

Spirituality and Well-being Programs

Sir John Templeton and the John Templeton Foundation are interested in seeing how the application of scientific methods and theories to the realm of spirituality can contribute to a vast improvement in the well-being of people around the world. A starting premise of the Foundation's activities is that there is "so little we know, so much we are eager to learn."

The complex nature of spirituality as it is manifested in the major world religions, among diverse peoples and cultures, and among individuals makes the task quite daunting. The nature of what it means to "be well" or "healthy" also varies considerably in its definition and actualization among cultures, peoples, nations, and throughout time. Despite these challenges, it is clear that even a one percent increase in our current understandings could translate into major gains in the well-being of people around the globe.

Prayer is an interesting example of a spiritual practice that occurs millions of times per hour worldwide. Collectively perhaps 3-4 billion prayers are directed each day to God or some perceived "higher power." Some are spontaneous, others are rote. Some are long, some are short. Some are quite directed in terms of human purpose, others are directionless.

Francis Galton in the 19th century was apparently the first to study the efficacy of prayer using selected scientific (principally statistical) methods. He published a summary of his data and conclusions as "Statistical inquiries into the efficacy of prayer," *Fortnightly Review*, No. 68, new series, August 1, 1872, pp. 125-136. Since that time, people have debated about whether such scientific studies are valuable or not and what, if anything, might be proven by them. This phenomenon continues unabated to this day. Some good recent examples are the late C.S. Lewis, famous Christian apologist and literary scholar, who argued that prayer is fundamentally not amenable to scientific study and the Platonic mystic, skeptic, and mathematician, Martin Gardner who also argues that prayer cannot be studied scientifically. Secular humanists, such as the anthropologist Hector Avalos, find even the question somewhat foolish. Others, including Sir John Templeton, are optimistic that scientific methods can, at the very least, study the medicinal efficacy of prayer. Studies on prayer and its effects from a theoretical perspective turn upon one's answer to the question, "How does God work in the world?" How one answers this question determines in large part what evidence would be sought for the power of prayer, indeed whether evidence should be sought at all. Terrance Tiessen, a Canadian theologian, has helpfully explored this question by classifying people's views into ten models of the relationship between providence and prayer.

The John Templeton Foundation, faithful to one of its core guiding principles that what we know is vastly exceeded by what we do not know, considers this an open question. Members of the Foundation's international Advisory Board are of different opinions on the scientific study of the efficacy of prayer question. For example, Dr. David Myers, a psychologist at Hope College, believes that prayer is valuable but that its effects are not readily or principally detectable by scientific means. Dr. Herbert Benson of the Harvard Medical School is a board member who believes that evidence for the efficacy of intercessory prayer in medicinal settings is mounting. An independent review of medical studies on the effects of intercessory prayer published

through 1999 by the international Cochrane Collaboration in January of 2000 concluded that the studies to date were "too inconclusive to guide those wishing to uphold or refute the effect of intercessory prayer on health care outcomes. In the light of the best available data, there are no grounds to change current practices. There are few completed trials of the value of intercessory prayer, and the evidence presented so far is interesting enough to justify further study." [Roberts, L., Ahmed, I., Hall, S., Intercessory prayer for the alleviation of ill health (Cochrane Review). In : The Cochrane Library, Issue 3, 2002. Oxford: Update Software.] The view expressed by the Cochrane reviewers is shared by John Templeton Foundation Trustee, Professor F. Russell Stannard, Emeritus Professor of Physics at the Open University in Britain.

The Foundation funded the largest study of intercessory prayer in medicinal settings in the world with its two million dollar award to Dr. Herbert Benson of the Harvard Medical School. Dr. Benson has collected all data for this study and prepared an article for submission to a bona fide, reputable, peer-reviewed academic journal in 2002. Consistent with the traditions of academic research, the John Templeton Foundation will not make any public statements nor does it have any data to release about this study until such time as it appears in an academic journal. Questions about the specifics of the study should be directed to Dr. Benson at the Harvard Medical School. Whatever the results of this study, the Foundation believes that it will certainly not be either the first or the last word on this subject but that our *understanding* of various issues at the intersection of spirituality and well-being will be advanced by having undertaken a study of this nature.

¹ C.S. Lewis, "Work and prayer," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology & Ethics*. Ed. Walter Hooper, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970: 104-107; "Petitionary prayer: A problem without an answer," in *Christian Reflections*. Ed. Walter Hooper, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967: 142-151; Martin Gardner, "Prayer: Why I do not think it foolish," in *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener*, St. Martin's Griffin, 2nd ed., 1999.

² Hector Avalos, "Can science prove that prayer works?," *Free Inquiry*, 17(3): 27-31, Summer 1997.

³ Cf. Harold G. Koenig, Michael E. McCullough, David B. Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, Oxford University Press, NY, 2001 whose production was funded principally by the John Templeton Foundation.

⁴ Terrance Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?*, Intervarsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL, 2000.

⁵ David Myers, "Is prayer clinically effective?," *Reformed Review*, 53(2): 95-102, 2000, accessible on the web at <http://davidmyers.org/religion/prayer/html>; also see his *Psychology through the Eyes of Faith* (with Malcolm A. Jeeves), HarperCollins, NY, rev. ed., 2002.