

The Artistic Manifestation of Prayer: An Analysis Through the Framework of Theological Aesthetics

Mufan Zhao*

Beijing NO.4 High School International Campus, Beijing, China, 100006

*Corresponding Author, Email: christina_zmf@sina.cn

Abstract

This paper shall respond to the question of why human engaged with religious belief conduct prayer and relevant behaviors, in an analytical context moving beyond the traditional understanding of prayer as a purely private or intercessory act. By adopting the framework of theological aesthetics and phenomenology, this study analyzes prayer as a fundamental spiritual and cultural force that finds its ultimate manifestation in artistic creation. The research integrates Thomas Aquinas's classical definition of prayer as an upward movement with Simone Weil's concept of 'unmixed attention' and Makoto Fujimura's theology of making. Through an examination of the creative processes of artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Fra Angelico, and Hilma af Klint, the paper proposes a cyclical model of artistic prayer encompassing four stages: receptive orientation, internal translation, public offering, and communal return. The findings suggest that we pray not because we possess answers, but because we yearn for them, and in the hands of the artist, this yearning is translated into tangible forms. Ultimately, the paper argues that prayer is a vital mechanism for cultural transmission and meaning-making, bridging the divine impulse with human understanding, and shaping the collective imagination of civilization.

Key words

Pray; Prayer manifestation; Theological aesthetics; Human behavior

1. Introduction

Prayer often starts in silence; beneath that silence, however, are myriad questions and anxieties. To a person faced with the bewilderment, the chaos, the hurt of

the world, when the edifice of reason unravels and the heart tugs with questions, there is something stirred up and incited. One looks within, not to hide, but to look upward. And this motion is never an exclusively private one. The ache that compels a person to pray is a

common human ache. In moments of crisis, longing, or awe, human beings have always turned to prayer to bear something that feels too big for one person. In classical theology, Thomas Aquinas calls prayer the raising of one's mind and heart to God (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q.83, a.1). It can be inferred that prayer is the action for an upward motion, not away from suffering, but toward comprehension. It is a spiritual response to human weight: a cry for direction, courage, meaning and solutions. To pray, in its simplest sense, is to communicate, toward something higher, beyond the self, toward meaning.

This essay contends that we pray not because we hold answers, but because we seek the strength to continue searching. Using the lens of theological aesthetics, I argue that prayer is a generative cultural force rather than a mere psychological coping mechanism. While current scholarship—ranging from the relationality of Crisp et al. (2022) to Fujimura's (2021) "theology of making"—acknowledges prayer as both a reorientation of the self and a precursor to creativity, a gap remains: the specific connection between the internal experience of prayer and its visible manifestation in artistic artifacts. This paper addresses that gap by defining the "cyclical process of artistic prayer." The significance of this research lies in its potential to reframe artistic labor as a form of public liturgy. By bridging the divide between private phenomenological experience and tangible cultural production, this study offers a new framework for understanding how spiritual "attention" (as Simone Weil termed it) is synthesized into the "concrete manifestations" that shape human civilization. Ultimately, this work provides theologians and artists alike with a vocabulary to view the creative act not just as a craft, but as a vital, transformative response to the human weight of the world.

2. The Phenomenology of Prayer: Silence and Attention

Prayer does not finish in the person. It starts in silence and that silence will have outward effects. As the soul soothes and directs, what then? And whatever answers in response, other people may respond in other ways. Some will act; some will speak. But it is the artist who makes. Among all vocations the artist is uniquely

positioned to sense inward movement and render it into a form that is outward. Fujimura (2021) says that art is "a humble act of hospitality for the divine to dwell" (p. 57). In other words, for the artist once you have started to pray, your soul for creating has opened up.

The practice of the artist is not only a masterful technique but a hypersensitivity, an ability to attend to the what a new thing that sits unseen, the way of speaking what is still in the midst of formulation. This posture of receptivity and responsiveness will be a spiritual praxis. Weil (2002) says prayer is "absolutely unmixed attention" (p. 105). It is not just need to be receptive because there is the need to be responsive. But once that strength has been received prayer will be thought and thought will become action. The artist, painter, composer, writer, will receive the spiritual current of prayer and render it into a visual/sensory response. That which they give is not just a "work of art" but a rendering of how one soul has listened and tried to understand.

3. The Artist as Vessel: Translation of the Divine

Within the framework of theological aesthetics, the artist functions as a "vessel," a conceptual site where the individual self transcends its private boundaries to interface with the divine (Viladesau, 1999). This transition can be analyzed through a Durkheimian lens, which posits that religion and its associated rituals serve as an extension of the self into a collective, sacred reality (Durkheim, 1995[1912]). In this context, the artist's "unmixed attention" is not merely a psychological state but a sociological bridge (Weil, 2002). By focusing this attention, the artist allows their subjective "self" to be subsumed by the "collective representations" of their culture, effectively turning the creative act into a communal extension of human yearning (*Ibid.*).

The work of Leonardo da Vinci illustrates this extension of the self into the collective imagination. In *The Last Supper*, da Vinci does not merely record a historical or narrative event; he interprets a mystery through the lens of shared theological significance (Kemp, 2006). His process—involving rigorous study of Scripture and human expression—represents a "spiritual meditation" that moves the individual creator toward a collective comprehension of the divine will. From a Durkheimian

perspective, da Vinci's composition serves as a "sign" that crystallizes the deepest anxieties and hopes of the community (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]). The artist's self is extended through the "vessel" of the canvas, translating an internal, spiritual current into a public, tangible form that reinforces the shared imagination of civilization.

Consequently, the act of creation is characterized by a "submission" of the individual ego to a higher order of meaning. As Thomas Aquinas suggests that prayer is the "upward motion" of the mind and heart toward God, the artist's work becomes the physical manifestation of that movement. Rather than a purely private journey, the artist's "form-giving" acts as a vital mechanism of cultural transmission. By rendering the invisible visible, the artist ensures that the "conversation of the soul with the eternal" is no longer restricted to the individual, but becomes an enduring part of the social fabric (John Paul II, 1999).

4. The Cyclical Process of Artistic Prayer

Prayer, following the stance of argument by the author, is a process abiding by the context created following the religious creation. In the case of an artist, prayer is not one act. It unfolds. In the same way that creation unfolds through stages of reception, interiorization, outwardization and recognition, prayer is not a slide rule of mechanical actions, but rather a spiritual process through which the artist comes not merely to clarity, but to communion. In every stage, as in every phrase, the question of prayer is one of transformation for both the creator and the created.

Prayer starts with a question, an appeal for illumination when the soul is confronted with the unknown. Painters start their work not with a concept, but with a plea, What should I paint? Fra Angelico never changed his first brushstrokes because he felt that God had painted the first image. His Annunciation (c.1440) is full of quietness and solemnity, the close posture of the bowed Virgin and the gesture of the angel who stands poised to receive what has never been offered before. Hilma af Klint also only painted after long periods of prayer and meditation, insisting that her paintings were "painted directly through me... without changing a single brush stroke," and that she often felt they were "commissioned"

by spiritual advisers (Moderna Museet, n.d.; Apollo Magazine, 2023). In this stage, prayer is receptivity: listening, not to be taught, but to be oriented.

After what is received, we must learn to understand it. The second stage, then, is the internalization of spiritual impulses and an attempt to give them a human shape. This is not a mechanical transcription or reproduction, but a translation where emotion, context, and artistic intention intervene upon the divine impulse to make it visible. In Fra Angelico, the holy is expressed in Florentine perspective; in Hilma af Klint, the spirals speak of metaphysical (and modernist) order. If Aquinas says that beauty "pleases when seen" because it is a human expression of divine beauty (Summa Theologica, I, Q.5, a.4), we may in turn agree that art is not merely an imitation, but rather an interpretation.

The artist's work is not completed in making it so much as in giving it. The third stage of prayer is in offering. Makoto Fujimura's *Golden Sea*, painted following the 2011 tsunami in Japan, was the artist's act of giving comfort and resistance. The gold and crushed minerals are a record of beauty that can emerge from suffering. "To make is to pray." And to make is to serve (Fujimura, 2021, pp. 54–57). In this way, the prayer of art becomes public, made tangible from the spiritual.

But prayer is not complete with the giving. When an audience weeps before a painting or when a symbol comforts an individual, the artist receives confirmation that what he has given matters. Fujimura notes that survivors of the tsunami found hope in his painting; Angelico's frescoes still inspire contemplation centuries later. This final stage is not finishing, it is returning. John Paul II writes that the artist is "a witness to the invisible," exposing "the inner need for redemption" (1999, para. 16). Inspired anew, the artist again turns to prayer, not to start, but to finish. The spiritual cycle is: receiving, interpreting, giving, and receiving anew.

5. Conclusion

Seen in a different light, prayer is not just a private act. It is a cultural force. It is how we each access meaning, and how our civilizations maintain meaning. Every honest prayer adds not only to our personal awareness, but to the creation of our shared imagination about what it is that is true, beautiful, and holy. Many of us would

argue that prayer is not artistic at all; that the most common one is indeed very intercessory, and it is indeed very corporate. Here the goal is petition, not production. Well, corporate still means that corporate prayer shapes culture: it crystallizes the deepest desires of a community, it creates a common language of hope, and it often creates a common action (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Wuthnow, 2011). Intercession and the revelatory artistry we describe both begin in the same vulnerability, and end in the same act of world-making, one through service, one through sign.

So why pray? It is not merely why we reach to God in silence, but why we emerge from that silence. Prayer starts as a cry; it ends as an act of culture. It starts as confusion; it creates content. It starts in the inner eye; it ends in the outer world-matter. In the hands of the skilled, prayer is not merely faith; it is a medium by which generations remember, question, and hope. To pray is to receive; it is to shape; it is to offer; it is to be shaped. It is the conversation of the soul with the eternal, in pigment, in line, in light. To pray is indeed a vital cultural verb, to nurture meaning.

While this research establishes a conceptual bridge between the internal act of prayer and the external act of creation, it is not without its boundaries. Primarily, this study is situated within the specific framework of theological aesthetics, drawing heavily from the Christian intellectual tradition; as such, its conclusions may not fully account for the creative processes found in secular, non-theistic, or non-Western religious contexts. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach adopted here prioritizes the subjective experience of the artist. Because the transition from the "inner eye" to "outer world-matter" is deeply personal, this study offers a theoretical roadmap rather than an empirical measurement of how prayer directly influences specific artistic techniques or stylistic choices.

Additionally, there is significant room to investigate the sociological impact of artistic prayer—specifically, how these "concrete manifestations" function in secularized public spaces to foster communal resilience

or social justice, acting as a "public liturgy" for those who may no longer participate in traditional religious institutions

References

- [1] Apollo Magazine. (2023, April). The cosmic visions of Hilma of Klint. Apollo. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/the-cosmic-visions-of-hilma-af-klint/>
- [2] Aquinas, T. (n.d.). *Summa Theologica*. (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.). Retrieved from <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>
- [3] Baesler, E. J. (2012). An introduction to prayer research in communication: Functions, contexts, and possibilities. *Journal of Communication & Religion*, 35(1).
- [4] Crisp, O., Arcadi, J. M., & Wessling, J. (2022). *Analyzing prayer: Theological and philosophical essays*. Oxford University Press.
- [5] Durkheim, É. (1995 [1912]). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. (K. E. Fields, Trans.). Free Press. (Original work published 1912)
- [6] Fujimura, M. (2021). *Art and faith: A theology of making*. Yale University Press.
- [7] John Paul II. (1999). Letter to artists. Vatican.va. Retrieved from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html
- [8] Kemp, M. (2006). *Leonardo da Vinci: The marvelous works of nature and man* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [9] Moderna Museet. (n.d.). Hilma af Klint: Topics and central works. <https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/hilma-af-klint-2013/topics/>
- [10] Viladesau, R. (1999). *Theological aesthetics: God in imagination, beauty, and art*. Oxford University Press.
- [11] Weil, S. (2002). *Waiting for God* (E. Craufurd, Trans.). Harper Perennial Modern Classics. (Original work published 1951)
- [12] Williamson, W. P. (2018). The experience of Muslim prayer: A phenomenological investigation. *Pastoral Psychology*, 67(5), 547-562.
- [13] Wuthnow, R. (2011). *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves*. Princeton University Press.