

“WITHOUT PRAYER YOU HAVE NOTHING”: PRAYER IN UNCERTAIN TIMES  
IN TRINIDAD

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For Marcel Mauss in his 1909 work “On Prayer”, prayer is the essence of religion, religion’s central point (2003[1909]). While Mauss reaches the definition of prayer as “...a religious rite which is oral and bears directly on the sacred” (2003:57)<sup>1</sup>, he also acknowledges the very broad and less definable aspects of prayer:

*“Infinitely supple, it has taken the most varied forms, by turns adoring and coercive, humble and threatening, dry and full of imagery, immutable and variable, mechanical and mental. It has filled the most varied roles: here it is a brusque demand, there an order, elsewhere a contract, an act of faith, a confession, a supplication, an act of praise, a hosanna”* (Mauss, 2003:2)

Fairly unsurprisingly therefore, given the multiple aspects to it, prayer has been broken into different categorises that facilitate its study. These include looking at prayer in terms of: adoration, confession, intercession, petition, thanksgiving (Wakefield, 1983); adoration, thanksgiving, supplication, confession, reception, obligation (Whittington and Scher, 2009); ritual prayer, petitionary prayer, colloquial prayer and meditative prayer (Poloma and Pendleton, 1991); inward, outward and upward aspects to prayer (Ladd and Spika, 2002, 2006); active and passive communicative prayer and responses from God (Dein and Littlewood, 2007) amongst

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<sup>1</sup> Mauss notes that he includes the notion of prayer as being oral in his definition with the understanding that prayers not spoken aloud but interior to the person also have a sort of language, and that unspoken prayer rituals are a form of sign language (2003:56).

others. Key to the study in this paper however, is the concept that prayer is a form of communication between humans and the spiritual realm, and what is considered prayer and what is not, is defined by the community itself under study. As illustrated below, their understanding of prayer does not necessarily mesh with how others have traditionally defined the concept, but rather links to other cultural beliefs about the spiritual from the Caribbean region.

Anthropological investigation of prayer appears to have developed little from Mauss' classic work. While prayer is fundamental to European religious understanding and discussion, it may be a less central concept to apply to other cultural contexts.

Morphy suggests that the ambiguous and diverse nature of the use and meanings of prayer, its close association to discourse on Christianity, and its dependence on knowledge of the local language (which is therefore less accessible to those spending shorter time periods in the field) may mean that prayer is a difficult concept for cross-cultural comparison, despite its salience (Morphy, 2003:142).

As argued by Mauss, prayer is more than an individual act, it is a *social* act. This is not to say that it is not also an individual act but rather, Mauss argues, that while prayer occurs in the mind of a person, it is also a "social reality" that exists outside that person and is part of religious convention, and it is the social reality and conventions themselves that influence performance of that personal prayer (Mauss, 2003:36). In this sense, it can also be understood as a socio-cultural act, influenced by the beliefs and cosmological worldview of the culture, and the context and demands of everyday life in that culture. This study looks at the place of prayer in everyday life in a Trinidadian village, how it is influenced by culturally-specific cosmological beliefs regarding interaction between humans and the spirit world, as well as by the wider

cultural context in which the individual lives. Prayer is a critical point where such beliefs and everyday experiences interlink as, through the act of prayer itself, such a relationship is reinforced and made real.

### *Prayer and coping*

Empirical studies of how prayers may impact on medical outcomes have increased in recent years (Breslin and Lewis, 2008, for reviews of these studies see Francis and Evans, 1995; McCullough, 1995, Dein and Littlewood, 2008) however Dein and Littlewood (2008) point out that there are limitations for such a field of research and conclude that such studies find no compelling evidence for an effect of intercessory prayer on patients' recovery. They note, rather, that prayer can be an effective coping strategy (Dein and Littlewood, 2008:42), as has also been found by a number of studies looking at coping with illness (Taylor, Outlaw, Bernado and Roy, 1999), but also for dealing with less personal crisis. Ai, Tice, Pearson and Huang (2005) found that prayer was a coping mechanism for people dealing with the September 11<sup>th</sup> crisis in the USA for example, and, as for the women coping with breast cancer in Dein, Stygal and Martin's study (2006), prayer was connected to optimism and hope. In these studies, hope and optimism are seen as critical aspects of the power of prayer in enabling coping. Hope and optimism regarding personal and wider circumstances can be seen as key elements of a positive religious worldview that is meaningful to the individual, a worldview in which individuals can situate themselves, the divine, and their particular circumstances, and which may therefore provide reason to be hopeful and optimistic. Such studies link with research that investigates meaning systems within religion (Park, 2005b; Silberman, 2005), and how meaning-making within

religion may assist with coping (Park, 2005a; Dein, Cook, Powell and Eagger, 2010).

Religion offers a worldview which encompasses the human, the divine or spiritual world, and an understanding of how the world works. It allows the individual to make sense of the world and to be able to respond to it, giving ontological security regarding the workings of the universe. Such ideas link to existential psychological perspectives such as Eric Fromm's work, *Escape from Freedom* (1994 [1941]), in which he argues that humans need to avoid isolation and to be connected to the outside world, and to Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) notion of "sense of coherence"(SOC), found to have a positive correlation between optimism and self-esteem, and a negative correlation between anxiety and depression (Hart, Hittner and Paras, 1991). A "just world hypothesis" is also found in many religions (Hogg, Adelman and Blagg, 2010), where good things are seen to happen to good people and bad things to bad people giving the world a method, a purpose and a consistency.

Such a worldview and sense of cosmological order is acknowledged, and, indeed, reinforced through prayer. The individual is perhaps never more so aware of their position, their relationship to the divine with whom they are attempting to communicate, and their personal circumstances than when they are praying. The act of praying makes such a worldview real to the individual in their particular circumstances, relating to them personally, not only acknowledging their personal meaning system but acting within it. It is ritual that expresses meaning and, as Geertz (1973) suggests, it in turn gives our world meaning: "*In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined...turn out to be the same world*" (Geertz, 1975:112). Prayers may aid coping by bringing individual meaning-systems to the fore and reinforcing them, thus facilitating the understanding of the individuals, who can then relate

cosmologically, and act in accordance to their current circumstances. This study of the use of prayer as part of everyday life in Trinidad suggests that prayer enables people to cope with day-to-day problems and experiences through the comfort and hope that communicating with God brings, reinforcing a cultural worldview which places God in control, and so gives meaning to the individual's everyday world.

### *Prayer in Trinidad: About the Study*

Trinidad is an island of 1,684 square miles located in the southern Caribbean seven miles from mainland Venezuela. With its smaller and more tourism-driven neighbour, Tobago, it forms the nation of Trinidad and Tobago, one of the richest nations within the Caribbean due to its supply of oil and natural gas. The history of Trinidad explains its ethnically diverse population: following the virtual annihilation of the indigenous Amerindian population, European colonizers (Spanish, French and British) brought Africans over as slaves<sup>2</sup>, and then Indians as indentured labourers. Trinidadians of African and Indian descent form the majority of the population, approx. 37.5% and 40% respectively, 20.5% are “of mixed heritage” and 0.63% are White/Caucasian (National Census Report Trinidad and Tobago [2000], 2009). The island is also theologically diverse, with the Census recording that 29.6% of the population are Roman Catholics and 25.6% Hindus. These are the largest single religious groups although over one third of the population is Protestant of different denominations (Anglican, 8.9%; Baptist; 8.2%, Jehovah's Witnesses, 1.8%; Methodist, 1.1%; Pentecostal, 7.8%; Presbyterian, 3.8%; Seventh Day Adventist, 4.5%). In addition,

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<sup>2</sup> Slavery in Trinidad lasted only for a relatively short period of time, slaves arriving from 1776, and slavery was abolished in 1834. Allen notes that this had an important effect in that many retained their African beliefs and practices, 1998:78

6.6% of the population are Muslim.

Also prevalent in Trinidad is *obeah* which is not a religion but

*“A system of beliefs rooted in Creole notions of spirituality which acknowledges the existence and power of the supernatural world and incorporates into its practices witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells and healing”*(Fernandez Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert, 2003:121).

Fernandez Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert (2003) note that although *obeah* does not have an established liturgy or community rituals, it can express other aspects of Afro-Caribbean religions including divination, spirit possession and animal sacrifice, and central to its practice is the manipulation of spirits by humans. Brought over by African slaves and providing them with a form of social control and perceived autonomy, *obeah* involves the undertaking of secret rituals to bring particular circumstances into effect, as well as being a form of healing (Fernandez Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert, 2003). Outlawed and viewed as pagan worship by the colonial government in Trinidad and Tobago, the demonization of the practice of *obeah* has continued into present times: it is seen as either “evil and fearsome”, or ridiculous, but it is still sufficiently part of social reality for even the well-educated middle-class to take care to address suspected *obeah* attack (Laitenen, 2002:35). In practice, also, accusations of *obeah* use abound at local, national and even international levels.

Trinidad also suffers high rates of crime and violence, and many in Trinidad view the justice system as corrupt and incapable of dealing with this. During fieldwork a State of Emergency (SoE) was called in Trinidad in an attempt to deal with the crime situation. Running from August-December 2011, the SoE gave police special powers

to arrest and hold people, and a curfew was enforced in particular areas restricting movement in the evenings and early morning. One of these areas was Toco, the main fieldsite for this study. As such, the SoE forms part of the backdrop to this work.

Toco is a rural village on Trinidad's North-East coast. The vast majority of those in Toco are of Afro-Caribbean origin, reflecting the population in other villages in the area, although not Trinidad in general. Toco is situated in the poorest region in Trinidad, and like other villages on the coast, agriculture and fishing are key forms of local employment although there are few jobs of any kind in the area. During the colonial era<sup>3</sup> Toco had many estates producing coffee, cocoa, citrus, nutmeg, bananas and coconuts amongst others crops. These estates have long since closed however, and young people increasingly leave village for Port of Spain, the East-West corridor, and to the USA and Canada to look for work. The main social problems in Toco and the surrounding area are seen as child sexual abuse and drugs<sup>4</sup>. Other crime and violence is viewed as more prevalent in the capital and along the East-West corridor, and local community members are more wary travelling to these areas (although many do so frequently). Both local and national systems and institutions are frequently viewed as corrupt, and the policing and justice system as ineffective. The inability of local police to detain those well-known to be involved in the drug trade in the local community was often cited as an example of this.

Participant observation was initially conducted in and around the capital of Trinidad, Port of Spain, and in the East-West corridor, an urban sprawl where most businesses in Trinidad are based, followed by the main period of fieldwork undertaken in Toco (March 2011-May 2012). During fieldwork the researcher lived with local families,

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<sup>3</sup> Trinidad became independent from Britain in 1962

<sup>4</sup> As well as being traded in the surrounding coastal waters, drugs (marijuana, and to a lesser extent, cocaine) are both grown and imported locally.

attending community meetings, events and gatherings, immersing herself in the local culture and way of life. The vast majority of those living in Toco were Christian and church services and events were attended in all seven of the local churches (Anglican, Catholic, Evangelical, Spiritual Baptist (x2), Independent Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist churches), and in one Pentecostal church in a nearby village. Most of the researcher's attendance and involvement was based in the three churches which most people attended: the Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist and Catholic churches, and the researcher also attended Bible study and prayer meetings in the first two of these churches. Special attention was also paid to the Spiritual Baptist churches and to the Independent Baptist church due to their strong influence on the local community. Despite differences in praxis between these churches, there were many similarities in belief and approach between the denominations: differences blurred as community members often visited each others' churches; members of the same family were often members of different churches; some people attended more than one church, and many of those in the village choose to change churches once or more during their lives. Informal interviews were conducted with community members throughout the period of fieldwork. Notes were taken both during and after participant observation and conversations, depending on the context.

The study focused on understandings of health and illness and the relation of these to wider cosmological worldview. In undertaking fieldwork, prayer emerged clearly as an important aspect of everyday life. Prayers and explanations about the use of prayer were part of church services and activities, other community events and gatherings, as well as interviews and everyday conversation.

### *Use of prayer in Trinidad*

Prayer features heavily in daily life within Trinidad, and churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike reported using different types of prayer in their lives<sup>5</sup>. All events and meetings, from children's sports days to informal village meetings, started with a prayer that invited the Holy Spirit into the group to guide the proceedings. Such prayers would serve to remind those present why they were gathered, focusing and drawing together a sometimes very diverse group of people as all those present united in prayer. Individuals reported that they prayed in the morning when they awoke, thanking God for waking them and asking for guidance in the day ahead, and again at night, thanking God for the day that had passed. "Grace" was said before meals, giving thanks for food and for being able to eat, but also, in some cases, asking that the food be blessed so that it did not poison or cause harm to those eating it.

Individuals reported praying on the way to work as they travelled in cars and maxi taxis, asking for safe arrivals. Religious leaders were asked to bless vehicles, boats and houses, to thank God for providing such items, but also importantly to ask for protection from harm (e.g. house fires, car-jacking, drowning) while using these<sup>6</sup>. Such blessings involved the religious leader saying a short prayer over the item, and, where performed by a Catholic priest, the item was also sprinkled with Holy Water. Individuals may also be blessed for particular reasons, for example through a prayer that asks God to bless a child who has an exam so that they might be guided by the Holy Spirit to know how to answer the questions. In leading others in prayer, or in

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<sup>5</sup> The researcher met only three people who claimed to be atheists, although there may well have been others. Only one of these people lived in the village of study. For another, it was the continual involvement of prayer in aspects of daily life that he found particularly offensive, and his refusal to be involved in prayer caused anger for others.

<sup>6</sup> Some people may be spurred into getting these items blessed following a mishap - a friend who lived on the East-West corridor now gets every new car blessed after being car-jacked on two previous occasions.

individual prayers, the Holy Spirit is believed to guide the person in knowing what to say and how to say it.

Prayers can be made more effective by increasing the numbers of pray-ers, and by the morality and Christian-like behaviour of the individual who is praying. Since the greater the number of people praying means the greater the power of the prayer, prayers said by a whole church, or by a prayer group would be more effective than one person praying on their own. This belief was used to motivate church attendance often citing the words of Jesus: “*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*” (Matthew 18:20, KJV), the Holy Spirit being more present and effective in a group.

Certain people were believed to have a particularly strong relationship with God through being spiritually powerful people. These were people who had spent years developing their spirituality and deepening their relationship with God, or had a particular gift from God. They maintained their power by living a good Christian life, listening to and being led by the Holy Spirit, and having a particularly deep relationship with God. Prayers made by these individuals were thought to be particularly effective, and indeed such individual spiritual power may be revealed by their ability to have their prayers answered. In the Pentecostal church the intercessory prayer group was compiled of those who had a particular gift in praying for others so that personal, local and national problems might be taken to them for this. Individuals who do not have such a gift can improve their prayer effectiveness through living a good Christian life, including maintaining regular communication with God. Such activities help the Holy Spirit to dwell within the individual, guiding their actions, keeping them blessed by God, and allowing them to continue to be a good Christian

whose prayers God would answer.

Fasting was also thought to increase prayer efficacy and was undertaken when there was an urgent or particularly difficult situation. There were different levels of fasting, from not consuming any food or drink (even water) to eating everything but meat, and the level or duration of fasting could differ dramatically. Fasting was felt to increase the individual's closeness to God by denying self desires and demonstrating control, as well as allowing blood flow that would have usually been used on digesting food to circulate to the brain, improving brain activity, and ability to focus on God, and on the prayer. Individuals reported feeling more spiritual and "lighter" during fasting.

#### *Asking in prayer*

All community members questioned agreed that there was nothing that an individual couldn't request in prayer, including personal gain (e.g. money, a car). Whether such prayers would be answered was a different matter however, God giving what is needed and what is good for the individual. Whatever the issue, individuals were encouraged to pray to God about it, something mentioned commonly in everyday conversation (for example when giving advice to others).

While community members reported that they asked for material items, prayers said in church services for particular individuals tended to be in relation to family, for example, for children to do well at school, to curb the alcohol or marijuana use of teenagers and sons-in-law, to guide the husband back to church and to God. Prayers to gain a job/promotion or to improve a situation at work were also common in services, as were prayers for healing from sickness or emotional situations (for example, after

the death of a loved one). On occasion, stronger, more powerful prayers were needed for cases of severe enduring sickness (particularly if it was thought to have a spiritual cause), or in cases of spirit possession. These aimed to drive out evil spirits from within the body or the disease caused by evil spirits, using God's power to do so. Such cases were handled by local religious leaders, often using a team from their church who would pray with them, although the Catholic church referred individuals to priests based in other areas of Trinidad who were able to perform exorcisms. Often community members left the local area to seek help from religious leaders who were renowned for their ability to heal. Although there were religious leaders and spiritually powerful people in the local community who could perform such services, most people preferred to seek help from leaders and spiritual healers outside the area, who were generally seen to be more effective and kept cases more confidential.

Prayers for protection were also commonly said, asking God to keep the individual and their family healthy, and individuals and their possessions safe from crime and misfortune. Sickness, crime and other misfortunes were all seen to have a spiritual element, which only God could control. While these can be brought on the self by not living according to how God wants mankind to live (for example contracting HIV by having sexual relations outside marriage), these can also all be caused by other people putting witchcraft directly onto the individual, or onto other individuals who may harm them. This was defined as *obeah*, also (locally) linked strongly to devil worship. For most people, their strong faith in God, and their life as good Christians meant that they were "covered with the blood" (Jesus' blood spilt on the cross), and they were therefore protected from harm. For example, one community member disclosed that anyone who tried to kill her would be struck down by God before they had a chance to do so. Other people would say prayers around their house or yard to protect them

from evil spirits or people with bad intentions (who were following the Devil, as anyone with bad intentions is).

Prayers for the nation were also said both in churches and in prayer group meetings. This was seen to be extremely important given the high rates of crime and violence in Trinidad, and, related to this, the high number of people choosing to follow the Devil rather than God. The prayers asked for citizens to turn back to God, and to change their behaviour, as well as for the government to make the right decisions following God's wishes. The PNM party, which was supported by most people locally, had lost the last election, so prayers were also said to return this party to power.

#### *“Bad” prayers*

While community members agreed that there was nothing that you couldn't ask for in prayer, there were also some things that you shouldn't pray for. These were ungodly requests, for example praying to win the lottery when God is against gambling. More often, however, objections were made to prayers for inflicting harm on others. These were unacceptable as God is the judge who rewards and punishes, and it is not for man to judge his fellow men. Such prayers would cause these desires to “come back on you”: what you prayed for others might be visited upon you. This is not to say that some people did not pray for misfortune for others who had wronged them. While no one admitted to doing this, stories of others who had done so were passed on, for example a woman who, after her husband left her for another woman who then became pregnant, prayed that the new woman's baby would die.

Another form of prayer frequently mentioned were prayers used to undertake *obeah*.

Such prayers could be said for a range of intentions, mainly for protection (for example, to protect a garden from thieves); to benefit the individual (for example, to increase the number of fish a fisherman catches); or for more malicious reasons such as to harm someone directly (for example, “putting something on them” that might result in illness); or to turn themselves into an animal, object or folkloric creature to harm them (for example, to become invisible, or turning *soucoyant* or *gombo*<sup>7</sup>).

Although there has been a movement within wider Trinidad seeking to view *obeah* as not necessarily a negative practice, in the Christian village where the study was set, *obeah* was viewed negatively as “black magic” by the vast majority of community members. Magic was believed to work through the Devil fulfilling what was requested, so the individual who engages in this is therefore following the Devil and not God. “Bad” prayers are therefore believed to be addressed to the Devil, or to particular evil spirits, although some community members argued that the person saying these may not realise that they are addressing the Devil. These “bad” prayers, which can be accompanied by rituals, are passed down from other people or learned from particular “bad” books, such as *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*. The Bible can also be used to produce evil, particularly Psalms for example, if read with malicious intent. Few community members would give precise details of these bad prayers, as to do so would indicate that they were themselves involved in such activities, but many did indicate what others allegedly do. If an individual did not know how to do such prayers themselves, or wanted someone with more spiritual

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<sup>7</sup> *Soucoyant* are part of Trinidadian folklore, and are community members who shed their skin at night, fly in a ball of fire and enter other people’s houses to suck their blood. There were many stories of occasions where people suffered *soucoyant* attack although there was also disagreement between community members as to whether such creatures existed. *Gombos* are part of the folklore of the villages in the local area, and are male community members who enter other local people’s houses and have sex with women while they sleep. *Soucoyant* and *gombos* undergo this change, and then revert back into humans, through using particular “prayers” that they learn. They may also learn particular prayers in order to enter locked houses and keep their victims and their families asleep while they do their work.

power to undertake them, they could visit a specialist, a presumed *obeahman/woman*, who would say prayers and undertake rituals on their behalf. Such visits would be made to spiritual specialists outside the community to hide this from neighbours and so that the *obeahman/obeahwoman* wouldn't know those people involved. Likewise, people from other villages would often come to Toco seeking a spiritual specialist for similar help.

Good people (good Christians) say good prayers, bad people (non-Christians or not "real" Christians - both of which would fall into the category of followers of the Devil, since those who don't follow God must therefore follow the Devil) say bad prayers. While those saying bad prayers may be temporarily rewarded by the Devil, they will ultimately be punished by God, and while good Christians may suffer as part of life, just like Jesus or like Job, they will ultimately be rewarded in the next life.

### *Responses to prayer*

God answers prayers in three ways: "yes", "no" or "wait". When the individual receives what they ask for, the prayer has been answered. If it is not received, this may be because it is not right for the individual to receive it (a "no"), or because it is not the right time for the individual to receive it (a "wait"). God answers prayers, but He gives only what the individual needs and when they need it, rather than whatever the individual wants. Thus prayers may not be answered immediately. A direct response to a prayer may come from God through dreams or visions, or by revelation during prayer. Very few people ever heard an actual voice from God, but many described the experience of an "urge", a "feeling" or an idea that pops into their head, all of which are attributed to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides the believer, and

was compared to the voice of the individual's conscience telling them what to do, also communicating aspects known only to God (for example it may tell the person not to catch a particular maxi-taxi as it may be involved in an accident). It is up to individuals themselves to either follow this guidance or ignore it, something that people struggle with if they are being guided to do something they don't want to do. As well as learning to hear and be led by the Holy Spirit, the individual must learn to distinguish the voice of the Devil from the voice of God. In addition to direct communication from God, answers may also come from those around the individual, for example in a church sermon or in what others do or say since God may communicate through others.

Proof that prayer works and that God answers prayers was talked about frequently in daily life: the family situation that got resolved, the recovery from sickness, the lost spectacles that were then found, and, on one occasion, the hurricane that came close to hitting Trinidad but instead passed between Trinidad and Tobago, causing minimal damage to both islands. Not only was this a clear case of prayer working for the community, but it was also a case of God wanting to protect Trinidad as a nation, a country God has a special love for.

### *Discussion*

Prayers are an active part of everyday life in Trinidad and the content of prayers reflect and indeed reveal key societal issues and beliefs about how the world works. Prayers for jobs, protection from crime and the detention of criminals, money to pay household bills, the keeping of family members away from drugs and alcohol and close to God and the church, illustrate the common problems experienced in Toco,

and the main concerns of community members. Prayers reflect the daily reality of lives in the area: there were few jobs, high rates of crime in certain areas, and low conviction rates, with drug (and alcohol) abuse seen as a serious local problem. The emphasis placed on blessing cars among those who lived along the East-West corridor (where there were greater numbers of car-jackings and accidents) also illustrates the link of prayer to local experience.

Prayers were said for aspects of life which were important to the individual locally, and around which there was a level of uncertainty: jobs, crime, family, money, health. Such prayers asked for resolution and assistance in dealing with personal and social issues: their presentation situated these in a context where God is in control of what happens, that everything happens for a reason thus helping the individual to make sense of problems in everyday life. Prayer reduces anxiety, community members stating that anxiety and faith are incompatible, if you have faith and trust in God then you cannot be anxious. That prayers were often said by women (who make up the majority of those who attend church services in Trinidad) for male family members/partners (who are who are more likely to engage in un-Christian behaviour) links with Wilson's influential work on *respectability* and *reputation* and gender roles in the Caribbean more generally (Wilson, 1973).

In prayer, the individual expresses and shares their stress and life problems, not only with God but often with other members of the community (in churches or outside) who are also asked to pray about them. For some, communing with God was a comfort in itself, but a good relationship with God, mediated by prayer, also offers protection for the individual from evil spirits and the Devil. Such a powerful external controlling force may be particularly important where the state cannot be relied upon

for such assistance: it is God who rewards and punishes mankind for their actions, something that the state cannot, or will not do. God is in control giving existential security where there is little actual security, and a clear notion of spiritual justice where there may not be worldly justice. Community members felt they had little control over their immediate circumstances: unemployment schemes are run by the government and have recently been cut in the area, for example, and power and control in the nation was seen to be based around the main cities and the East-West corridor, with villages along this coast being forgotten about and left behind.

Individuals felt that the government made decisions that were not for their benefit, which they could not influence through their own political action. In this Trinidadian village however, despite external control coming from outside the individual (and the community) in terms of state power, ultimate power over life circumstances came from a far stronger force, that of spiritual power, God. This was another external power, but one which the individual could commune and relate with, the way they chose to live their life being justifiably rewarded or punished by God.

God judges, then rewards or punishes people according to whether they have followed Him or followed the Devil. Punishment comes in the form of God allowing the Devil to do something to the individual (as God does not directly punish people) instead of protecting the individual from the Devil's work. The Devil is always there and, with evil spirits who work for him, is always around the individual. It is the Devil who is responsible for anything bad, evil or ungodly that occurs. It is down to individuals themselves to choose who they follow however, meaning that community members can choose to positively influence their lives by following the path God has laid out for them. Community members know when they are on this path as they are guided by the Holy Spirit, which is the medium through which God operates on earth. God's

control is also reinforced through the phrase “Please God” after making plans as well as through prayers. If the individual acts in a righteous way and still encounters misfortune, God has also allowed this for a reason, for example recovery from a serious illness to show His divine power and “convict” others to follow Him. Thus prayer (and a Christian lifestyle) gives the individual limited agency over their circumstances so that they are not entirely dependent on the control of others. This suggests a strong sense of coherence within individuals, a clear worldview in which the positions of mankind, the divine and other forces are laid out, and explanations are given for everyday circumstances. Such beliefs, illustrated by the study of prayer, reveal the cultural worldview of the area, how the individual places themselves and their own agency in relation to external worldly and spiritual agents.

As well as providing explanation for misfortune, such beliefs also link to Caribbean beliefs in witchcraft and in the spirit world. *Obeah* utilises spirits to divine the future, to increase individual gain, to protect the individual or to suppress/harm others. Not all spirits have the same level of power however, and the more powerful the spirit, the more powerful the effect, but also the more spiritually powerful the *obeah* practitioner must be to manipulate it. The power of one spirit may therefore trump the power of another, so that so that the individual hopes that the most powerful spirit is working for them. In this way, Christian beliefs tie into these ideas: God and the Holy Spirit are seen to be the ultimate powerful spirits, trumping the Devil and other evil spirits. To have God as a spirit working personally for the individual, protecting them and blessing them for their gain, and harming others that try to harm them means that the individual can be beaten by no other spirit: they are working with the “the ultimate *obeahman*”, as some community members refer to God. The issues that community members took to church to pray about, or asked a spiritually powerful individual to

pray for on their behalf, are also issues that an individual may use *obeah* for, or may be asked of *obeahman/woman*. As well as using a spiritually powerful intermediary as above, harming others is something that is particularly linked with *obeah* and which can also be taken up in prayer. The term “prayer” is also used by community members to refer to *obeah* incantations, such as turning into a creature as well as oral addresses to God. The phrase “Please God” may also be seen to work in a similar way to such incantations: by saying the phrase, the future event becomes more assured, and failure to say this invites the opposite. While there has been much discussion within anthropology as to the difference between magic and religion (see chapter 2 in Bell, 1997, for a historic review of this), the data from this study suggests that in this cultural context they might be closely linked.

Prayer and its incorporation into daily life may resemble Christian practice in many places around the world. However the content of prayers and beliefs about how prayers work reveal a particular worldview and the central concerns of a culture. Prayer in Toco helped people make sense of and deal with the everyday problems of daily living, asking God for assistance and protection, placing Him in control of a situation that may otherwise seem unpredictable and uncontrolled. Studying prayer in Toco also reveals a worldview that includes aspects of Caribbean spirituality and witchcraft, with prayer linking the community member to a wider meaning system and understanding of the world, and the act of prayer itself reinforcing and making real the relationship between humans and the spiritual realm. Prayer is therefore a key method through which religious beliefs that bring meaning and understanding to the individual are reinforced and made real, enabling the individual to cope with problems in life.

## References

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