



“Please, God...” Prayer and its Functions in Narratives. Based on Projective Method of Research (Religious Apperception Test). Theoretic Background and Rationale of the Study

Zofia Grudzińska

Abstract

In religious studies, prayer has been extensively researched. Psychological studies use survey methods, so low-educated respondents often cannot comprehend the items. A projective method is presented, based on the Thematic Apperception Test by A. Murray and Ch. Morgan. Data collected in semi-structured interviews are used for qualitative research and for statistical analysis. Quantitative analysis of the references to prayer in narratives has yielded certain results, confirming the usefulness of the test. Qualitative analysis has revealed specificity of the petition and intercession prayer and has called attention to association of location to specific types of prayer.

Keywords: religiosity, structure of religiosity, prayer, projective techniques, TAT (Thematic Apperception Test)

Słowa kluczowe: religijność, struktura religijności, modlitwa, metody projekcyjne, TAT (Test Apercpcji Tematycznej)

In various disciplines branching out from the general field of the study of religion, psychology functions as a bridge between the empirical and the humanistic science. What many centuries ago started with philosophers asking questions about human nature, evolved to embrace experimental and laboratory work. Subsequently, it had to develop instruments allowing for precise analysis of data to fulfill the requirement of Popper’s paradigm¹, namely, that answers to any questions posited by the creative mind should come in form of hypotheses, which the scientist strives to falsify or temporarily prove in the course of relevant research. In the latter case, the truth of the findings is recognised only until another scientist provides its reliable falsification.

Naturally, psychology of religion must draw on credible data and no one should try to argue otherwise. The task, admittedly, is particularly difficult in the field which

¹ K.R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach*, Oxford 1972.

studies the phenomena of faith and religiosity, so deeply embedded in the unconscious. Any study in the field by definition aims to describe processes stemming from the recognition of a relation to a transcendent entity, the invisible and intangible *sacrum*. More than that, it strives to fathom its complex nature. Nevertheless, without reliable data, the researcher turns into a spinner of tales. No matter how gripping the tale, it is not their role.

Furthermore, once the need for reliable and inter-subjective data is recognised, it is a veritable cliché, that “the value of [collected] material is dependent on such factors, as the technical quality of the research tool”². An overview of the literature of the subject³ proves that so far among the researchers who study personal religion, the tool of choice has been the questionnaire and the data format complie swith that of scales. Thus for a long time research was dominated by quantitative methods, which seemed to promise the greatest precision and give the possibility of comparative analyses. Alas, while guaranteeing statistical accessibility, they brought their own drawbacks.

Firstly, such a research format severely limits the population being studied. Where the medium of comprehension is verbal code, often relying on complex or ambivalent utterances, particularly prevalent in the language of religion, the questionnaire items are difficult to comprehend for persons with lower educational levels.

Secondly, remaining on the level of self-description, questionnaires may miss out on the incredible richness of data rooted in the person’s subconscious. Where the domain of study is religion – which by definition leaves at least one end of the puzzle outside the bounds of the tangible – any method promising access to the underlying strata of the human psyche should be given a chance to prove its worth. This reasoning justifies the author’s decision to use projective methods for studying various aspects of personal religiosity.

The subject of the research

Prayer has been chosen as the focus of the present study as it seems to be one of the main ways of religious practice in Christian religion as well as in many other religions throughout the world. It functions both as a ritual and a means for individual religious experiences.

The Bible lists three elements crucial for practising religion: prayer, fasting and alms (Matthew, 6). The man who might be considered the founder of the psychology of religion, William James, in his fundamental treatise determines that “in most books on religion, three things are represented as its most essential elements: sacri

² P.M. Socha, *Zakres znaczeniowy pojęcia religijności a sposoby jego operacjonalizacji*, „Studia Religiologica” 1983, No. 9, p. 169.

³ *Idem*, Socha, *Skale do badania religijności – aktualny stan i zagadnienia psychometryczne*, „Przełęcz Religioznawczy” 2003, No. 3/209, p. 203–216.

rice, confession and prayer”⁴. Although his list is different from the Biblical one, he clearly puts prayer in the crucial position, since in the course of his lecture he skips sacrifice altogether and devotes only a few words to confession before he goes on to a detailed examination of prayer. Moreover, he then quotes Auguste Sabatier, who deems prayer the determining factor of any religious experience, as it “distinguishes the religious phenomenon from such similar or neighbouring phenomena as purely moral or aesthetic sentiment”⁵.

The research presented in this article was conducted within the cultural framework of Polish society, in which the dominant religion is Roman Catholicism – so much so, that even respondents who are of different religious upbringing or non-believers would still be familiar with the cultural codes rooted in the Catholic belief. Inasmuch, we can speak after Heinrich about “root reality”⁶ which is part of everyone’s identity, irrespective of his or her personal beliefs. Atheists, pantheists, agnostics and church-goers, all function socially in the same world, which has discovered the concept of *sacrum*, whether as an existing factor or as an artefact of human history. No one, who has been socialised within any culture recognising the concept of God, is truly free of its influence in the process of constructing one’s own identity. For the deeply religious, it has functions reaching far beyond the merely conceptual, as it organises their lives and has indeed a central meaning. Therefore the research tool has been embedded in the Polish reality of Catholicism.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church prayer is “the living communion of the children of God with their father”. This approach stresses the relational aspect of the activity. The teachings of the Roman-Catholic Church recognise the following categories or types of prayer, on the basis of the aim of the praying person:

- prayer of blessing and adoration, where „we bless him for having blessed us” and adore “the greatness of the Lord”⁷;
- prayer of petition, as “we understand that every need can become the object of petition”⁸;
- prayer of intercession, in other words: “asking on behalf of another”⁹;
- prayer of thanksgiving, offered in any circumstances, as “every event and need can – become an offering of thanksgiving”¹⁰;
- prayer of praise, which “lauds God for his own sake and gives him glory”¹¹.

⁴ W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, A Penn State Electronic Classics Publication 1902/2002, p. 445, available at: <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/wjames/Varieties-Rel-Exp.pdf> [accessed: 29.08.2012].

⁵ *Ibidem*, *Esquissed’unephilosophie de la Religion*, p. 447.

⁶ B. Spilka, R. Hood Jr., B. Hunsberger, R. Gorsuch, *The Psychology of Religion. An Empirical Approach*, New York 2003.

⁷ *Catechism of Catholic Church*, 2627, available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM [accessed: 29.08.2012].

⁸ *Ibidem*, 2633.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 2635.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 2638.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 2639.

Basic terms and assumptions

Prayer, being an act of worship, can also be considered a reflection of a person's individual attitude toward the transcendent, the relational phenomenon, in the case of the believers. In the broader scope, apart from partaking in the activity of praying, the prayer itself is perceived as an element of the whole "package" of religion, hence existing as part of the system of constructs describing the domain of the *sacrum* in any person's overall picture of reality. It can have a central meaning, as is the case of people with intrinsic religious orientation¹². It is peripheral, although still retaining the functional aspect as the expression of one's belief in religious rituals, as is the case of people with extrinsic religious orientation. Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, atheists demonstrate simply the awareness of a specific phenomenon in the social sphere of life or of an abstract object of philosophical reflection. In each case, however, it remains embedded in the domain of religiosity.

The term "religiosity" itself is defined in several ways: Głaz¹³ writes about the "personal relation to *sacrum*, the object of religion, which is carried out and comes to light through relevant forms of awareness, practices, morality, cult"; Socha¹⁴ calls attention to the subjective aspect of experiencing religion, where the researcher is concerned not so much with the attitude toward religion, as with "the essence and structure of the individual religiosity"¹⁵ – or, simply put, any psychological processes initiated, stimulated or reinforced by the reference to the transcendent. Sometimes, the issue is sidestepped inasmuch as the concept of religiosity is indirectly defined as engagement in religious practices and self-reporting that religion is important in one's daily life¹⁶; in another approach, religiosity is seen as a communal phenomenon¹⁷, or a "preservation of certain customs to satisfy some conventionally established practices to secure a path for the soul toward what is transcendent"¹⁸.

The term "structure of religiosity" is a further refinement of the concept of religiosity and reflects its complex nature. It is posited that all elements thereof are interconnected and to a certain extent interdependent, although the exact arrangement of the interrelations remains the subject of future research¹⁹.

¹² G.W. Allport, J.M. Ross, *Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 1967, No. 5, p. 432–443.

¹³ S. Głaz, *Doświadczenie religijne a osobowość*, Kraków 2003, p. 11, [own translation – Z.G.].

¹⁴ P.M. Socha, *Religia i jej definicja z perspektywy psychologa* [in:] *Definicja religii. Studia i szkice*, M. Karas (ed.), Kraków 2002, p. 105 [own translation – Z.G.].

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ E. Diener, L. Tay, D.G. Myers, *The Religion Paradox: If Religion Makes People Happy, Why Are So Many Dropping Out?*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 2011, No. 101/6, p. 1278–1290.

¹⁷ R.P. Turner, D. Lukoff, R.T. Barnhouse, F.G. Lu, *Religious or spiritual problem: A culturally sensitive diagnostic category in the DSM-IV*, "Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease" 1995, No. 183, p. 435–444.

¹⁸ C.M. Del Rio, L.J. White, *Separating Spirituality From Religiosity: A Hylomorphic Attitudinal Perspective*, "Psychology of Religion and Spirituality" 2012, No. 4/2, p. 113.

¹⁹ Z. Grudzińska, *Test Religijnej Apercepcji Tematycznej „RAT”*. *Próba konstrukcji testu projekcyjnego do badania profilu religijności*, Warszawa 2009.

To study the religiosity structure means, therefore, to map out and analyse not only the type of cognitive constructs, emotions, motivations, attitudes and beliefs which are generated by, connected with and resulting from experiencing the individual relation to the transcendent. It is also recommended to establish the hierarchy of the mental processes and phenomena listed above and their internal connections. The current article provides the results of such research concentrating on the concept of prayer among people raised in a predominantly Catholic society. It has to be mentioned here, that the secondary purpose of the research was the on-going work on refining the tool used for collecting and interpreting data – the Religious Apperception Test, which will be described in the next section.

Use of projective methods in related research

The search for a more efficient code with which to construct a tool for the study of the structure of personal religion was kindled by the words of Chwedeńczuk²⁰, which opened a promising path: “the language of religion [...] functions as a carrier of images”. Different encoding processes were also anticipated by Pruyser²¹. Writing about operational categories of thought processes he brought up McKellar’s concept of an existing continuum of thinking, from type A („primary processes”) to type R („secondary”) and posited the existence of a thinking process of a mixed R/A type („imaginary”), further suggesting a prevalent role there of for such areas, as the transcendent and religious.

A distinct concept of monoconcrete, poly-concrete and hierarchic codes, regulating thinking processes, was presented in the so called „Code-Emotion” theory posited by Obuchowski²². According to his proposition, for the subject to correctly decipher the meaning of the items of questionnaires used in research of personal religion, he must have the ability to fluently operate the hierarchic code. Obuchowski describes this type of code as a system, with which „a person aims to classify the world, to construct „models” thereof on varying levels of generalisation. Meanwhile a person, who functions on the concrete level of thinking, does not transcend the boundaries of direct experience and will rather use the criterion of function. “He cannot, even when operating a verbal code, receive information which he would not be himself able to send. If a given utterance, intended for such a subject, operates on the basis of a hierarchic code, the person does not receive any comprehensible communication”²³.

Such concepts suggest a new path in the research of the religious and spiritual: replacing verbal stimuli with a code employing images. Asking respondents to draw pictures or presenting visual clues, which they later interpret, has already made inroads in the research of the processes of creating the God image. The visual stimuli

²⁰ B. Chwedeńczuk, *Przekonania religijne*, Warszawa 2000, p. 139–140 [own translation – Z.G.].

²¹ P. Pruyser, *The Dynamic Psychology of Religion*, New York 1968, p. 47–73.

²² K. Obuchowski, *Kody umysłu i emocje*, Łódź 2004.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 203 [own translation – Z.G.].

method has been often implemented in this type of research, conducted by Basset²⁴, Ladd²⁵, Barret and Reichert²⁶ or de Roos *et al*²⁷. A significant attempt at using pictures in both clinical and scholarly work was made by Rizzuto²⁸.

Another examples of meaningful research based on projective techniques is the study of a construct labelled as “r-dependency”, conducted by Parent as reported by Socha²⁹. The Thematic Apperception Test, originally created by Morgan and Murray³⁰, has been a model for a test to study the structure of religiosity, *i.e.* the Spiritual Themes and Religious Responses Test³¹. The latter is the only known study devoted to the analysis of the attitude toward prayer and it has relied not only on qualitative analysis, but has so far met with sufficient interest to have become the basis for construction of a working system of interpretation.

Nonetheless, instruments of the “tat” type – that is, based on the procedure introduced in the original TAT – are less popular in contemporary psychological research than other qualitative methods, where the narrative is obtained through verbal stimuli.

The method: the Religious Apperception Test

The Religious Apperception Test has been based on a concept similar to the Thematic Apperception Test. There are two reasons for this decision. Firstly, according to the theory of the specificity of projective techniques for studying mental processes, it will facilitate access to the unconscious beliefs and experiences of the subject. Secondly, material obtained in this way is not contaminated by the assumption of the researcher, who – when using an *a posteriori* method of processing data – may attempt to reveal the empirically present parameters of the personal religion in the studied population (the preferred method is usually factor analysis). In the approach based on projective techniques, the stimuli are meant to provoke verbal or nonverbal behaviours, which become material for interpretation pertaining to the intended focus of research. Tests which rely on the mechanism of projection, in order to be effective, present stimuli

²⁴ G. Bassett, A. Miller, H. Crafts, L. Parks, S. Robinson, S. Stevens, C. Wheeler, R. Stevenson, *Non-verbal Measure of God-Concept* [in:] *Measures of Religiosity*, P.C. Hill, R.W. Hood, Jr. (eds.), Birmingham, Alabama 1999, p. 409–415.

²⁵ K.L. Ladd, D.N. McIntosh, B. Spilka, *Children's God Concepts: Influences of Denomination, Age and Gender*, “The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion” 1998, No. 8/1, p. 49–56.

²⁶ J.L. Barret, R.A. Richert, *Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concept*, “Review of Religious Research” 2003, No. 44/3, p. 300–312.

²⁷ S.A. de Roos, J. Iedema, S. Miedema, *Influence of Maternal Denomination, God Concepts, and Child-Rearing Practices on Young Children's God Concepts*, “Journal for Scientific Study of Religion” 2004, No. 43/4 p. 519–535.

²⁸ A.-M. Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: a Psychoanalytic Study*, Chicago 1979.

²⁹ P.M. Socha, *Zakres znaczeniowy pojęcia religijności a sposoby jego operacjonalizacji*, „Studia Religiologica” 1983, No. 9, p.169–185.

³⁰ H.A. Murray, *The Thematic Apperception Test Manual*, Cambridge, Mass. 1943.

³¹ M.S. Saur, W.G. Saur, *Transitional phenomena as evidenced in prayer*, “Journal of Religion and Health” 1993, No. 32, p. 55–65.

of an ambiguous nature. Data collected using projective techniques are spontaneous, since “fuzzy” stimuli allow for individualised conceptualisation. Moreover, such data are not contaminated by the researcher’s assumptions. Finally, it allows the researcher to tap both conscious and unconscious of the respondents.

The testing method presented here makes use of two mechanisms:

- thematic apperception, defined as the ability to process ambiguous stimuli in a way which is coherent with the individual system of cognitive constructs;
- the projection of motivational and emotional personality traits.

The former would be responsible for the result of mediating the meaning of the details in the picture, which can be interpreted in several different ways. The latter directs the person’s processes of constructing a story based on the picture content so that the plot is inter-explanatory in relation to the aforementioned details; it can also offer insight into the possible identification mechanism of the person tested with the characters appearing in the picture.

The Religious Apperception Test (henceforth referred to as RAT) consists of nine black and white cards, representing everyday scenes of either religious context, or imbued with details which might direct the viewer toward religious thoughts or interpretations. Three cards, depicting a single person, can be used in gender versions – male or female – to facilitate identification. The degree of infusing the picture with religious content differs – in some cases the religious element is subtle, in others ranges from mildly to starkly explicit. As the primary research was carried out in Poland, it was decided to embed the pictures in the Polish cultural milieu – which means that the character of religious references was limited to the Roman Catholic tradition, prevalent in Poland, as according to the recent census 95.8% of the population declares this denomination³².

It is a necessary strategy in any research concerning personal religion, which, apart from being a highly individualised phenomenon, is nevertheless one almost exclusively formed in the process of socialization. In the author’s opinion, in spite of such “enculturation”, essential in a test based on visual stimuli, the tool can still be used for participants of other faiths, as long as they have been raised in Poland.

Preliminary validation was carried out with the help of an already verified instrument – the Scale of Religiosity constructed by Huber³³, henceforth referred to as a C-15 Scale. The results were positive, proving that the RAT can be used for the study of the structure of religiosity³⁴.

The next necessary step was to construct the system of interpretation, which would enable cohesive and inter-subjective analysis of the content. The basic requirement of such a system is that if used independently on the same body of data it yields the

³² G. Gudaszewski, M. Chmielewski, A. Jakubowski, *Informator o wyznaniach religijnych, stowarzyszeniach narodowościowych i etnicznych*, Warszawa 2010, available at: http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbr/gus/PUBL_oz_wyzn_rel_stow_nar_i_etn_w_pol_2006-2008.pdf [accessed: 18.07.2012].

³³ S. Huber, *Zentralität und multidimensionale Struktur der Religiosität: Eine Synthese der theoretischen Ansätze von Allport und Glock zur Messung der Religiosität* [in:] *Religiosität: Messverfahren und Studien zu Gesundheit und Lebensbewältigung. Neue Beiträge zur Religionspsychologie*, Ch. Zwingmann, H. Mosbrugger (eds.), Münster–New York–München–Berlin 2004, p. 79–105.

³⁴ Z. Grudzińska, *Test Religijnej Apercpcji Tematycznej „RAT”...*

same results. Looking back at the history of the Thematic Apperception Test helps see the conundrum: in the decades following its inception several different propositions for ways of interpreting were presented, each of them fuelled by a particular school of thought to which its author belonged and structured in accordance with the framework characteristic with the given theory. In research proper, it was possible to employ only those systems of interpretations, which at some stage allowed for converting qualitative data into quantitative values for subsequent statistical processing. Thus, Bellak's³⁵ interpretation system, though inspiring in itself, could hardly be part of a scientific study. Among the systems which were used with success for both diagnostics and research were Westen's Social Cognition and Object Relation Scale and Cramer's Defense Mechanism Manual, due to their high validity and reliability³⁶. It has been decided to follow a good example and construct a system which enables similar operation of converting data into quantitative markers.

The system of interpretation for the RAT was constructed based on the data collected in over a hundred interviews in a demographically diverse sample of Polish nationals³⁷. It has been decided not to base it on any existing theory of religiosity but to formulate its own in the process of a grounded theory practice proposed by Glaser and Strauss³⁸ and later modified by Glaser³⁹. Therefore, a content analysis was conducted by independent judges, of whom one was an expert librarian, trained in tracing emergent codes.

Following categories constitute posited dimensions of the structure of religiosity:

- 1 – AFFECTIVE (emotionally experiencing religious practices)
- 2 – SUPPORT (belief as the source of care and support)
- 3 – MOTIVATION (motivation for engaging in religious practices)
- 4 – PRAYER (practising prayer and its functions in life)
- 5 – CONSECRATED PEOPLE (beliefs and convictions concerning consecrated people)
- 6 – RITUAL (knowledge of and familiarity with common religious rituals)
- 7 – MORALITY (faith seen as a source of morality, a set of moral instructions)
- 8 – STEREOTYPES (utterances expressing set convictions about links between religiosity and age, social-economic status, gender etc.)
- 9 – SHOCK (paradoxical reactions, sarcastic utterances, jokes, non-verbal reactions like laughter, smirk, grunts etc. emitted to relieve tension)
- 10 – ESCHATOLOGY (convictions and conjectures concerning eschatological issues)
- 11 – REFLECTION (reflection about religion)

³⁵ L. Bellak, *Long form for the analysis of the TAT*, New York 1947.

³⁶ I.B. Weiner, R.L. Greene, *Handbook of Personality Assessment*, London 2007, p. 436.

³⁷ Z. Grudzińska, *The Religious Apperception Test (RAT) – a Projective Test to Research the Structure of Religiosity. Constructing the System of Interpretation* (in print).

³⁸ B.G. Glaser, A.L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, New York 1967.

³⁹ B.G. Glaser, *Emergence vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory*, Mill Valley CA 1992.

The dimensions proposed here were additionally verified by the subsequent work of independent competent judges, who conducted anew the content analysis of the material.

In the category of PRAYER the following subcategories were identified:

- prayer for help (both for the praying person as for the third party);
- prayer for support (help seen not as providing any particular grace, but in a more general understanding, giving strength in life's crises);
- prayer for peace of mind (which could also be construed as a plea for help, only focused on the emotional state of the praying person);
- prayer of dialogue (expressing a general wish to seek contact with the *sacrum*, to “talk to God”);
- prayer of thanksgiving (in the sense expressed by the Catechism of the Catholic Church);
- prayer as a ritual (where the narration focused on this functional aspect of prayer, be it in the course of the individual experience or as part of the institutionalised religion);
- prayer seen as an element of a “job description” (pertaining to consecrated persons shown in some of the pictures), also labeled as “fulfilling occupational obligation”.

There was one more subcategory, labeled “unspecified”, for those utterances in the narratives, which referred to or clearly mentioned prayer, but without any further elaboration as to the aim or rationale of the activity.

The final results differ from the list given by the Catechism, the only direct connections are prayer for help (for petition / intercession prayer of the Catechism) and prayer of thanksgiving. No respondent mentioned the prayer of praise or blessing.

In addition, every utterance could be affectively neutral or loaded either negatively or positively, giving subsequent variables of “positive” and “negative comments”. The two subcategories also include the references, which clearly stressed the prognosis of either negative or the positive outcome of the prayer. These variables are redundant with the variables marking distinct types (subcategories) of prayer. They give possibility of evaluating the same data, albeit from a different angle.

Discussion

The subsequent research into the conceptualisation of prayer among people raised in a Catholic society has become a test of the usefulness of the Religious Apperception Test as the tool for a study which yields reliable results. For the purpose of statistical analysis the sample has to be considerable. Thus, collecting data is a time-consuming process. Nevertheless, it can be efficiently organised without too much difficulty, supported by a team of trained voluntary assistants.

Such research has been conducted and its results allow a certain extent of confidence in the assertion that the Religious Apperception Test can be profitably used for studying the structure of religiosity.