

Peter May analyses a recent *Everyman* programme on the Mantra study <sup>1</sup>

# Does prayer work?

One of the biggest, multi-faith, prayer experiments ever devised has concluded that prayer made no significant difference to the outcomes of the cardiac patients involved. A pilot study had suggested that prayer could have a measurable effect on the outcome of patients who required angioplasty, a surgical procedure to unblock diseased coronary arteries.

To test the hypothesis, cardiologists at Duke University Medical Centre in the American 'Bible belt', set up a three year trial, known as the Mantra study, to see if patients made better recoveries if they were prayed for. Statisticians advised them that they would need 750 patients to reach a statistically significant conclusion.

Enrolling the help of 26 prayer groups across the world, patients were randomly allocated into two groups. One group was assigned for prayer, the other group wasn't. Neither doctors nor the patients and their families were told which patients were being prayed for – in other words, it was a 'double-blind' trial.

The praying groups included Christians in Manchester, Buddhists in Nepal, Sufi Muslims and Carmelite nuns in America. The Cardiologist who led the study was a practising Jew but was inspired by Hinduism.

## Questions about the study

The study appeared to be done to the highest, scientific standards. It was a prospective, double-blind study, where an appropriately large number of patients were randomly allocated into the two groups. There was however a major flaw. It assumed that no one prayed for those in the non-prayer group, or that the sheer volume of prayer for the other group from around the world rendered any such prayers inconsequential.

They could not rule out that members of the patient's family might have prayed for those in the non-prayer group, or that those patients, who did not of course know which group they were in, might have prayed for themselves! After all, they lived in the 'Bible belt'. The assumption made was that the 'amount' of prayer was the most important factor.

The researchers claim that after the events of 9/11, due to an apathy that threatened to end the study after only 500 patients had been entered into the trial, more groups were called upon to pray. We are told the figures 'suggest' there may have been a greater benefit after 9/11, when the prayer was increased. However, we were initially told it would need 750 patients to produce significant results, so to claim benefits for the remaining 250 patients has to be considered 'special pleading' and was not statistically significant.

## Questions about testing God

Moses said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'<sup>2</sup> This is the text that Jesus repeated during his temptation in the wilderness, when asked by the devil to throw himself from the top of the Temple.<sup>3</sup>

## Questions about prayer

Christians believe they are speaking directly to the loving Father in heaven who created them. But what do Buddhists believe about prayer? They do not believe in a personal, creator God, whom you can talk to in that way. Prayer is a different concept for them.

THIS STUDY REVEALS

A SLOT-MACHINE ATTITUDE TO PRAYER, VIEWING IT A MECHANICAL BUSINESS, WHICH IS MORE EFFECTIVE IF YOU PUT MORE ENERGY INTO IT

I suggest this study reveals a slot-machine attitude to prayer, viewing it a mechanical business, which is more effective if you put more energy into it, and which works the same whether you believe in God or not? It reminds me of the famous Old Testament power contest where Elijah mocked the 450 prophets of Baal, taunting them to pray louder in case their God was lost in deep thought, was busy, travelling or just asleep? They prayed all day, without success. Elijah, however, then saw an immediate answer to his single, short prayer.<sup>4</sup>

James reminds us that there is a moral factor in prayer. He said the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective and cites the prophet Elijah as an example. He implies that he had no special powers but was 'a man just like us'.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus offered a similar warning in the Sermon on the Mount: 'When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'<sup>6</sup>

The Scriptures offer many examples of great prayers. They are not shopping lists for 'goodies'. They have to do with the relationship of God to his distinctive people. Consequently, they are concerned with asking for forgiveness, wisdom, courage, mercy, understanding, guidance, discernment and strength to do the right thing.

Yes, we are told to cast our cares upon him, knowing that he cares for us.<sup>7</sup> But we don't expect immunity from ill health, the avoidance of suffering, guarantees of a long life or exemption from physical death.

The apostles were beaten, stoned, thrown to wild animals and killed. The great apostle Paul cried out to God to be rid of his 'thorn in the flesh' (could it have been angina?), but it was not removed. Instead it taught him humble dependence on the grace of God – and God used him mightily as a result. But he didn't live into old age.

Jesus taught that fundamental to authentic Christian prayer is the desire 'Your kingdom come, your will be done',<sup>8</sup> implying a concern for and an openness to accept God's sovereign purposes.

Can people be randomly allocated to the love and care of God? That is an appalling concept. We need a deeper understanding of prayer.

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## References

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| 1. BBC 2, 23 October at 9.00pm | 5. James 5:16,17 |
| 2. Deuteronomy 6:16            | 6. Matthew 6:7   |
| 3. Matthew 4:7                 | 7. 1 Peter 5:7   |
| 4. 1 Kings 18:27ff             | 8. Matthew 6:10  |