

Recent prayer research spurned by excuse-makers

How can we tell if something isn't so?

Throughout time, humanity has cared deeply about answering this question. If someone tells us evil spirits are making us sick, we have to know if they're right. If someone says they can foretell the future, it's really important to know if we should crown him king.

It's only in an eye blink of history that we've come up with a good answer. A few hundred years ago, we learned that wishful thinking and self-deception were very real problems. That's when we started testing things in ways that tried to avoid them.

Some ways of testing worked. Those stayed around. Others didn't, so they were thrown away. What survived became known as the scientific method, and that's what we've got today. People are always welcome at any time to find a better way of understanding the world. So far, no takers.

This method of finding out what isn't so tells us that the earth is round, that it orbits the sun, and that objects attract one another with a force proportional to their mass. It tells us that germs, not spirits, cause diseases. It tells us that observing the world, and not animal entrails, is a better way to learn about the future.

It also tells us that intercessory prayer doesn't work.

As reported in *The Gazette* a few days ago, the most thorough and careful prayer study ever attempted has finally concluded. The results were negative. Nada. Zip. Zero.

The same techniques that tell us that astrology isn't real and that black cats don't bring bad luck tells us that praying for sick people who don't know they're being prayed for makes no difference whatsoever. You'd get similar results by flipping coins or rolling dice.

I've been following this study with great interest for the past year or so, watching its progress in *Science and Theology News*. S&T is published by the Templeton Foundation, an organization committed to honest, constructive engagement between science and religion. Atheists, agnostics and deeply religious thinkers of all faiths are involved in Templeton, exploring the frontiers of the human mind and religious belief. It's exciting stuff.

Responses to the study fall into two cate-



OPINION
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gories: Excuse making, and thoughtful engagement. The excuse-makers are those who say the power of prayer can't be tested, or that God shouldn't be put to the test, or that supernatural events are beyond the ability of science to understand.

These are excuses because if the test had been positive, they'd have been the first to trumpet the results from the pulpit, the TV studio and the op-ed page.

Excuse-making is also degrading to religion. Claiming that supernatural events can't be tested is what dowzers, tarot readers and telephone psychics do. They fail every test they're put to. Is this really the company the excuse-makers want to keep?

But there are other, more thoughtful responses as well. Dr. Harold Koenig, a co-director of Duke's Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health, says that "It is not religion by itself through some supernatural process that is responsible for the religion-health relationship." Dr. Keith Meador, a psychiatrist who teaches at Duke's Divinity School, thinks studies like this "distort" the relationship of God to man. "It's as if we have some kind of contractual exchange as opposed to a covenantal relationship." That's thoughtful engagement.

I'm not a theologian, but I'm passionate about religion and science. I want to be a thoughtful-engager, not an excuse-maker. The best attempts we've made so far tell us that human prayers don't affect the material world. So be it. Can religion assimilate an answer like that? I think it can. I think in many cases it already has.

The universe, as we find it, is an awfully big place. It's been around for several billion years, and in all likelihood will be around for several billion more. Studies like this one that add to our knowledge can only help move humanity forward on its journey toward our ultimate destination. Wherever that may be. Perhaps it is God.

Dr. David Myers, in reacting to the study, put it best: "My understanding of God and God's relationship to the world would be more challenged by positive than by null results."

Amen.

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