independence and confidence in the essentials of Muslim faith that was actualized in the writing of the Risale-i Nur. In the language of interaction ritual theory, Said Nursi was the energy star at the center of a devotional movement whereby he sought to confer access and status to fellow Muslims as an invitation to deepen acquaintance with each other into the truths of the Islamic faith, even as his presence and activity was a challenge to the authority of the Turkish Republic, via the disciplines of formal prayer practices and interpretive devotional reading in service of spiritual development within a modern context.

Nursi sought to deflect attention in his followers away from himself and toward the Risale-i Nur so as not to reproduce the dynamics of a Sufi lineage, especially considering the political backdrop of the implementation of state-sponsored secularism, instead conceiving of the text as a ‘collective personality’ bearing his charisma. The text of the Risale-i Nur, in its explication of the ‘I’ as “mirror-like” that is a “key to the locked talisman of creation”, becomes the medium for achieving self-understanding that encourages the practitioner to conceive of salat as an “unending conversation” and the basis of “permanent happiness” in relationship with the divine so that life can be “friendly” in the “great hostel of the world”. Prayer serves to “enliven” one’s “conscious inner sense” as an “electric lamp” that both sheds light and cultivates one’s interior world. Through such metaphorical ways of conceiving of communication with the
divine, Nursi created a way of seeing the world and one’s place within it that is imbued with relationship, even conceiving of the atoms and particles in the universe as part of divine creation and activity. Reading, reflecting, and interpreting the Risale-i Nur create the conditions for developing the form of fluency appropriate to the Nur movement, whereby one can conceive of one’s prayer practices in a morally meaningful fashion rather than conceive of it just as a ritual requirement or a practice that needs to be performed with exactitude. For Nursi, creating the linguistic ecology to support the meaning of prayer practices, as well as all of Islamic practice and faith, is crucial for creating the conditions for Islam to flourish in a modern context. This symbolic ecology of language, whether in writings that are more accessible for less philosophically inclined Nurcus or in more technical reflections to nourish his ‘students’, seeks to create a lens for the enactment of prayer practices so as to facilitate positive emotional energy and enable the development of “embodied confidence” via self-understanding.

For both the Padre Pio Prayer Groups and the Nur movement, their founders serve special roles that go beyond memorializing by practitioners to affecting the enactment of prayer practices in creating the reality of relationship with an ascribed divine. Communicating via Padre Pio, much like other Catholic saints, creates a more complex prayer relationship between human and divine due to the role of the intercessor as a charismatic intermediary, but it is slightly different due to the fact that he was a friar, a stigmatic, and lived in the twentieth-century with wide renown in the Italian community for his miracles. This makes memory of him prevalent, the contextual aptness of his presence relevant, and the anticipatory desire to prayer through him palpable, even if it
means that he sometimes displaces Jesus and Mary as the traditionally preferred intermediaries. For followers of Said Nursi, conceiving of Muslim faith and practice through the symbolic richness of the *Risale-i Nur* means that they get to meet Nursi through his text, teaching them about the meaning of the Qur’an even if it means that the Qur’an itself is situationally crowded out in favor of Nursi’s text due to interpretive freedom and cultural memory. Praying and conceiving of Muslim life through the lens that Nursi has constructed through his experiences in twentieth-century Turkey joins together memory, aptness, and the anticipatory promise for relationship with the divine in an appropriate way for practitioners within a secularized context.

**Proposition 2:** Prayer and worship practices can enact relationships between and among human persons of a shared tradition, which results in the formation of communal bonds and a forum for testifying to the power of an ascribed divine.

I have expanded this proposition to include both prayer and worship practices so as to specifically bring in the combined effects of practices deemed as prayer - whether ritualized prayers or colloquial prayers - to practices that more broadly express reverence for the ascribed divine, whether it be through traditionally authorized rituals such as a Catholic Mass or communally generated rituals such as the Nur reading circles. Worship practices can be identified not only by explicit rituals, by also by such actions as when Muslims signal their faith with an *Inshallah* (God-willing) to accompany future-tense statements to when Catholics genuflect in the presence of the Eucharist. Regardless of whether prayer and worship practices are conducted with a strong sense of commitment and sincerity, or whether they are executed in a routinized way without strong feeling,
they minimally symbolize membership within a community of practice. How prayer and worship practices constitute forms of bonding and shared community capable of circulating emotional energy amongst practitioners, especially within the context of identifiable groups, is the issue I wish to explore in this proposition.

A good place to start for framing this discussion is with reference to Robert Wuthnow’s *Sharing the Journey*. A large ethnographic research and survey project into the phenomenon of small groups in the United States in the late twentieth-century focusing on such groups as AA, self-help, and Bible studies within which almost 40% of American participated at the time, Wuthnow and his team found that for participants of all groups, more than 60% of their sample reported that their spirituality deepened or changed as a result of their involvement, with 90% reporting such change from those in Bible studies (Wuthnow 226-227). In terms of what was meant by spirituality for the participants, it largely retained its “connection with specific religious concepts, such as feeling closer to God and understanding the Bible”, but it also connoted behavioral outcomes, such as “being able to share one’s faith, forgiving others, loving others, and forgiving oneself” (230). In commenting on the effort that participants report in their activities with such groups, Wuthnow states that consistent engagement in spiritual disciplines is “hard work”: “It is not a matter of fitting into our natural environment and drawing whatever insights may emerge from our experience. Nor is it a matter of being enveloped in God’s grace. It is, rather, a special pursuit, an added task, a set of skills to be mastered, like learning to play the piano” (225). Wuthnow further discusses the notion of why spiritual disciplines seem like “hard work”, which is that engaging in them
often “requires people to go against the grain” (226), investing energy in a set of practices that are not nurtured in broader cultural contexts within a secularized society. Of all the practices that participants enact in these groups, Wuthnow reports that prayer stands out:

“Of all the spiritual activities in which small groups engage, collectively and individually, prayer is thus the most distinctive. It gives spirituality a pragmatic flavor by focusing on specific needs and the resolution of those needs. It embeds spirituality in the relational character of the group. Prayer is no longer the preserve of an ordained member of the clergy who somehow has special access to God and who interceded with God on behalf of the laity. Instead, each person in the group senses an intimate relationship with God and with each other. In short, prayer is democratized. But it is also collectivized. Its power is more evident because of the group. In the caring they experience from one another, members are convinced that their prayers have been heard” (242).

While the American, Christian, late twentieth-century context is clearly evident in the summary provided above, the findings from this study are applicable to understanding how the circulation of positive emotional energy is enacted in small groups who congregate by choice to develop their spirituality within a religious environment. Prayer and the “hard work” of disciplines “embeds spirituality in the relational character of the group”, providing a space where prayer is “democratized”, “collectivized”, and granted “power”, directed toward “specific needs and the resolution of those needs”, and convincing participants that “their prayers have been heard” by God. Hence, one’s efforts in committing to participate in these kinds of small groups as a path is rewarded by enabling the goal of spiritual development, but it also has a group outcome whereby it “senses an intimate relationship with God and with each other”. In the concluding section of Sharing the Journey, Wuthnow states that, “small groups make a difference to
the spiritual lives of their members mostly by demonstrating love, by nurturing intimate relationships, and by giving people an opportunity to tell their stories…small groups do provide a context in which people can rethink themselves and their values” (346).

As we move into a discussion of these issues in the context of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups and the Nur movement, there is an important distinction which should be drawn when considering Wuthnow’s research population and the ones we are about to consider. Specifically, the small groups in Wuthnow’s study “seldom include worship”, and thus participants are “unlikely to come away with a sense of the power, majesty, authority, or transcendence of God. Instead, divine imagery tends to reflect the human relationships people experience in their groups” (230). It is at this point that the focus of power as based within the group relative to a divine becomes salient as we consider the disciplinary practices of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups and the Nur movement.

The Padre Pio Prayer Groups formally rely on the structures of the Catholic Church to physically and practically conceive of the practitioners’ relationship to each other and the divine, coming under the direct oversight of the Pope, with meetings held in Church spaces and involving clergy as spiritual directors to facilitate feelings of belonging and to verify that group activities are in keeping with catechetical principles. The monthly meetings themselves are tripartite in nature – corporate prayer, Mass, and group gathering – which provides a logistical separation of different activities whereby prayer, worship, and communal bonding each has its space. The specific activities of the group gathering are not entirely governed, providing a degree of freedom for what is
largely a controlled process. Hence, two of the three portions of the meeting emphasize the power of the ascribed divine in formalized ritual, taking place within the Church, whereas the third is a space where interpersonal sharing and communal bonding, including intercessory prayer for specific needs and instances of suffering, can occur in a social place separate from the place of formal ritual. It is in this portion of the meeting where the power of the group meets with the power of the ascribed divine not only for the benefit of affecting the desired goal for attending to those who are suffering, but also for the benefit of generating emotional energy within the attending practitioners for enacting a relationship with the divine and with each other.

It is here where the difference between the “Glove” and the “No Glove” groups become important. For the “Glove” group, relics, whether they be a fully intact glove or prayer cards within which a piece of a blood-stained glove is contained, are the key facilitators for miraculous healings as recounted in personal testimonies. Per Taves, these relics are the “special things” for which testimonies of its power via intercession through Padre Pio construct the “experiences deemed religious” for this group. As the spiritual and group leaders attest to the power of the disciplinary practice of praying the rosary, the communal bond within the “Glove” group as a “family” is jointly focused through the rosary and the miraculous testimonies of healing. In this structure, aside from a shared commitment to a set of practices which goes “against the grain”, there is little space for the group to share in the power of the divine and enact relationship in this way as a group, as the power is primarily located in formal prayer, the ritual of the Mass, and
relics\textsuperscript{78}. There is little room for human power to participate in this structure, with the choice to touch the relic, pray with it, and offering prayers for intercession being the main juncture for outreach to the divine. Human power is vested in the charismatic figures who lead the group and have a special connection to the Glove, which is also the basis of the conflict that the group has had with the central coordinating office in the United States, analogically reenacting the difficulties that took place over decades between the Church and Padre Pio. In this context, God’s will is both transcendent and immanent, with the circulation of positive emotional energy relative to the degree that one has fluency in praying the rosary and conceiving of the power of intercession via Padre Pio as involving sacred objects\textsuperscript{79} and divine action to influence physical healing\textsuperscript{80}.

\textsuperscript{78} This is underscored by James McCartin in his study of the immigrant lay Catholic community in the United States in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Stating that the community was both “empowered” in its connection to the broader Catholic community but “subordinated” relative to the hierarchy of the Church, placing them at the “bottom of the pyramid of power” (McCartin 12), he also talks about the importance of the rosary – it “became a common language through which Catholics of every ethnic group communicated with the “Mother of God”” (27) – and praying to saints for this community: “Saints thus became mediators with God and sympathetic advocates who engaged in the affairs of everyday life. Their devotees, who often considered the saints to be trusted friends or akin to family members, frequently enshrined their mass-produced images in their homes or carried them on their persons as acts of devotion. Regular participation in this fluid exchange between heaven and earth bolstered the sense of an ordered hierarchy in the spiritual life. For its part, intercessory prayer plainly underscored the distinction between earthly supplicants and heavenly intercessors: such intercessors wielded remarkable influence with God, while the very act of approaching a saint for help meant acknowledging one’s powerlessness to procure divine favors on one’s own” (25). See McCartin, James P. \textit{Prayers of the Faithful: The Shifting Spiritual Life of American Catholics}. Harvard UP, 2010.

\textsuperscript{79} While the main object that is under discussion here, the Glove, is a first-class relic for which there are specific protections that mark it off as sacred, prayer cards and other sacramentals and devotional items can play a more personal role in the process of cultivating “embodied confidence”, assisting the practitioner in a more ongoing way as part of the process of gaining fluency for experiencing the divine as real. This pertains not just to Catholic practices, but to any number of devotional practices across different religious and cultural traditions where objects and images are utilized, whether they are officially authorized or not.

\textsuperscript{80} Robert Wuthnow investigated the degree to which prayer can be conceived as enacting “domain violations”, a construct from cognitive anthropology that he uses to assess whether prayers are memorable given the degree to which they express a violation of the boundaries constructed between the sacred (non-human, divine) and profane (human) worlds for understanding perceived divine action. He found that in a sample of 77 people, all Christian church members from different traditions in the United States, just about
In the “No Glove” group, which goes ‘by the book’ and does not have access to a relic, it likewise follows the tripartite structure as indicated by the Statutes, but the group gathering is enacted differently, incorporating space for members to share their experiences and perspectives, reflecting on quotes from Padre Pio or making individual presentations, and corporately saying special prayers that are inherited from Padre Pio (“Stay with me Lord”) to recite to God, as well as to Padre Pio from the group and from Pope John Paul II. The latter two prayers ask, through Padre Pio’s intercession, to “follow Your example of prayer and penance and come to follow more closely our Risen Lord”; “strengthen all believers in the willingness to take up the cross daily”; to “teach us” “humility of heart” and “obtain for us” the “eyes of faith”. While the context of ritual worship through praying the rosary and holding the Mass sets a tone for the transcendent power of the divine, the immanence of divine power as indicated by reflection upon the example of and intercession through Padre Pio in the group gathering creates the context for communal bonding and spiritual development whereby the members of the group all interview respondents conceived of God in their prayers as strong and powerful, and the human being as weak: “It was as if the prayers reassured them about divine strength by juxtaposing God with human weakness or need” (Wuthnow, “Teach us” 502). This dynamic was particularly salient when the enactment of prayers served as a reminder of mortality, though none of his study participants spoke about prayer where the divine was perceived to actually influence events in the human realm: “In contemporary congregational settings, participants are taught to pray and to talk about prayer in culturally acceptable ways that emphasize divine power without having to make statements about divine intervention that to them would seem unreasonable or absurd” (505). See Wuthnow, Robert. “Teach us to pray: The cognitive power of domain violations.” Poetics, vol. 36, 2008, pp. 493-506. For a constructive move to advance understanding of prayer and healing within the Toronto Blessing Pentecostal movement, which is a context within which it is acceptable to talk about divine intervention, see Brown, Candy Gunther. Testing Prayer: Science and Healing. Harvard UP, 2012. Influenced by Pitirim Sorokin’s concept of love energy, and building upon Matthew Lee and Margaret Poloma’s appropriation of interaction ritual theory, Brown finds that: “social interactions focused on healing rituals create an effervescence or augmentation of morally suffused emotional energy. To put it simply, individuals who experience healing through Pentecostal prayer rituals credit divine love and power for their recoveries, and they consequently feel motivated to express greater love for God and other people” (Brown 285). This is an example to highlight how the power asymmetry between the divine and human in situations of physical healing can lead to motivational and social effects on the human side of the relationship.
become empowered through their relationship with the divine and Padre Pio. Although it is more difficult for the “No Glove” group to generate positive emotional energy without a relic to support habitual entrainment, instead relying on the “hard work” of its members. To have embodied confidence in the context of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups is to feel like a spiritual child of Padre Pio, creating a special relationship with the divine via his intercession, with the “Glove” and “No Glove” groups enacting access to this relationship through different pathways.

While the Padre Pio Prayer Groups formally reside within the Catholic Church, the Nur movement must rely on its own in order to create communal bonds and socially support the kind of relationship with the divine that it seeks to enable for its practitioners. As the goals of prayer practices between the two movements each share a similarity for sustaining and strengthening relationship with their ascribed divine, the Nur movement has organically adopted styles from within the Turkish social, cultural, and religious context to physically and practically create feelings of belonging, as it is separate from state-sponsored mosques and has had to be careful throughout its history of the movement’s public presence. Like the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, the Nur movement is “against the grain” of secularist Turkey and explicitly in competition with other groups within the contested religious space of the country. The institution of dershanes for young adults as a living arrangement to become more deeply introduced into the writings of Nursi, combined with house-based modes of constructing meeting and prayer spaces – comfortable couches lining the walls of a room conducive for relaxed sitting and conversation with space in the middle to conduct prayers, with the ritual purity of the
space preserved by the removal of shoes for practitioners before entering either the house or the meeting space – immediately creates a communal and shared environment where all who are present are included. Similar to the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, there is a tripartite structure to evening meetings of reading circles – ritual prayer, reading the "Risale-i Nur," and communal tea – with the order of these only modified depending on when prayer is conducted given the specific time of year. Hence, prayer and worship is combined with modes of social connection that all occur in the same space, aligning the expression of testifying to divine power along with the power of the group to take part in this expression.⁸¹

From within the symbolic world of the Nur movement, that which physically lives on to bind the movement members through their founder with an ascribed divine is the "Risale-i Nur." Per Taves, the "Risale-i Nur" is the “special thing” at the heart of the movement for which testimonies of its communicative power and the duress under which it was produced and distributed construct the “experiences deemed religious” for this group. Reading and interpreting the "Risale-i Nur" within this context, where the relations

⁸¹ Reflecting on the contemporary Turkish context, Heiko Henkel speaks to the importance of salat as “part of a matrix of disciplines and institutions in which Muslim forms of subjectivity and social relations are forged and reproduced” (Henkel 489) that not only affirms Muslim faith across different contexts and ways of interpreting Islam, but that also has a more immediate effect within the specific context of the practitioner, namely: “By affirming and defining the practitioner’s ‘belief’, the salat establishes a web of social relations mediated by commitment to a shared discursive framework” (500). This “web of social relations” takes on particular importance in situations where signaling one’s faith, either generally or within a particular discursive framework, has social, cultural, economic, and political consequences. See Henkel, Heiko. “‘Between Belief and Unbelief Lies the Performance of Salat’: Meaning and Efficacy of a Muslim Ritual.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.), vol. 11, 2005, pp. 487-507. For other sources regarding the contemporary Turkish context that do not deal robustly with the Nur movement, but offer insight into the social, cultural, economic, and political context within which the Nur movement operates to advance a Muslim form of life, see Henkel, Heiko. “The location of Islam: Inhabiting Istanbul in a Muslim way.” *American Ethnologist*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2007, pp. 57-70; Tugal, Cihan. “Transforming everyday life: Islamism and social movement theory.” *Theory and Society*, vol. 38, 2009, pp. 423-458; and Tugal, Cihan. *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism*. Stanford UP, 2009.
among practitioners are “horizontal, not hierarchical” and the ability to interpret and understand the text is a shared responsibility, enacts a way of conceiving freedom of conscience that privileges the “hard work” of seeking to understand the nature of reality and one’s relationship with the divine in and through it as a process of “self-discovery”. Said Nursi is construed as a fellow “brother” and a “student” of the Qur’an, with whom practitioners get to meet in and through the text in the process of cultivating one’s heart and mind. When considering the combined effects of the place of the Nur movement in the history of Turkey and the communal intensity for reflecting on the Risale-i Nur – regardless of whether one takes on the more committed mantle of being a “student” of Nursi – there is a high degree of shared trust that results in a strong form of bonding social capital. Though, the many schisms that have occurred throughout the history of the movement are likely due to the related effects of the freedom of conscience encouraged, the high social capital generated within reading circles, and the lack of logistical centralization, making it possible for many smaller factions to have integrity and perpetuate themselves over time. On the micro-level, the communal tea is on par with the time spent reading the Risale-i Nur, as this is the time where friendships are forged, ideas and emotions can be shared, and one’s character is on display. It is here that modeling the ethical messages contained in the Qur’an as mediated by the Risale-i Nur connects to life outside the reading circle, where one’s occupational work is valorized as a form of service, and honor and reliability - in terms of carrying out a Muslim way of life and supporting one’s fellow practitioners - is realized. In this sense,
Nursi’s desire for the *Risale-i Nur* to be a “collective personality” - transforming “I” into “We” - is idealized via the power of the ascribed divine, one reading circle at a time.

**Proposition 3**: Prayer and worship practices can constitute a form of training that is intended to prepare and protect religious practitioners in spiritual battles that are fought within the human person and among human persons throughout one’s life in order to sustain and strengthen relationships with an ascribed divine.

While the metaphor of prayer as a form of training is elicited in both the Padre Pio Prayer Groups and the Nur movement in the context of fighting spiritual battles during the course of human life, Padre Pio’s famous quote – “Prayer is the best weapon we have, it is the key to God’s heart” – brings the idea of a weapon to unlocking and protecting a relationship with the divine. The discourse of prayer as a weapon that we see from Padre Pio, especially with regard to recitation of the rosary, exists alongside a cultural history where devotion to Mary has been enlisted in the service of conflicts that would seek to endanger Catholicism:

“Throughout the centuries since the Reformation Mary has been promoted as a weapon against the modern enemies of Catholicism, from the Reformers to eighteenth-century rationalists and freethinkers, to liberals, anarchists, communists, and socialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Following World War II, Marianism was enlisted to defend individual, familial, and national goals as part of the Church’s criticism of modern society...In the 1950s United States, in the aftermath of World War II and the dawning of the Cold War, intensified devotional movements to Fatima, as led by Bishop Fulton Sheen and popularized by Father Patrick Peyton’s Family Rosary crusade, conceived of the rosary as a “weapon for peace”” (Kane 101-102)\(^8\).

\(^8\) For an example of the conception of both prayer and fasting as “spiritual weapons” in the context of “Sanctified” churches in the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions, see Butler, Anthea. “Observing the Lives of the Saints: Sanctification as Practice in the Church of God in Christ.” *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965*, edited by Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, Johns Hopkins UP, 2006, pp. 159-176. Quoting from a religious pamphlet by Dr. Sister Pearl Page:
In telling the story about the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, both amongst those with a hagiographical and academic interest, the call to formation of these groups is related from the perspective that they were spurred by Padre Pio in the early 1950s due to a papal call to encourage prayer and that they increased in numbers throughout the 1950s and 1960s in Italy due to devotion to Padre Pio and the effort to build and sustain momentum for the Casa as a house of “prayer and science”. The formalization of the Groups in 1966 and its growth in Italy and beyond after this date is told from the perspective of making them official inside the Church, supporting the global expansion to educate those about Padre Pio in an effort to rally a call for his canonization, and the support of Pope John Paul II in the canonization process as part of an overall effort to encourage popular piety connected with saints. Strikingly, little is mentioned about the role or the effect of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which set the stage for significant change in the Catholic Church that affected just about all aspects of Catholic practice, including the growth of individual prayer and the formation of prayer groups as a communally encouraged form of devotion.

“Fasting is another powerful offensive spiritual weapon. Without this weapon you are not fully equipped for battle. Just as we have been equipped with the weapon of prayer, God wants us to be equipped with the weapon of fasting. Prayer and fasting go together to penetrate and break through every resistance that the enemy has built. Fasting strengthens and intensifies our prayers. As you begin to use your spiritual weapon of fasting, as you humble yourself through fasting and prayer before God, you will break through enemy territories and claim victory in every circumstance...To sanctify means to set apart for God a fast to consecrate ourselves for the work He has given us to do, to humble ourselves before God, and to repent of all sin and disobedience in our lives” (Butler 162). Given that prayer has been conceived as a weapon by multiple traditions, whether for social and political purposes or for spiritual development, it would be interesting to track the history of this metaphor, especially as a consequence of the formation of the Secular Age, per Charles Taylor.
The dynamics of devotion to Padre Pio in Italy are so pervasive, and his persona identifiable with everyday people and famous figures alike, that the conditions created following the Second Vatican Council may have only served to strengthen the growth of the groups as a form of devotion to the friar and his power, a counterweight to official Church modifications for accessing a relationship to God. Padre Pio’s emphasis on traditional practices like the rosary, confession, and Marian devotion stands as a stark contrast to what was occurring in in the United States specifically during the late 1960s and 1970s in the aftermath of Vatican II, which saw the “collapse of devotionalism” (Chinnici 20) that had flourished in the first half of the 20th century due to immigrant communities from central, southern, and eastern Europe and the need to combat secularist and communist forces in World War II and the early Cold War years. The United States saw the growth of movements like Charismatic Catholicism, Centering Prayer, Houses of Prayer, and Renew, which appropriated traditional practices, but focused much more on the individual’s experience and reflection that little resembled previous forms of piety. This might explain why the Padre Pio Prayer Group movement was relatively slow to catch on in the United States, which was bolstered primarily by those who had knowledge of Padre Pio (especially in Italian immigrant communities) or who had experienced miraculous occurrences as a result of prayer to Pio and his perceived intervention. Though, the conditions created by the Second Vatican Council to encourage greater lay participation and the formation of prayer groups were essential to

the backdrop of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups becoming a global movement, allowing them to extend beyond the borders and cultural specificity of the Italian Catholic imagination.

In the case of the “Glove” group, the dynamics harken to an earlier, pre-Vatican II era, implementing traditional devotional practices, the importance of the Mass, and the tactility of Pio’s relic as a pathway to relationship, whereas the “No Glove” group, sticking close to the rules of a realized, post-Vatican II incarnation of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, combines traditional practices and forms of ritual prayer with greater attention to catechetical and discursive understanding in order to inform the practice of one’s daily spiritual life and journey. With Padre Pio’s conceptualization of prayer as a “weapon” and Father Sariego’s conceptualization of the groups themselves as a “militia of prayer”, the Padre Pio Prayer Groups are portrayed as a countercultural movement, venerating Padre Pio’s authentic, devotional example to strengthen the bonds of faith within the individual and to pray for the alleviation of the suffering of others in a spiritual battle of good versus evil against the forces of a society that does not reflect the values and virtues of Christian life. In their own way, as previously outlined, the “Glove” and the “No Glove” groups evince this way of conceptualizing prayer as a form of “armor” by their modes of practice.

84 From within the framework of the Padre Pio Prayer Groups, the practice of medicine and the advancement of secular medical science holds a special place for alleviating suffering through care and compassion. It is reasonable to conceive that medical care jointly serves with prayer as a form of “armor” to protect the well-being and relationship of body and soul, serving together as intercessory analogues due to the interconnections between the Casa and the prayer groups.
In the Nur movement, the metaphor of training had particular salience, not just because of Nursi’s military experience, but due to the extremely difficult circumstances of his exile and multiple imprisonments. The production of the *Risale-i Nur* can be conceived as a kind of training manual for how to engage in moral jihad, modeling a form of positive action in the clandestine network of those handwriting the manuscripts that sought to resist the enforced secularism in order to allow the light of truth from the Qur’an to emerge. Under these circumstances, “becoming a soldier” was not just metaphoric, but was realized within a life or death scenario for all who risked themselves for Nursi and the cause of keeping the truths of Islam alive within Turkey without the aid of physical weapons. Prayer and worship constituted then and now the “kit-bag” and “rifle” for the practitioner to embark on spiritual battles as part of the competitive “test” and “examination” to prove one’s worth on the battlefield of earth for eternal life with the divine. Conceiving of one’s life in this way transforms the idea of what “one’s basic duty” is, marking the daily “revolution” of the prayer times and cultivating one’s “mirror” in a virtuous fashion so as to realize a relationship with the divine and achieve happiness and joy in this life and in the hereafter. Gaining fluency in “embodied confidence” within this context is to become in tune with one’s training, maintaining steadfast commitment to one’s moral obligations of prayer and worship, cultivating virtues and gratitude, while also being open to and in awe of the universe, expanding in one’s knowledge as the mode of access for enacting relationship with the divine.

For Nursi, knowledge of the universe did not just reside in learning Islamic sciences, as he created a special place for the pursuit of secular science, viewing the
civilizational and material progress of human beings as a good. Hence, the disciplinary conceptualization of prayer and worship as a form of training extended to contemplation of the laws of the universe and the ways that humans can benefit from this knowledge, framed within a Muslim belief of a divinely orchestrated “continuous creation” that generates a sense of cosmic meaning\textsuperscript{85}. This differentiated Nursi from other Muslim reformers within and outside of Turkey, as he saw the dangers not just of secularism, but also of materialism and naturalism which he saw as in service of atheism. Fighting against atheism was, for Nursi, the central cosmic spiritual battle toward which the \textit{Risale-i Nur} served as an antidote, a weapon in service of religious belief that protected the practitioner like “armor”. Creating and nurturing an open pathway for the Muslim to learn from the sciences and grow in material progress, undergirded by such virtues as diligence, thrift, and generosity, was key for Nursi in order to allow for a modern Muslim practice that could adequately respond to and fight the forces of atheism.

While Nursi expressly forbid his followers to become involved in politics, since it would factionalize the movement and take away from constructively fighting this spiritual battle, there is a central ambiguity at the heart of the movement regarding the degree to which engaging in politics is necessary within the Turkish context. Nursi was deeply involved in politics before his transformation to serve the writing of the \textit{Risale-i Nur}, his exile and imprisonment were forms of political and legal violence that he had to engage in battle, and in his later life he openly advised political leaders and supported

\textsuperscript{85} It remains to be seen whether, in time, a Nur-based interpretation of the sciences can retrieve evolutionary theory from its association with atheism, materialism, and naturalism, and whether advances at the forefront of physics, such as quantum theory, can be reconciled with the largely Newtonian conceptualization of continuous creation.
policies that would be congenial to the cause of Muslim faith and the flourishing of his movement. Ideally, for the Muslim community to live in accord with the truths of Islam within Nursi’s conception and gain embodied confidence in relationship with the divine is a non-political endeavor, as his conception of shari’ah was in accord with constitutionally-based freedoms and the rule of law, but the degree of governmental regulation over religious affairs as part of the realization of Kemalism creates a situation where the cosmic battle against atheism becomes intertwined with the freedom to practice Islam. Hence, the capability to gain fluency for practitioners within the Nur movement, where memory, aptness, and anticipation of realizing relationship with the divine can be enacted on an individual and communal level may dynamically shift according to different interpretations of the Risale-i Nur and what is situationally demanded in order to safeguard the freedom to practice. The private sphere of reading circles thus provide a mechanism whereby the circulation of emotional energy within the practitioner can be enacted in a stable fashion as the political situation fluctuates, while that situation creates a degree of turbulence that prevents the Nur movement from achieving a coherent sense of community.

Conclusion

“The sentiment of reality can indeed attach itself so strongly to our object of belief that our whole life is polarized through and through, so to speak, by its sense of the existence of the thing believed in, and yet that thing, for purpose of definite description, can hardly be said to be present to our mind at all. It is as if a bar of iron, without touch or sight, with no representative faculty whatever, might nevertheless be strongly endowed with an inner capacity for magnetic feeling; and as if, through the various arousals of its magnetism by magnets coming and going into its neighborhood, it might be consciously determined to different attitudes
and tendencies. Such a bar of iron could never give you an outward description of
the agencies that had the power of stirring it so strongly; yet of their presence, and
of their significance for its life, it would be intensely aware through every fibre of
its being” (James 63-64).

The above quote comes from William James’s third lecture in the Varieties of
Religious Experience entitled, “The Reality of the Unseen”, descriptively animating
what, for him, is the essence of a broad and general definition of the “religious attitude in
the soul” as consisting of the “belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme
good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (61). While James’s remarkable
and enduring study of religious experience from more than one hundred years ago is
inevitably infused with a Protestant perspective that prioritizes belief to understand such
phenomena, drawing from his psychological training and lens to view such experiences,
this project on prayer has been inspired in part to critically respond to James’s claim that,
regarding this “inner capacity for magnetic feeling”, “such a bar of iron could never give
you an outward description of the agencies that had the power of stirring it so strongly”.
Research over the past few decades from anthropology and religious studies – with the
turn toward practice as exemplified through the trajectories on lived religion and
disciplinary practices – has been helpful for providing better contextual descriptions
regarding the powerful agencies that stir religious practitioners. The largely French
theoretical resources that have been relied upon to elucidate such descriptions from
scholars as diverse as Bourdieu, Foucault, de Certeau, and Hervieu-Leger needs to be
enriched with a clearer set of theoretical premises regarding the nature of the human
person and what drives motivation and the construction of meaning that allow these
trajectories to get beyond description within a bounded contextual set to engage in comparisons across traditions and time periods.

Interaction ritual theory is a candidate for such premises, carving a middle ground between those who would emphasize the reproduction of cultural repertoires and dispositions – ‘habitus’ – and those who argue from a postmodernist perspective that all is situational flux to understand religious experience. The work of Ann Taves and Tanya Luhrmann has been helpful for seeking to bridge psychology and religious studies (Taves) and psychology and anthropology (Luhrmann) to retrieve the category of religious experience, though I would argue that it needs to be supplemented with attention to social dynamics to understand how emotional energy is produced. This project has attempted to provide a comparative micro-sociological analysis on prayer in two traditions as a way to elaborate upon interaction ritual theory to respond to the problems of describing and explaining religious experience, seeking to make the case that it can be fruitfully employed in a way that can satisfy those coming from a social constructionist perspective while retaining the possibility of getting at cross-cultural universals. In a sense, my attempt to articulate the concept of “embodied confidence” is a way to put contextual flesh on James’s notion of a religious believer’s “sentiment of reality”, resituating the problem of understanding this reality to look at the social dynamics of a conscious, interactive relationship with an ascribed divine to get at how a practitioner draws energy from this reality.
In terms of aspiration, is it possible to connect a social analysis of prayer at the micro-level through interaction ritual theory with broader historical and theological ways of understanding prayer to describe and explain how religious worlds and relationships with the divine becomes real to practitioners? While attention to the three propositions above serves as an entrée to try to do this, a more robust study is necessary that offers both ethnographies of the “body” and “value” and innovative methods of measurement for emotional energy including visual evidence, social network analysis, and physiological and psychological measures\textsuperscript{86}. If this can be achieved, it is here I think we can move up a level from the micro/meso-level offered to us by interaction ritual theory to look at the meso/macro-level of how individual and group behavior interacts with contextually relevant societal and institutional conceptions of prayer. The future development of analytical typologies of prayer ideally should be constructed by taking into account micro-meso-macro level dynamics. Prayer as a manner of speech, writing, and behavior that intends to communicate in some way with the divine is translated into individual practice, whereby one learns what prayer is by modeling, usually at a very young age, the movements and utterances of elders, parents, family members, fellow religious believers, and/or religious leaders who are passing on the practice that is reinforced through a community. One learns how to pray in this process, but one is also ostensibly learning what prayer means in both action and speech by watching, listening,

\textsuperscript{86} For a somewhat humorous take on the difficulty of bringing together methods from the cognitive sciences and those coming from disciplines oriented to social and cultural dynamics within the context of prayer research, see Charles Hirschkind’s inaugural post on Reverberations launching an essay series entitled “Cognition and Culture, at it Again!”, September 3, 2013, \url{http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/2013/09/03/cognition-and-culture-at-it-again/}. Accessed 16 August 2016.
and touching, translating that process to inform one’s behavior as a proper way of relating to the divine within a specific context. This process seeks to construct both a ‘habitus’ as well as a manner of personal comportment conducive to gaining emotional energy via the process I have conceptualized as “embodied confidence”.

Similarly, the capacity for one to experience positive emotional energy that is gained through habituated rhythmic entrainment, a capacity that Collins believes is foundational to human social psychology, needs to be connected with a history at the meso and macro levels to understand the pray-er’s place within a tradition of received practice. While Collins names emotional energy as that which is gained in interaction rituals, utilizing the Durkheimian notion of collective effervescence, I would like to harken back to Weber’s notion of charisma to link these situational experiences within a history of interaction to more macro-level phenomena. Whether a person is enacting ritual prayer or creating their own way of addressing the divine in colloquial speech and manner, one might label this process of habituation the “vernacularization of charisma”, since the learned behavior of prayer is adopted in form and appropriated at the individual level, while ultimately being creatively translated as a mode of relating to the divine that is both particular to the individual but also resonant in kind with what has been learned. In successful praying, conceived as an interaction ritual, one makes prayer one’s own and draws strength from that process, summoning one’s cognitive and emotional resources, but in a way that is supposed to be constructively and consistently serving the ideas contained within a larger body of knowledge and practice from a religious tradition. Hence, one could link the performative and linguistic aspects of prayer to locate where
one resides within that horizon, gauging how the circulation of emotional energy
generated by habituated disciplines within situations is effective for reinforcing, resisting,
or broadening a tradition. If we are able to link in this way the micro-meso-macro
dynamics of religious practice through interaction ritual theory, we will come closer to
achieving Orsi’s “radical” or “abundant” empiricism and Mauss’s call to understand the
“bio-psycho-social” techniques of religious practitioners for achieving a real relationship
with the divine.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Mesaritou, Evgenia. “‘He is among us, get it into your head, he is alive and always here’: saintly presence at the pilgrimage centre of Padre Pio and the importance of ‘being there’.” Culture and Religion, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 87–109.


“2 + 2 = Five, or the Quest for an Abundant Empiricism.” Spiritus, vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, pp. 113-121.


The Phenomenology of Prayer, edited by Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, Fordham UP, 2005.


