Two of the founding fathers of American psychology, G. Stanley Hall and William James, thought that religion should be included in any complete study of human nature. Religion and, more generally, spirituality once again are important topics primarily as related to studies of well-being and in promotion of psychological and physical health. Prayer is the essential component of rituals in all religions and thus deserves special attention if we are to understand the place of religion in so many lives.

A 1991 survey found that about 90% of Americans pray. Many of those prayers are requests to God for help getting out of some mess; there are no atheists in foxholes, the saying goes. Many others are memorized chants: “Now I lay me down to sleep.” In *Prayer: A History*, however, Philip and Carol Zaleski show that psychologists have much to learn from serious prayer in its many forms and from those who pray.

These authors define *prayer* as “action that communicates between human and divine realms” (p. 5); it is about people talking to God. Although they think that science can contribute to our understanding, “only an empathetic study of prayer… can reveal prayer's
secret life” (p. 28). Much of the book involves listening to people as they pray and describing their rituals. This really is not a systematic history but is more a sampling of prayers in their various forms and experiences over time. Neither is it a work in theology, because it does not take any positions except perhaps one, namely, that prayer is a good thing and may be universal.

Religion begins in prehistory and includes every culture on earth. Within every culture are various traditions that have changed over time, and within each tradition are various modes of individual expression and interpretation. The Zaleskis were forced to be selective, presenting us with an extensive variety of prayer experiences that are representative of the religions that could have been included. Christian traditions are overrepresented, but there are significant presentations from Jewish, Hindu, Native American, and other religions. There seem to be few major oversights, but I found no mention of Mormon practices or the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. However, the Exercises are commonplace and unsensational, focusing on interiority rather than external phenomena, so they might seem out of place in this book, which uses more dramatic exemplars of prayer experience.

The book is divided into four parts, the longest of which presents four fundamental modes of prayer in terms of four archetypal figures: the refugee, the devotee, the ecstatic, and the contemplative. This is an interesting way of organizing the varieties of prayer, giving us a good sense of the experiences, although not much history. The refugee's prayer is a call for help, the most common form of prayer, according to the Zaleskis. Examples include the currently popular Prayer of Jabez, asking God to increase our wealth, and the serenity prayer of Bill W., a founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, who said that the task of every drunk is to cry to God for help. I was enlightened to find Robinson Crusoe here as an archetypal man of prayer.

The prayer of the devotee is repetitive and often intense, as in the five daily prayers of Muslims and the Jesus prayer. In its most intense it may be autohypnosis or it may involve divided attention, as when beads are fingered while engaging in some nonprayerful task. The ecstatic is in the mysterious realm, perhaps in an altered state of consciousness. For the contemplative, prayer is a way of life rather than an event, although the centering prayer that is included here as an example appears quite similar to a period of meditation. We get a clear sense of each of these four modes because of the extreme examples provided for each. These are mystics and saints who have all-consuming relationships with God.

Part 3, Prayer and Culture, giving us views of how prayer was and can be an integral part of the daily lives of ordinary people in various cultures. The six-volume *Carmina Gadelica* documents prayer throughout the daily life of traditional Gaelic culture. The day begins, for example, with the blessing of the kindling. Similarly, “in traditional Judaism almost every conceivable event claims a berakhah (blessing)” (p. 239). Another chapter in Part 3 presents examples of how artists (prose and poetry, painting and film) have illustrated the place of prayer in human life. Occasionally the authors seem to stretch the connections,
as in their suggestions that a photograph can induce a state of prayer. Sure, but so might almost any other thing. Other examples do help to expand our understanding of prayer experience, especially quotations from the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. This chapter seems least helpful as history, but clearly fits the “empathic approach” used by the Zaleskis.

When the book comes to contemporary American culture, I shouldn't have been surprised, although I was, to find an extensive prayer “life” on the Web: “Internet prayer groups now number in the thousands and enroll millions of participants, mostly evangelical Christians but also representatives of just about every imaginable religion” (p. 308). If you are interested, try the site operated by Irish Jesuits: [http://www.sacredspace.ie/](http://www.sacredspace.ie/)

The section of this book of most relevance for psychologists is Part 4, Something Understood. Much of the current interest among psychologists concerns spirituality and health. A literature search of empirical articles in peer-reviewed journals from 1990 to 2005 found 290 articles in which prayer was a keyword (Michael Donovan, personal communication). About 64% concerned mental health interventions or relationships, and 40% were related to physical health, with some overlap in these categories. Psychologists are continuing a long history in American culture of using prayer for healing, a tradition dating at least to the metaphysical healers of the early 19th century and including Christian Scientists and Navajo healing prayers.

Psychological science is not ignored. In fact the Zaleskis, who are associated with the faculty of religion at Smith College, do an admirable job of reviewing research on the efficacy of prayer (Chapter 12) and putting it in the context of their history. Empirical research in this area begins with Francis Galton's study of the British royal family who were the objects of an abundance of prayers. Actually, their life expectancies and that of the clergy that Galton studied were lower than for other groups.

Attempts to manipulate prayer as an independent variable in experimental designs have not produced any meaningful results. The authors provide a summary of two major experimental studies, pointing out the methodological flaws in this research. Readers of this review might stop and contemplate the design problems here. After all, we are not talking about testing a new psychotropic drug or standard cognitive–behavioral treatment. Prayer is more than meditation and relaxation; it includes a communication with God. How can this be a double-blind study? “(T)hese hospital studies implicitly assume that God will play along with the experiment and obligingly cure only those for whom prayers have been said, while turning his divine back on the rest”(p. 345).

The neuroscientists also have entered this game, using brain scans to search for spirituality in the brain. Of course the brain is active during prayer, and scans may be able to distinguish the recall of memorized phrases from our attempts to formulate petitions. It seems unlikely, however, that anyone will discover the network of cells that are active when we tune in to God.
I had only one disagreement with the authors. They think there is a human instinct for prayer that, along with a sense of the divine, arises “simultaneously as immediate facts of consciousness, only later to be articulated as systems of belief” (p. 31). This sounds like one of the innate ideas that empiricists eventually put to rest but that does not detract from the understanding of prayer in the remainder of this book.

The final chapter, “The Mystery of Prayer,” is a poetic conclusion to this history. It is clear in this conclusion that the Zaleskis did not intend this book to be a psychological analysis of prayer, not even in the sense of description: “We can describe the visible world of prayer in sumptuous detail, and a resplendent and fascinating world it is; but the most intimate dance between God and the soul occurs at a level beyond human perception” (p. 354).

There is much that is known and much to learn about the psychology of religion (see Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). Although we know a lot about topics like the development of praying in childhood and the personality correlates of prayer, “no generally agreed-upon theory of prayer has emerged” (Spilka et al., p. 282). So perhaps the best conclusion is that prayer is a mystery, but that becomes a dilemma for someone educated in psychological science who prays and is trying to figure out how it works. For that person, this book helped to sharpen the dilemma.

Reference