

In our Time Programme 53
Prayer

Melvyn Bragg : Hello, why do people pray? Is it for the benefit of God or for our own sake? Is it a good Christian weapon, as Martin Luther defined it, and as Mahatma Gandhi put it, "The most potent instrument of action"? Or is prayer simply the most essential form of self analysis? Or was (indistinct) right to see prayer as a way of changing the mind of God, when he wrote in "The Arts of Love", "End the Gods are moved by the voice of entreating? People seem to have prayed since the dawn of language, but why, and has it done us any good?

With me to discuss the purpose of prayer, is the physicist and religious writer, professor Russell Stannard, his latest book "The God Experiment", describes a project that involves three groups of six hundred patients and will explore whether praying for the sick is effective. I'm also joined by Andrew Samuels, a leading Jungian analyst, and professor of Analytical Psychology at the University of Essex.

Russell Stannard, all cultures seem to have had religion at some time, do you think that religious impulse is innate?

Russell Stannard : Yes I do. I think that, you know there have been examples where people have claimed to have found a tribe in some far off country which shows now signs of having been religious, but when those claims have been reexamined it's been found in every case that, you know when you look at their artefacts and the way that they bury their dead, it's quite clear that religion is very much a universal drive in all peoples at all times. So it's something that is very deeply rooted in the psyche.

Melvyn Bragg : Why do you think it is rooted? I mean do you think it comes from culture or do you think it comes from nature?

Russell Stannard : I...you know being a religious believer, believe that it's implanted their by God. It's a natural tendency that we all have to define our purpose in life, which I believe can only be satisfied if you if you have a right religious relationship with God, which doesn't mean to say that, of course everybody finds God in that kind of way, and when that doesn't happen, then religious drive finds itself in other outlets. We find people who devote all their energies to various causes of of one kind and another, some of them very good in themselves, but they do seem to me to be to be sort of just displacements of this basic religious drive.

Melvyn Bragg : Andrew Samuels, do you see religion as being from your studies, something that has always been there as far as we can discover records.

Andrew Samuels : I think it's worth looking at religion as if it were an instinct, in fact, as fundamental as sexuality or aggression, and like all instincts the religious instinct has a goal, and the goal is to acquire or find or construct meaning, purpose, pattern, order and something beyond the everyday. So you can't actually discuss religion in terms of opting in or opting out, on this reading of it, it's as fundamental as sex or aggression.

Melvyn Bragg : Why would you call it "religion" though? If it's finding patterns or ...and that sort of thing why wouldn't you call this say "learning"?

Andrew Samuels : Well, I think there is also an instinct to learn, I mean psychoanalysis talks of the epistemophylic instinct and a love of knowledge, but I think that the urge and the drive to be religious is somewhat different. Firstly it's explicitly not resting itself on rationality, whereas knowledge, especially, in our time, knowledge does involve some kind of embrace of rationality, and religion explicitly does not.

But I think there's something else too, which is that the beyond, the above, the trans, whatever word we want to use, this is not just something to do with knowledge, this is something to do with belief and to do with humanities aspirations, and I don't think that knowledge quite captures it. Though I see what you're getting at of course.

Melvyn Bragg : Yeah, what do you think of Richard Dawkins idea, Russell Stannard, that the "why?" question, the religious question is in effect a non-question, we don't need to ask it, and we don't need to answer it?

Russell Stannard : I certainly do not go along with that. I think that Dawkins and myself are scientists. Scientists are very successful in what they do, but that is simply because we very carefully delineate the kind of questions that we're prepared to answer, and very roughly speaking, they're questions that sort of begin with the word "How?",

you know "how do things work, how do things behave the way they are?", and as long as we stick to that kind of question, then we are on very, very firm ground and our scientific methods, our methods of observation, experimentation, are exactly the right way to answer those sorts of questions. Now there are some people, like Richard Dawkins, who then, I would say, make science into their God. So that anything that science cannot get hold of has somehow to be discounted.

So any questions to do with purpose and meaning in life, of an absolute nature, Richard you know, completely dispenses with, knowing that science cannot answer them, he then takes the tack that okay well these questions are meaningless. And I just simply don't go along with that, I think that questions to do with "Why are we here?" "How ought we to be using our life?" are perfectly relevant questions to answer, and the fact that science, the scientific method doesn't come up with answers, means you have to look somewhere else.

Melvyn Bragg : Andrew Samuels, Freud's account of God was, well, very, very briefly, perhaps wrongly you may say, was that he was an ideal substitute for the father in some ways, how far does that take us?

Andrew Samuels : Oh I think that kind of psychologising about religion is completely pointless and shallow, and I would go along with Russell here, that actually there is a psychology/religion dialogue that is as important as a science/religion dialogue, and I think what everybody is beginning to discover in the psychological world is that there are things that we don't understand and to reduce God to father, and to reduce religious belief to transference, that's to say that God plays the same part in the adult's mind as the father played in the child's mind, I think it's really very superficial.

There are lots and lots of other ways of reading it, and I like the idea that Russell put forward of some kind of implantation. That we are born ready to function in a religious way, ready to image things....in a religious way.

Melvyn Bragg : Rather like the language instinct, you mean?

Andrew Samuels : Absolutely, absolutely, yes, and the social urge is an instinct as well. I think the difficulty is to avoid getting too spuriously precise about the words we use here. If we talk about an instinct, of course there's lots of different ways of understanding it, and language instinct or the innate capacity to make use of language is a very good parallel for the innate capacity to make use of the religious parts of ourselves.

Melvyn Bragg : Well let's take one aspect of religion, which is prayer, and there are many forms of prayer, there's thanksgiving, there's worship, there's contrition and so on, but if we can talk about intercession and petition. Do you think that er....does prayer for you, Russell Stannard, does it involve the notion of, as it were God talking back?

Russell Stannard : Yes it certainly does. Not of course as an audible voice. Really it's a case of ...I find myself with some kind of problem which I've been wrestling with for ages, and I take it to God in prayer, and then suddenly a thought comes in to my mind which wasn't there before, it has a kind of "otherness" about it, as though it didn't come from my mind, it has come from some other kind of source, and the way I look upon that is that God is stirring up in my mind, his thoughts. It's not that he is sort of transferring them from out there into my mind. If you surrender your life, or try to surrender your life to God's will, then you are inviting him to sort of take over your own mind, and that is how these thoughts start to bubble up. They're actually God's thoughts, but they're in your mind.

Melvyn Bragg : Andrew Samuels, a lot of people find it hard to accept the fact that God can take a personal interest!

Andrew Samuels : Yeah, yeah.

Melvyn Bragg : And he's got more to do, anyway he isn't that sort of God (Russell chuckles), and why should he even ...someone as distinguished as Russell (laughter), it's a problem to solve in physics that God can say "No hold on there". What's your view of that?

Andrew Samuels : I don't think it's so easy to split it up into A talking to B and B talking to A, I think that psychologically speaking, what goes in prayer is some sort of union of communication between the two entities

involved , and in that sense it's a dialectical, it's a relate...dialectical thing, it's a relationship, and what I've been interested in in particular, is not just what A, the human gets out of the encounter with B, the divine, but what B, the divine, gets out of the encounter with A the human, because if it is a dialectical relationship, it's reasonable to ask , "What's He, capital H, getting out of this, if anything?", and I think that is the challenging part of religion.

Melvyn Bragg : Well what do you see, as an analytical psychologist , what is the divine? Do you have an image, a sense, a word description of the divine?

Andrew Samuels : Well, I don't think it's simply a projection from within, whether of a parent figure or other sort of aspect of the psyche , exactly. I think it is a discovery, a psychic fact, that humanity has always engaged with, and it seems to have certain characteristics in common. One is whatever is construed as divine, is experienced as absolutely Other , with a huge capital O, it is not you, it is completely distinct from you, and here if I could put in brackets, that's also like child development, when the child has to realise that the parent is also somehow distinctly other, but perhaps not with such a large capital O (Russell chuckles), because after all you come from the same stuff. But God is very much, Other.

Now that's terribly frightening, and also terribly liberating, because it allows humanity to stay small, to stay in a state of impotence, to stay in a state of lack, to admit to failure, and in general to be, to use the word we always use "human". You know, it's very interesting how we use that word human. he or she is all too human , and I think it's the encounter with the divine, that enables that psychological move to take place.

Melvyn Bragg : But in the history of religion, the divine has changed from being a vengeful God, a merciful God or a woman God....so the divine has changed in different contexts?

Russell Stannard : Well, our perception of the divine has changed, and that is what I think is backing up , what Andrew is saying, about this otherness of God. It seems as though there is an objective reality which we call God , and that as time goes on, we get a better understanding of what that reality is like, and so as you quite rightly say, if you put the writings of the bible in chronological order, in the order in which they are actually written, you do start off with one God amongst many Gods, he's a tribal God, he's only interested in the Israelites, he couldn't care a fig about Egyptians. He happily kills off Egyptian children, he lives up a particular mountain.

It's a very different kind of God that we believe in now, and as you trace through the bible you can see how that conception is gradually changing and being honed down, until you eventually get to today's understanding of there being just one god who loves everybody, a God of mercy, and I think that we would no more want to go back to earlier understandings of God, than we would want to back to earlier understandings of science. Which is not to say that we have got a perfect understanding of either at the moment , but we have a better understanding now than we originally had. We are closer to the objective reality.

Andrew Samuels : I'm uncomfortable with your depiction of the contemporary God and the way you just did it, because I think that's exclusive and I think it's sort of Judeo-Christian, and I think there are lots and lots of problems with it . I would....I would like to describe or imagine today's God as a less than complete God, as a God who has enormous needs, who has enormous flaws , and who in a way has to survive his encounter with humanity, and I think that is what the nature of modern prayer is partly about, it is a challenge, you know the key issue that children come up with for example, is that if God is so powerful and so good, why is there so much evil in the world, and that's a very smart, important, fundamental question and has to do with prayer as well, and I think that one of these reasons why, God if you like, is somehow mixed up with evil, insufficiency, lack and nasty things is because he is not as advanced in our time as he might be, or as he could have been, and I think this, if you like, this image of God as a very much less than perfect, very much less than supreme, very much less than complete, very much less than moral being is an exciting modern way to look at God.

Russell Stannard : I must confess I do go along with the orthodox view that God is all loving, all good, all perfect, and that we have to find some other understanding for why the world itself is so flawed , and why there is evil there, and I think that when you think things out, yes you can get some point as to where that truth might lie, that if the overwhelming principle behind our lives is love, you know that God's prime concern is not that we have a good time, but that we enter into a loving relationship with him, and certain consequences come from that, we have to be given freewill, otherwise love is not real, and as soon as you give freewill to your creatures then you run the

risk of them abusing that. So God gives us the freedom, but it's we who make the evil.

Melvyn Bragg : Your book's called "The God Experiment" and there's this project "The God Experiment", which...could you briefly tell people what you're doing there?

Russell Stannard : I'm a trustee of the Templeton Foundation, which is an American Charitable Organisation devoted to progress in religion, and it is simply that we have funded an experiment...and experimental proposal that was put to us, by Herbert Benson from Harvard. The basic idea is that people who are suffering from coronary artery diseases, and are going in for bypass surgery at five hospitals there are being divided up into groups, teams of intercessors have been set up, and they pray for a certain batch of patients. Now in fact the groups are such that 600 patients are being prayed for and 600 are not being prayed for.

So they are the control group. The patients themselves don't know whether they are being prayed for or not, they've simply been told you might be prayed for or you might not be prayed for, and then what's happening is that, there case histories are being followed up over a period of 3 years, to see whether there's any difference between the recovery rates of the two groups. In fact there's three groups, the third group of 600 are told you will be prayed for and they are prayed for. So that's to see whether there is any additional benefit if you like from actually knowing that you're being prayed for. Obviously if there is a positive result that those prayed for significantly, you know statistically significantly do better then that will be an incredibly important result, and will lead to lots of other kinds of research, you know different prayer techniques, trying out different diseases, and see whether they succumb and so on.

So it will be a very important result, but it's important to recognise that, that would not prove that God exists, and we are quite insistent from the very outset that this is not an experiment aiming to prove to everybody that God exists.

Melvyn Bragg : Andrew Samuels?

Andrew Samuels : Yeah, look I'm not against linking science and religion, I agree with Einstein, science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind, and all that kind of thing, but I do have some trouble with this, Russell, I really do. I think it's an extraordinarily over literal approach to everything to do with religion, and it did occur to me that never mind telepathy, let's just say it is really about prayer, you really need a control group of people who don't know this is going on at all, because one of the things I think is going to happen is that if prayer is effective, and I think it may well be, then both groups are going to get better, because of the praying people that you've got out there. I think it's a very, very problematic and over literal approach to things, and I don't understand what it, you know, what the results will mean. I repeat I'm not against a science religion link, but I don't feel that what's being proposed in this experiment is really very..very useful, and I don't have much confidence in it, I'm sorry to be frank, but I only wanted....quite honestly, because my own gut reaction, is that it's going to be null result, either because God will not cooperate and after all it does say in the bible, "Thou shalt not put the Lord thy God to the test" and there are probably some very good reasons for that, and secondly, because of well what the investigators themselves call "the background noise". When we say that one group is not being prayed for, all we mean is that they're not being prayed for by these special teams of intercessors.

Obviously you can't stop people praying for themselves, or their loved one's praying for them, and my own gut feeling is that when you pray for somebody you know and you love and you are agonising about, that is likely to have far more effect than prayers for a stranger. But my scientific training says, "that is a gut feeling, if there is any way of testing it out, one ought to test it out". If it turns out to be a positive result then at that stage, everyone will say, "Well what an obvious thing to do, why didn't somebody else think of doing that long before?"

Melvyn Bragg : Well, people do it every week in church don't they? They pray for the sick.

Andrew Samuels : And they do it in a lot of other places, and that's what's wrong, probably both with church or synagogue or mosque, and this experiment. It's actually missing the point about where prayer is at, at the end of the century.

Melvyn Bragg : Where do you think it's at?

Andrew Samuels : Well it's private. I don't mean privatised in the Thatcherite way, I mean it's become a much more...religion as a whole, spirituality has become not only more private, but more spread out, and I think this is an interesting and healthy development yeah. It's got to do with the way we live, the way we work, the way we organise ourselves socially, the way we make love, the way we consume, in not just food, but also fashion, drugs, these kinds of things, have got a religious charge now, and we can recognise that. In fact they probably always did, everyday life was probably *always* completely riddled, with something spiritual, and if you like everyday life was always already a kind of prayer, if you want to use that sort of evocative way of talking about it. Now I think what's gone off in this prayer experiment, and in linking prayer too much to church, or too much to a benevolent God, too much to traditional forms, is that the essence of what's possible in a prayer experience is just institutionalised, and I don't like that, because what I hear from my clients and from my friends, and I know from my own personal experience, is that prayer from within, going on within, and prayer as it were, as an omnipresent aspect of all bits of daily life, and social life and consuming, that is the modern way of experiencing these things.

Melvyn Bragg : But how can you describe.....? Isn't prayer becoming so elastic as to be loose of any bonds with any fact at all?

Andrew Samuels : It's difficult....it is, there's a problem, like the word "politics", that's also gone into all aspects of life, but you yourself said that religious forms have changed enormously, and I think what we may be seeing, we may be seeing ourselves coming into a period where the religious forms are going to be relatively form-less, and I think that has terrific possibilities. It has great anxieties, because it leaves the prayer and its energies very uncontained, by decorous official structures, and the risk is that it just becomes a non-word, everything is a prayer. But I think the possibility is that people locate sources of authority and love within themselves, which then become some things that they can use in their life and their relationships. They do not depend on external sources of authority, such as organised religion, or indeed by the way, the psychotherapy profession, because I think the rendering private of prayer also renders private things like insight, which have stayed if you like the possession of people like myself. I think "the people", humanity is taking these things back, at this moment, and that's very exciting, from my angle.

Melvyn Bragg : What's your response to that, Russell?

Russell Stannard : I think I'd go along with just about everything you've said. Prayer is multi faceted, it's you know, consists of contrition, self dedication, worship and thanksgiving and things of that kind, all of which are very private, in the main are very private. So I think that prayer is one's ongoing relationship with God, of self dedication, trying to allow God to work through one's own life, and intercession is just an extra.....an extra aspect of prayer, so yeah, let's....

Melvyn Bragg : But it has been.....organ....in Western organised religions, it has been a very powerful part of them, you know "Ask me and you will get an answer", "Pray and your sins will be absolved", "Pray and the people who are dead will be comforted by your prayers", I mean prayer has been very, very...the intercession....the petitioning aspect of prayer has been a very strong feature of it in the organised churches.

Russell Stannard : Yes it is, but I think that one can have a rather naive understanding as to how God's likely to respond, you know "Ask and you shall receive", that is certainly the case, but what you receive might be the answer "No".

Or it might be "Yes, but not now"

Or it might be "Yes, but not in that way, I have a better idea". So there are many different kinds of answers to intercessory prayer.

Andrew Samuels : I think that where it's at, at the moment, is prayer as a dialectical or dialogical experience, and this goes back to something I was saying earlier about what does God want from his side of the prayer relationship, and I'm afraid the traditional approaches to prayer miss out this dimension utterly. Jung wrote a book called "Answer to Job" which caused a lot of trouble in his relations to Christian people, which had been very good up until then, and in this book, Jung argued that the way God, Yaweh treats Job, shows how immature, narcissistic and irresponsible God is.

I think this is a very good place from which to begin, and I want to re imagine prayer as not only all the traditional

things but, in addition a means by which humanity says to the "out there", to the "bigger than itself", to the trans-whatever word we want to use, "Hey the world is not good enough, and you have a responsibility in this matter".

So I see prayer as a protest, as well, and I think a lot of younger people, because one of the noticeable things about all the environmental politics we saw in Seattle a few weeks ago, at the WTO thing, was that, for many of these young people, their environmental and ecological concerns are terrifically spiritual and formed in a religious way as well.

Russell Stannard : I think protesting against God and being angry with God are certainly experiences that I have had, and I think it's a very natural reaction, and I'm sure that sort of God forgives me for having lost my temper with him. But always at the back of my mind, or at least when I've calmed down, I suspect that my frustration is simply through lack of understanding as to what God is really all about.

Melvyn Bragg : But you're talking very confidently and (indistinct), enviably almost, confidently about God Russell, but for a great number people. Looking back just on this century, at the end of this century, the idea of their being a God in human affairs, on this planet for the last 100 years, is something that they can't countenance, they look around and they say "No".

Russell Stannard : I can only say.....I understand, you know, how that can be the case, of course one can't carry out a controlled experiment where you know you run the history of the world without a God, you know that might be so absolutely horrendous that we might see....

Melvyn Bragg : It could have been a lot worse?

Russell Stannard : ..Oh it could have been a lot worse, absolutely. I think that the important thing in my life is that you carry out a kind of God Experiment of your own. You give prayer a try, you say "Okay God I'm going to give you a chance, if you are there please talk to me, please make your presence known to me in my prayer life and I'm going to stick at this for a long time to give you a good chance and let's see where we go", and I think that if you do that, if you really open up your heart in that kind of experiential way, you know George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement said, "I came to know God experimentally", and I think that's how it is with everybody. You're never argued into a belief in God, you must try that experiment. You then encounter God, and the kind of presence you come into, is one that is not evil, it is one that is good and loving and kind and powerful, and awesome, and it's that direct relationship and understanding of God, which then confronts you with other ways of trying to come to the problem of evil and suffering.

Melvyn Bragg : Andrew Samuels?

Andrew Samuels : If people look for God where they've been told to look for God, they will be disappointed, and the events of this century if you like, bear that out. If people pray in the way they're supposed to pray they will be disappointed as well, but what's missing around the table is third position, a kind of anti-prayer, anti-God position, because that isn't my position. My position is that there are new forms of religion, new approaches to spirituality, which can, if allowed to by the big institutions of religion, breathe new life into God, new life into God, okay? That's blasphemy, but that's what's needed, and new forms of prayer will then develop, and you know the word that's missing, from all of this is "spontaneity", and I think that the adherents of organised religion are terrified of spontaneity, because it de-traps them if you like, it takes away their vestments, and they can't live without them. I meet people all the time who say "Well of course I'm a Christian with a small 'c'" or "I've got a sort of consciousness or sensibility, but I don't do anything", these people ought to be religion's gold dust.

Russell Stannard : Well I go to church every week I'm a lay reader in the church of England, I preach in the church, I've got a sermon coming up next Sunday, so I'm very much part of organised religion, but I do empathise a great deal with what Andrew is saying, that there are times where even someone who is in the establishment of the church, like myself, the old forms start to go stale, they don't speak to you as they used to, so I feel that in my own life, I do need from time to time to experiment with different ways of approaching God, yeah.

Melvyn Bragg : Well thank you very much Russell Stannard and Andrew Samuels, and thank you very much for listening.