A ROLE-TAKING THEORY OF PRAYING THE PSALMS: USING THE PSALMS AS A MODEL FOR STRUCTURING THE LIFE OF PRAYER

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Prayer is not by any means a new topic of theological concern. Indeed, *The Index to Religious Periodical Literature* – to mention only one bibliographical source – lists a host of articles on prayer every year since the early 1970s. Several journals have even dedicated entire issues to the subject.[1] And while prayer may not be new to the arena of theological concern, the direction from which the issue has been addressed in recent decades is somewhat new. For instance, the field of pastoral theology has devoted attention to prayer[2] and biblical scholars and others have combined the insights of critical Psalms interpretation with interests in prayer and pastoral counseling and ministry.[3] More recent scholarship has examined the dialogic discourse of Psalms within various

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[1] *Faith and Philosophy*, January, 1985; *Austin Presbyterian Seminary Bulletin*, Fall, 1985.

[2] *Theology Today* 39 (1982); 130-131; and Ralph L. Underwood's "Inaugural Address" in the fall, 1985 volume of *Austin Presbyterian Seminary Bulletin*.

[3] Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., "The Faith of the Psalmist," Interpretation, vol. 34, pp. 229-239; W. Brueggmann, "The Formfulness of Grief," Interpretation, vol. 31, pp. 263-275; Donald Capps, "The use of Psalms and Grief Counseling," ch. 2 of Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counseling, Philadelphia; Westminster Press, 1981), 47-94; W. Brueggmann, Praying the Psalms, Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1982; J. Andrew Dearman, "Praying the Psalms," fall 1985 Austin Presbyterian Seminary Bulletin.

frameworks, including Mikhail Bakhtin's discourse theory.[4] It is within this convergence of interests over the last three decades that the authors strive to make a contribution by suggesting a way to structure the life of prayer using the Psalms (and Role-taking theory) that has practical benefits for both the individual and church.

Research over the last decade demonstrates that Americans believe in the power and impact of prayer in their daily lives.[5] Since September 11[th,] 2001, there seems to be an even greater interest in and need for daily prayer than in recent times.[6] Whether it's Dan Rather asking for our "thoughts and prayers" for American troops or President Bush calling for a national day of prayer, prayer has taken center stage on both political and religious fronts.

At the same time, while people believe in the power and impact of prayer, many struggle with understanding how to move beyond prayer as petition (for the sole benefit

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[4] Levine, H. (1992). The dialogic discourse of Psalms. In Ann Loades & Michael McLain, (eds)., Hermeneutics, the Bible and Literary Criticism. St. Martin's Press, New York, 145-161. See Carol A. Newson, Walter L. Reed (1993) for additional applications of Bakhtin's thought to the Bible. For further discussions on the dialogic nature of speech and utterance, see Bakhtin (1984:183-84; 1986: 91-93), Keith M. Booker and Dubravka Juraga (1995:16), Michael Holquist (1990-60); Clark and Holquist (1984:9-10, 241), Newsom (1996:293-95). In addition, Nicholas Wolterstorff in Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the claim that God speaks (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), uses speech-action theory to support the claim that God speaks. Relevant here is his reflection on the notion of "discourse" and the idea that "there are many ways of saying things other than by making sounds with one's vocal apparatus or inscribing marks with one's limbs" (p. 37). Also, Wolterstorff bolsters his claim that God speaks with his analysis of the double hermeneutic involved "when the discourse of one person is appropriated into the discourse of another person" (i). Note that Bakhtin's discourse theory bears some resemblance to Wolsterstorff's thesis. For Bakhtin, no discourse utters the original word on any subject. And so every discourse is twice "dialogicized."

[5] Approximately 9 out of 10 adults (89%) surveyed agree that "there is a god who watches over you and answers your prayers" and four out of five (82%) believe that "prayer can change what happens in a person's life". People pray about many things. A majority of adults indicate that they generally thank God for what He has done in their lives (95%); ask for His forgiveness for specific sins (76%); acknowledge His unique and superior attributes (67%); and ask for specific needs or desires to be met (61%). See George Barna, "Barna Research Group," http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=19, Retrieved March 2003.

[6] Barna also found that four out of five adults (82%) reported that they prayed during a typical week. Ibid.

of the petitioner) or as internal monologue to an understanding of prayer as an effective dialogue or intimate, personal encounter with God.[7] In support of this struggle, religious pollster George Barna found that it was less common for people to be silent during prayer times to listen for God's response (47% do so) – as one might do in a conversation or dialogue – than to thank God for something or ask him to address specific desires or needs.[8]

Why is conversation with God in prayer such a struggle? Donald Capps, in his article "The Psychology of Petitionary Prayer,"[9] points out that the early psychologists of religion were "impressed with the then popular theory of . . . *auto-suggestion*." "In this view," describes Capps, "prayers that are ostensibly addressed to God are actually monologues with oneself."[10] Since this period, the critical question facing many has been "Does God hear us when we pray, and if so, does he answer?" That God may not answer at all for many is confirmed by the fact that he often seems silent in times of sickness or crisis. Consequently, prayer is often conceptualized as a linear or one-way transmission performed solely for the benefit of the person praying.

But as William James observes, for prayer to be a truly useful and religious experience moving beyond pure subjectivism or fantasy, it must be conceptualized as something more than a just a one-way transmission. James puts it this way:

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[7] Indeed, even the early church fathers expressed concern over such issues. See The Study of Spirituality, eds. Jones, Cheslyn, et al, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986; especially the article by Ann and Barry Ulanov, "Prayer and Personality: Prayer as Primary Speech," 24-33.

[8] Barna, "Barna Research Group," see footnote 4, *supra*.

[9] Donald Capps, "The Psychology of Petitionary Prayer," *Theology Today* 39 (1982): 132-43.

[10] Capps, 136.

If (prayer) be not effective; if it be not a give and take relation; if nothing be really transacted while it lasts; if the world is no whit different for its having taken place; then prayer . . . is of course illusory, and religion must on the whole be classed, not simply as containing elements of delusion . . . but as being rooted in delusion altogether, just as the materialists and atheists have always said it was.[11]

The Finnish philosopher of religion Antti Alhonsaari has rejected all dialogical paradigms of prayer because, as he maintains, there is no way for us to ascertain whether God has heard us. "The dialogical circle is incomplete," explains Capps, "and *true* communication has failed to take place."[12] Accordingly, for Capps, prayer that is true or authentic communication demands verifiable closure of some kind. French theologian Jacques Ellul also criticizes the understanding of prayer as discourse: "inasmuch as the partner is beyond our grasp and incomprehensible, (prayer) can indeed exist, but it is not communication . . .The latter presupposes that the two poles of the communication are defined."[13] Ellul requires a paradigm that addresses both ontological and epistemological concerns if prayer is to move beyond mere autosuggestion, monologue or transmission to authentic discourse.

In response to the challenges just noted, and in an effort to illuminate how prayer can better be conceptualized as a "give-and-take relation" between the human and divine both ontologically and epistemologically, the authors apply a Role-Taking theory to the biblical Psalms.[14] The authors presume that all prayer in one form or another is

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[11] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1961), 362.

[12] Capps, 136.

[13] Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man*, trans. By Edward Hopkin (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), 59.

[14] Capps, in "The Psychology of Petitionary Prayer," applied Role-taking theory to the field of pastoral counseling. His use of role-taking in prayer was for therapeutic purposes. Our application of Role-taking theory to the Psalms is an extension of Capps' original work.

communication – whether conceived of as communication with self (intrapersonal communication) or psychological projection, or with another (interpersonal communication), or in the corporate context (group or public communication). Within this setting, Role-taking (or co-orientation) theory is applied to the Psalms as a way to help move one beyond an understanding of prayer as intrapersonal to prayer as an interpersonal, two way exchange consistent with William James' notion of "prayerful communion."[15] As presented herein, what eventually emerges from a critical analysis of the Laments, Penitential and Storytelling Psalms is the idea of prayer as ritual and *communio* (versus one way, linear transmission),[16] that is, prayer as an authentic conversation with God that benefits both individual and community. Moreover, a Role-Taking theory provides a theoretical foundation for prayer that bridges the gap between theories that describe prayer as irresponsible subjectivism and theories that view prayer as dialogue with the divine.[17] As such, it draws on key presuppositions and practices inherent in Martin Buber's Dialogic and Michail Bakhtin's Discourse Theory.

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[15] This notion is discussed in greater detail below, *infra*, 9-10.

[16] Daniel Czitrom explains how community (communion) is derived from the Latin *communis*: *cum*, which means "with or together with," and *unio*, which means unity, or coming together. The word communication shares the same Latin root, which suggests common participation or "to make things common." The meaning of communication was extended sometime in the late 17th century to include the "imparting, conveying, or exchanging of information and materials," which was broad enough to include roads, canals, and railroads. The "ambiguity between the two poles of meaning, between communication as a mutual process or sharing and communication as a one–way or private transmission, remained unresolved." Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 10-11.

[17] For, in order to "to explain communication, or prayer, is necessarily to posit, however implicitly, "an image of...human nature." Clifford G. Christians, "Dialogic Communication Theory and Cultural Studies," in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (vol. 9, 3-31) (New York: JAI Press, Inc., 1988), 30-31.

Before applying the Role-taking theory to the Psalms, it will first be necessary to briefly examine some of the modern psychological and theological interpretations of prayer so that by way of contrast the advantages of a Role-Taking model can be delineated. In the process, the authors will trace the roots and depict the negative influence of Enlightenment rationalism on modern conceptions of prayer that reject dialogic or discourse models. Next, the question of how the Role-take theory applies specifically to the Psalms will be addressed. Before closing, the practical implications of the Role-taking approach will be considered for the Church's own appropriation of the Psalms in prayer.

PRAYER IN MODERN PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

In the Psychology of Religion Movement of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, three paradigms of prayer are discernible: prayer as human projection; prayer as submission to the divine will; and prayer as a mystical, psychological communion with God. The first two of these views have their roots in 18th and 19th century Enlightenment philosophy and theology. Perry Lefevre summarizes them in a nutshell:

> Kant and Schleirmacher interpreted prayer as the human means of cultivating the disposition to moral obedience or bringing of one's whole life into positive relationship with the Kingdom of God and held that prayer, while it might change the one who prayed, could not change or influence God's action. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) carried this theme further. Prayer could not influence God or God's action – not because of the nature of God, but because what religious people called God is simply a projection of their own humanity.[18]

Feuerbach takes anthropological theology to its extreme. Consistent with the Enlightenment "doctrine" of individual autonomy, made possible by the Enlightenment's subject/object, fact/value split, humans become the center of their naturalistic universe.

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[18] Perry LeFevre, *Understandings of Prayer* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 17-18.

"The ego attains consciousness of the world through the consciousness of the Thou," writes Feuerbach. "Thus man is the God of man. That he exists at all he has to thank nature, that he is man, he has to thank man."[19] When persons pray, then, in Feurbach's view, they objectify something that is within themselves, setting it up as the "other," the "Thou."[20] Prayer, in this case is merely "dialogue" with oneself, better understood as *intra*personal communication. Yet, even though this means that religious men and women often partake of something illusory, "it does not render either religion or prayer meaningless or unimportant. It simply points to what their real meaning is."[21]

As hinted above, Feurbach's anthropology is a direct reflection of Enlightenment thinking and its powerful influence on theology.[22] Enlightenment philosophers, as an outgrowth of the scientific and Newtonian revolutions, believed that the universe and human reality were both governed by natural, immutable laws discovered by reason. This transition from medieval to modern science is seen in the work Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Galileo's bifurcation of reality into two compartments – primary matter, which motion, mass and mathematics, and secondary matter, which was the metaphysical, supernatural, values and meaning -- allowed the notions of value and meaning to "shrivel

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[19] Cited from Barth's "Introductory Essay" to Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. By George Eliot (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), xiv; cf. 120-25.

[20] Although his understanding of "Thou" differs significantly from Buber's understanding, as explained later.

[21] LeFevre, *Understandings of Prayer*, 18.

[22] As Marvin Harris argues,

> all that is new in anthropological theory begins with the Enlightenment . . . . The issues of sociocultural inquiry brought forth during the Enlightenment embrace most of the themes that serve either as the foundation of contemporary theory or as the basic frame of reference in terms of which modern sociocultural research is still being carried out." Harris, 1968, 8-52.

away," according to Lewis Mumford.[23] In the process, he separated the qualitative as incapable of quantitative certainty. Newton's significant work, *Principia Mathematica* (1687), eventually helped to raise this mechanistic worldview to an axiomatic existence. Natural laws, discoverable by reason, were systematically applied to political science, economics and, with the foundation laid by such thinkers as Rene Descarte, to human beings and their (religious) experiences.

For Descarte, Galileo's primary and secondary become a material and spiritual dualism. Human beings (and the study thereof) were removed entirely from the spiritual. As evidenced by Feuerbach's anthropological theology of prayer introduced above, naturalistic explanations replace supernatural explanations of human religious experiences. The emphasis is now body and mind, versus, body, mind and spirit. In the Cartesian framework, what reigns supreme is human rationality – expressed by Descarte's famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum*. Accordingly, genuine knowledge must be constructed in a linear fashion, as cognitively clean as Newtonian mathematics. From Descarte's foundations in *Discourse on Method* and *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* we get the scientific method and the notion that one could demonstrate truth only of that which one could measure. The extension of Descarte's philosophy was a natural theology where by reason alone man could accept the existence of God and the soul. What this meant for the "spirit world" becomes clear: the object of prayer, God, could not be verified through measurement; therefore, anything we called prayer was, by definition, illusory.

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[23] According to Lewis Mumford, it was his bifurcation of nature into two compartments, commonly referred to as primary (matter, motion, mass, mathematics) and secondary (metaphysical, supernatural, values, meaning), that allowed the notions of value and meaning to shrivel away. Lewis Mumford, Pentagon of Power, 1970, 57-76, as cited in Christians, "Dialogic Communication Theory," 3-30.

In Sigmund Freud's conception of religious experience we see further evidence of Cartesian dualism. While Freud did not deal specifically with the issue of prayer, his understanding of religion had an implicit effect on modern conceptions of prayer that run contrary to the idea of prayer as dialogue as understood within the context of Role-taking Theory. Freud strengthened the notion of religion as human projection, as beyond verifiability, within the secondary realm of matter. According to Hans Kung, Freud stressed that: "Religious ideas are 'not precipitates of experiences or end results of our thinking,' but 'illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes."[24] Kung goes on to explain that these wishes are those of "the childishly helpless human being for protection from life's perils, for the fulfillment of justice in this unjust society, for the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life for knowledge of the original of the world, of the relationship between the corporeal and the mental."[25]

The human desires for what is not are thus objectified and set up as what is. Freud's projection argument is clearly dependent upon Feurbach's Enlightenment based naturalistic theology: "The unclear, inner perception of one's own physical apparatus stimulates thought illusions that are naturally projected outward and – characteristically – into the future and into a hereafter."[26]

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[24] Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?* trans. By Edward Quinn (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 282-83.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 283. However, like Feuerbach, Freud need not be interpreted as altogether hostile toward religion. On the one hand, he classes religions of humankind as "mass-delusion," but on the other hand, he asserts: "life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 30-31. Religion, in Freud's view, is hence a "necessary delusion."

The second view of prayer that has greatly affected Psychology of Religion declares that God's action is not changed or influenced when one prays: instead, the one who prays is changed. This position rests on the idealistic philosophy of Kant[27] —who said that one could not know God or the soul since they belonged to the world of *noumena* – and the experiential religion of Schleiermacher, who made one's subjective feelings or emotions the element out of which religious experience develops.[28] If we cannot bend the divine will, if we cannot alter the unalterable, Schleiermacher argued, then nothing is left to us "but to bring our will into accord with His."[29] In contrast to theories of projection, which concentrate on the object of prayer (the Thou being only an objectification of ourselves), the preoccupation with the question "Whose will is changed?" shifts the emphasis to the effects of prayer. God as a partner in the dialogue is presupposed; now the essential arena of discussion is how the conversation takes place.

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[27] Kant's idealistic philosophy combined with Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Ritschl, created a philosophic background favorable to critical approach to the Bible. Kant accepted Locke's emphasis on sensation and Descartes' stress on reason as the keys to knowledge concerning nature; said man can't know God or the soul, both of which he classed as data of the world of "noumena" by senses or reason. Man couldn't know the world of noumena, thus, no place for historical and objective revelation of God in the Bible, which was a man-made book of history subject to historical criticism, no place for Christ. Man, with his free will and immanent sense of what is right becomes the creator of a religion in which he develops the morality inherent in himself.

[28] Schleiermacher made feelings or emotions (German: *Gefühl*) the element out of which religious experience develops. He was trained in Moravian schools, in "The Christian Faith" where religion was presented not as set of beliefs and obligations based on authority of the church but as result of man's feelings of absolute dependence in a majestic universe. Moreover, Christianity brings man into harmony with God as man passively realized his dependence. Religion becomes a mere subjective apprehension of Christ, who reconciles man to the Absolute. Man is freed from dependence on an ahistorical revelation of the will of God and needs only to cultivate the feeling of dependence on God in Christ to enjoy a satisfactory religious experience. The essence of religion is subjectivity, for Schleiermacher, which is why he is referred to as the Father of Modern Theology

[29] LeFevre, *Understandings*, 16.

There are two different lines of thought that have developed in connection with "will theories." The first maintains positively that prayer affects our ability to receive religious insights and power. Williams James describes the major features of this view:

> By cultivating the continuous sense of our connection with the power that made things as they are, we are tempered more towardly for their reception.... We meet a new world when we meet the old world in the spirit which this kind of prayer infuses. . . . Such a spirit was that of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. It is that of mind-curers, of the transcendentalists, and of the so-called 'liberal' Christians.[30]

This perspective of prayer is intimately related to Schleiermacher's focus on the "religious sentiment." Therefore, it is not surprising that the so-called "liberal" Christians – inspired as they were by Schleiermacher – should describe prayer from the perspective of a person's disposition towards the inward effects of prayer. Prayer is, in this regard, a subjective attitude, as can be seen in this statement by Harry Emerson Fosdick: Prayer is "fulfilling inward conditions of attitude and receptivity, and getting appropriate results in heightened insight, stability, peace and self-control."[31]

The Jamesians were a second group of thinkers who analyzed prayer in terms of the conflict between the human and divine wills. The major problem for James and his colleagues, however, had to do with petitionary prayer. Prayers do not bend God's will, they argued; rather, "petitionary prayer is only effective in activating and altering the will of the petitioner."[32] This is very similar to the first position described above. Both of these views assert that God's will is not changed by prayer. However, there are several subtle differences. First, the model of prayer above, which is sometimes associated with

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[30] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 368-69.

[31] Cited by John Maquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought*, revised edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 189.

[32] Capps, "The Psychology of Petitionary Prayer", 132-43.

"liberalism," interprets prayer in general in terms of its subjective effect. In contrast, James makes a distinction between petitionary prayer and other types of prayer: "...petitional prayer is only one department of prayer; and if we take the word in the wider sense as meaning every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine, we can easily see that scientific criticism leaves it untouched."[33]

For James, then, the discussion of prayer's subjective effect is primarily used to address the problem of petitionary prayer and the divine will. Another difference between the two approaches is that while the first model is a practical one, employing prayer as a means of cultivating the inner religious disposition, James is much more interested in providing a theoretical foundation for prayer (in fact, James acknowledged in the Pratt questionnaire to which he responded that he himself did not pray).

Finally, and most important, James suggests the third view of prayer; that is, that certain kinds of "prayerful communion" have causes that are not merely subjective: "The appearance is that in this phenomenon something ideal, which in one sense is part of ourselves and in another sense is not ourselves, actually exerts an influence, raises our center of personal energy, and produces regenerative effects unattainable in other ways."[34] James speaks of God affecting individuals through "certain kinds of incursion from the subconscious region," having access through the "openness of the subliminal door." In this way James advocates a type of mystical, psychological "communion" which anthropological theories of prayer based in Enlightenment thinking lack.

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[33] James, *The Varieties*, 361.

[34] Ibid., 405.

Now that anti-dialogical models of prayer have been explored, and their philosophical and theological foundations set forth, it remains to be seen whether a Role-Taking theory of prayer can shed light on human communication *with* God and on the equally enigmatic nature of the divine response in our history. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether Role-Taking Theory – as first used by Capps in the pastoral counseling setting – can bring "verifiable closure" to the communication process or whether it can sufficiently, or better, define the "two poles of communication" .For if Role-Taking theory is to add anything to the discussion, it must explain how prayer can connect the individual ("I") to the transcendent ("Thou") while at the same time being firmly planted in the everyday human life world.

ROLE-TAKING THEORY AND BIBLICAL PRAYER—FOUNDATION FOR PRAYER AS DIALOGUE

Role-Taking occurs when a person puts her or himself in the position of another to the extent that she or he can anticipate how the other will respond. There are ample illustrations of role-taking in everyday life. For example, in a marriage relationship a spouse sometimes knows how his or her mate will respond to a given situation before the situation even occurs. The husband might "know" that his wife, if offered the new job, will not want to move to Chicago, or the wife may not need to ask her husband if he would like to spend some time alone away from the kids. Role-taking transpires when a person is able to consider a certain subject or situation from the vantage point of another, and so, effectively put him or herself in the other's place. In this way, role-playing

mimics the idea of empathic understanding made popular by modern psychotherapeutic approaches.[35]

In Scripture, in Christian tradition and in the weekly life of every Church, there are figures with whom the religious person identifies. Sometimes, when faced with a decision or a crisis, the believer will compare his or her predicament with a situation in the life of Abraham, Sarah, or King David, Luther, Wesley, or Julian of Norwich, or perhaps even a pastor or present day Christian leader. However:

> Merely the attempt to emulate certain traits or qualities of this figure is not, strictly speaking, role-taking. But when the identification involves putting oneself in the same *situation* as this figure, in order to anticipate how this figure would respond to the situation in which one currently finds oneself, this is role-taking.[36]

As hinted above, a certain amount of empathizing takes place within the one who role-takes. But instead of projecting our own inner selves onto the other in order to better understand him or her, we objectify the situation of the other, creating a mirror for our own circumstance. As such, this first phase of the Role-taking approach to religious experience embodies the Counter-enlightenment thinking of Giambatissta Vico and Dilthey, who sought to redeem the expressivist dimension to the concept of human nature and (dialogic) communication. Vico and his contemporaries redefined science not as examination of external events, but as the power of imagination to give us an inside perspective. From this understanding evolved Max Weber's *verstehen* (understanding). Dilthey places *verstehen* into the context of *Erlebnis*, "to live", "lived experience." Thus, in contrast to Descarte's linear epistemology, knowledge is built from the *emic*, the inside

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[35] For example, Carl Rogers' therapeutic triad revolves around empathic understanding. See, *On Becoming a Person*, 1961.

out, understanding anchored to life itself.[37] The *emic*, or inside, connects the two poles of communication in the process of "encounter" or the "lived moment".

The second step in the role-taking process occurs when, as one takes the role of an individual in one's religious tradition, the role of God is taken at the same time. "That is, one anticipates that God will act in the situation one confronts as God acted in the life of the figure with whom one has identified when that figure was confronted with similar circumstances."[38] In terms of how we perceive God working in the world, then, a situation can be perceptually restructured so that an individual experiences God's presence or action in his or her life. If one expects certain things to take place and they in fact do take place, one experiences "interaction" in relation to God. In terms of prayer, no verbalized speech is even a requisite. "The petitioner somehow 'knows' how God views the matter, and this knowledge or awareness is itself an 'answer' to prayer."[39] A

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[36] Donald Capps, "Suden's Role-Taking Theory: The Case of John Henry Newman and His Mentors," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1982), 21 (1): 58-70.

[37] As a correction to distorted conclusion about Greek heritage that dominated Enlightenment thinking, Vico stressed intuitive knowing that extends more broadly in scope than enlightenment rationality. His philosophy of recollective imagination challenged the doctrine of rational mind. We understand when we live deeply in the situation. This framework stands over against Enlightenment positivism that made concrete sense data the fundamental unit. While the scientific method gives law-like causal explanations that are empirically testable by objective (quantifiable means), it can not deal with every type of reality. The study of human beings, the humanities, has another logic. The human quest for self-understanding entails that human studies differ categorically from, say, physics. We explain nature, but we understand the life of the soul (Dilthey, 1958, vol. VI, 144, as cited in Christians, "Dialogic Communication Theory"). The symbolic realm is intrinsic to human beings, which alone of living creatures possess the creative mind, irrevocable ability to reconstruct, to interpret. In this perspective, communication becomes the symbolic process expressing human creativity and grounding cultural formation. Culture becomes the womb in which symbols are born. Communication becomes the catalytic agent, the driving force in cultural formation. In short, the work of such individuals as Vico and Dilthey restored the wholeness and fullness of man and moved the center of gravity back to his creativity—his expressivism—rather than reducing human beings to a thinking machine or a biological mass.

[38] Capps, "Suden's Role-Taking Theory," 60.

[39] See footnote 4, supra, in regard to Wolterstorff's speech-action theory. The idea that "there are many ways of saying things other than by making sounds with one's vocal apparatus or inscribing marks with

role-taking model can therefore respond to the charges asserting that humans have no way of ascertaining whether or not God answers their prayers. Such a model lets us conceive of prayer dialogically.

> Where another individual (or the same individual on another occasion) might perceive this course of events as a natural process, this mental disposition enables an individual to hear the voice of God or feel God's presence. Thus, the effect of a 'deep, sympathetic entering' into the God-role 'can go to the point of exteriorizing the other. . . .'[40]

But "exteriorizing the other," some will object, is only a form of projection – something that remains solely as a mental disposition of the individual, void of any corresponding reality. On the other hand, it must be asserted, in response to this accusation, that the biblical understanding of prayer is confessional, as is its notion of God's presence in the midst of his people. The biblical authors do not attempt to explain God's presence in history or his response in prayer – they know this is a mystery – instead, they simply assert his presence. Roland E. Murphy, in his article "The Faith of the Psalmist," affirms that though Israel understood Yahweh's presence to be a mystery, this did not prevent them from acknowledging him to be in their midst: "This is a very basic fact; they were not talking to themselves, nor did they speak 'as if' the Lord were present. His reality is simply taken for granted by them."

Religious experience can, of course, always be called into question by a naturalistic reductionism. What appears to one as a vision of Christ can be easily disregarded by the secularist as a product of hysteria or wish-fulfillment. Emil Fackenheim, in *God's Presence in History*, gives us a hypothetical situation of a modern

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one's limbs" (37) seems consistent with the idea that verifiability of the two poles of communication is epistemologically possible.

[40] Capps, "Suden's Role-Taking Theory," 60.

secularist who is present at the parting of the "Red Sea: "He would see what the maidservants saw – nothing less than the presence of God." Yet, "reflection would reconstruct the whole course of events. There had *appeared* to be a miraculous event; the event, however, had only *appeared* miraculous, and this appearance called for an *explanation*. There had *seemed to be* a divine Presence . . ." (emphasis added). The person who is set on giving a naturalistic interpretation for all past and contemporary events – including their own experiences – will succeed. Hence, Fackenheim argues that subjectivist reductionism and Jewish faith are mutually irrefutable and irreconcilable. Naturally, the issue of God's working in the world is complicated. It involves questions such as God's transcendence and immanence, his sovereignty and human freedom, the problem of evil and other subjects, which would be relevant to our present discussion. At this juncture, however, the point that needs to be stressed is this: a Role-taking model of prayer is compatible with the biblical conceptions of God's presence in the world and active communication with His creation – neither struggles to explain God's presence; both serve as a witness to it.

By using Role-taking Theory as a means of rendering prayer more intelligible, two significant biblical motifs can be held in proper tension – the community and the individual. On the one hand, role-taking focuses on the basis of prayer: the remembrance of God's past actions in the community and his promises to the community as they have been recorded in Scripture. "Prayer begins with recollection (*anamnesis*), proceeds to establish the ground for a request before making it, and states the end for which it is sought."[41] The traditions of the community are thus taken seriously. On the other hand,

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[41] C.W.F. Smith, "Prayer," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 867.

role-taking is open to the crisis in the life of the individual, and personal religious experience is thereby given attention. Consequently, co-orientation is able to express the best of both Freudian and Jamesian positions. Freud used the term "identification" to describe the capacity humans have for putting themselves in the place of someone else, for identifying with others. Children, who identify with parental figures, were Freud's main area of concentration. The child goes through a complex process of socialization, which includes religious socialization. It would be a mistake for any theory of prayer to ignore the enormous influence that culture and tradition have upon each individual's experience of God in prayer. A co-orientation theory not only admits the importance of these influences upon the developing religious consciousness, it also goes on to show how traditional and sociological factors function dialogically. At the same time, co-orientation is receptive to the Jamesian emphasis on religious experience. The situation that moves someone to take the role of another is personal; it is the perceptual framing of the situation that is structured within the traditional life of the community.

Prayer "as role-taking" is not unlike the Hebrew practice of "making the past present" in worship, what Parker describes in more modern terms as a form of "ritual evocation."[42] Roland E. Murphy comments:

> ... this saving God is not in the past tense. The cultic recital of his saving acts is far from an antiquarian remembrance. The original event that is recalled, whether

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[42] "Making the past present" in Hebrew practice finds additional support in Parker's idea of "ritual evocation." Ritual evocation suggests a form of communal participation with the larger Christian community whereby listeners or viewers of messages communicated by a particular medium use those messages to help reduce feelings of isolation and anonymity in modern times. Parker's observations about the audience for the "Old Fashioned Revival Hour" radio program depict an active, goal-directed community of "electronic wanderers" for whom the entire content and format of the program is a ritual evocation of a kind of religious experience that dominated Protestant America a half-century ago. "The audience appears to consist largely of working-class Protestants whose younger days were spent in an environment with such religious overtones." Accordingly, "we may conclude from the evidence that this program also serves a purpose in satisfying the needs of this group for recognition in an urban culture" (emphasis added) (Parker, et al., 1955, 391).

it be the Passover (Ex. 12:1-20) or the deliverance in Egypt (Deut. 26:5-11), is *real* for the worshiper. There is a re-presentation or reenactment which wipes out time from the liturgical point of view, and the worshiper is centered on the saving act which is re-experienced.[43]

To remember is, therefore, to place oneself in the presence of God: to put oneself in the shoes of Moses and, at the same instant, to speak from the burning bush. It is to realize that: "here is no 'unmoved mover,' no object to be adored, no 'Ground of Being,' but that in the biblical God we find "the Ultimate Partner who must enter the fray and be at issue along with the speaker."[44] To "remember" is to declare that we are involved with God in a dialogue that has historical implications and that we participate with God in the making of our futures. Reenactment and role-taking both depend on the creative power of language to make present something which has already happened; and, in each case, a new future is anticipated in this language. Brueggmann calls this "evocative" language. For example, the Psalms of celebration he describes as essentially "promissory."

> It may be urged . . . that these statements engage in fantasy and assert things which are not 'in hand.' Thus, for example, the key assertion of these Psalms, 'Yahweh is king,' strikes one as ludicrous in our world, because most of the evidence of the newspapers suggests God is not in power . . . . But if the words are evocative of a new reality yet to come to being, then the words have a powerful function.[45]

Bakhtin's views on discourse in the community are instructive here. As he observes, for instance, in the poetry of the Psalms, the authoritative word is inextricably intertwined with the sacred context framing it. The authoritative word is "indissolubly fused with its authority – with political power, an institution, a person – and it stands and

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[43] Roland E. Murphy, "The Faith of the Psalmist," *Interpretation*, 34 (1980) 3:234.

[44] Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1982), 61.

[45] Ibid., 32.

falls together with that authority."[46] For the psalmists, the authoritative word is lodged in the zone of sacred history in order to be retrieved and applied to the present. As Bakhtin further explains,

> The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal.[47]

In Psalm 95, the psalmist quotes God quoting earlier discourse, in order to bring the authority of sacred history to bear on the present moment – namely, the psalmist's own exhortation. The priest uses the "hieratic divine voice as an extension of his own monologic control of the worshipping crowd, allowing God's word to become again internally persuasive for the psalmist's generation. God does not need to be made into a subject by a visionary poet, but rather needs to be brought back into a conversation that God started and human beings feel has been interrupted.

Concepts such as "making the past" present or evocation have a significant effect on which model of communication is brought to bear on the discussion of prayer. James Carey, in contrast to linear or transmission (one-way) models of communication, which understand prayer as monologic or some form of projection, described communication as *ritual and as communion* because:

> it is a process through which a shared culture is created, modified and transformed. . . . A ritual view of communication is not directed toward the extension of messages in space, but the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information or influence, but the creation, representation, and celebration of shared beliefs. If a transmission view of communication centers on the extension of messages across geography for purposes of control a ritual view centers on the

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[46] Levine, "The Dialogic Discourse," 340-41.

[47] Ibid., 342.

sacred ceremony which draws persons together in fellowship and community. (emphasis added)[48]

Here, note that "fellowship" and "community" are specifically mentioned in Carey's understanding of communication. In this sense, participants in prayer reenact a ceremonial or "communalistic ritual whereby [they] critically examine and modify but also celebrate the shared beliefs [they] hold."[49] Communication is not just the passing of information from petitioner to divine; instead, it is better conceived as a re-creation of information ideas . . . , given a hint by way of a key symbol, slogan, or theme."[50] In the process of reenacting one's faith through prayer, then, the participant comes to recognize his position and profession of faith within his web of cultural environs. The reenactment of the word through association with the past and of a reality yet to come functions as a celebrated para-communal mooring line that connects the present with the past.

In short, prayer is closely related to the promises of God. For in prayer we look back to God's word or promise, we thank him for his activity in our lives, and we anticipate his presence in the future. Moreover, by paying heed to the nature of God's promises, we are directed away from purely individualistic praying, because: (1) the promises of God are given to the entire community, and (2) they are primarily concerned with God's redemptive purposes in the world.[51] The individual, although important, is

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[48] James Carey, "Mass Communication research and Cultural Studies: The American View" in *Mass Communication and Society*, eds. J. Curan, M. Gurevitch, and J. Woollacott (London: Open University Press, 1977): 412.

[49] Patrick Granfield, ed. *The Church and Communication* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994), 34-35.

[50] W. Stephenson, *The play theory of mass communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.1967), 2.

[51] Specific promises in the word of God are subordinate to the more overarching redemptive and relational promises of Yahweh contained in the three main covenants: Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic.

seen in relation to the community. A Role-taking or co-orientation paradigm of prayer thus draws upon a past situation or promise, enabling a person to anticipate the divine response in the present. Since it takes seriously the traditions of the community and the promises of God's word, it avoids any uncontrolled subjectivism. On the other hand, co-orientation still leaves room for individual religious experience.

If prayer is analyzed from the perspective of taking the role of God, the question of what is actually "transacted" in prayer is left unanswered because the "meeting has taken place within the supplicant." This religious interaction cannot be measured or weighed: just as it cannot be proven, neither can it be disproved. Nevertheless, a Role-taking paradigm allows the "subliminal door" to remain open as an avenue for God's speech to us. According to James, the subconscious is one arena where human and divine communication no doubt arises. This is an important realization; for the biblical understanding of the Holy Spirit's work in prayer can be conceived of as taking place in this fashion: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Too often, the role of the Holy Spirit has been neglected in systems of prayer. Barth is one of the exceptions. His chapter on prayer in *Evangelical Theology* underscores the centrality of the Spirit's task in prayer: "the only Holy Spirit achieves the opening of God for man and the opening of man for God."[52]

ROLE-TAKING THE PSALMS IN PRAYER

Although a Role-taking theory of prayer cannot undeniably "prove" that the dialogical circle is complete, it can at least provide us with a functional model for

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[52] Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 169.

understanding prayer as communication with God that moves beyond mere projection or intrapersonal models. Turning now to the Scriptures, three types of Psalms will be analyzed—laments, penitential and storytelling Psalms—using Role-taking theory to illustrate how the Psalms may be conceived as dialogic discourse between individuals, God and the community of faith.

The Laments

Much biblical scholarship has been devoted to the laments. This is at least partially due to the powerfully descriptive language of the laments. These emotionally honest words of anxiety and rage express what we as moderns often feel but are unable to articulate. The cry "How long, O Lord?" is but one well-known example of this language that mirrors our experience.

Walter Brueggemann states that the lament "invariably call god by name and expects a response."[53] Both of these distinctions portray lament as dialogue. Bernard Anderson has illustrated how at every level of the history of Israel's traditions the name of Yahweh is present. The basis of the Torah, in fact, is the self-disclosure of the Holy One (*kadosh*), to a people in the midst of their historical situation, so that they can call upon him personally – by the name of Yahweh – in prayer and worship. This is the background for the prayer of lament: it is raised in the context of faith and covenant relationship. God has taken a risk by giving his name. There is now the danger that Israel will seek to domesticate God – to limit him to their own conceptions (Ex. 32:1-35). But this kind of self-revealing risk is a necessary component of any genuine conversation. For a God who can be addressed by name can not only be invoked and spoken to, he can also

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[53] Brueggmann, *Praying the Psalms*, 22.

be challenged. He can be questioned about the administration of things: about why the wicked prosper while the faithful perish. The laments, therefore, to be understood properly, should be read in the context of the Hebrew expostulation literature. Here is a previous tradition upon which the laments are founded. Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and Job all stand in this tradition of taking issue with Yahweh.[54] The lamenters of the Psalms, themselves, then, are no doubt involved in role-taking. In their present situation of trouble—whatever that may be—the Psalmists turn to the examples of Abraham (Gen. 18:22ff) and Moses (Ex.32:9-14; etc.), who argue with God.

Expostulation with Yahweh is based upon his personal self-disclosure. Deity is not, in this instance, irrational or brute power. Instead, it is characterized by a personal face and presence (in Hebrew the face and presence of God are one and the same thing). The Lord of Israel is also characterized by his redemptive purpose and holy demand in relation to his people. On the one hand, Yahweh is described in terms of his faithfulness (*hesed*). On the other hand, he is surrounded by mysterious holiness. The fascination that draws one to this experience of "the holy" also exposes one to a certain dread (Ex. 3:6). Rationality and conceptual frameworks cannot contain either his mystery or his holiness; they shatter all boundaries. Nevertheless, we are compelled to respond to this "other," to this "Thou" who has disclosed himself to us. The laments hold in tension for us the nearness and hiddnenness of God. Clas Westermann, in the opening of *The Psalms:*

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[54] Cf. Also Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 195-201.

Structure, Content and Message, suggests that the "call of the Psalms is a call to praise the holy name.... a personal name...the name Yahweh...."[55]

The lament "invariably expects a response." If the only thing that happened in biblical prayer was our talking to God, the end result could not be called dialogue. But the fact that the lamenter expects a response from God illustrates that the author perceives himself as being in conversation with God. Biblical laments are prayed in this context of faith. The communication model of this form of prayer is clearly two-way, not monologic. Both "poles" of communication—sender and receiver—are defined. Conversation or exchange is presupposed, which, ultimately, forms the dialogic basis of purposeful encounter with the divine.

A similar conversational presupposition is embedded within the Catholic practice of *Lectio Divina*. The *Lectio* is a way that allows one to listen to the texts of scripture as if one were in conversation with Christ and he were suggesting the topics of conversation. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on his word leads beyond mere acquaintanceship to an attitude of friendship, trust and love. Conversation simplifies and gives way to communing, or as Gregory the Great, summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition, put it, "resting in God." This was the classical meaning of contemplative prayer for the first 16 centuries.[56]

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[55] Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message*, trans. by Ralph D. Gehrke (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 5.

[56] See Oliver Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1993: 181-212; Benedicta Ward, "Gregory the Great" in Jones, Cheslyn, ed. *The Study of Spirituality* 79; Kalistos Ware, "Ways of Prayer and Contemplation: Eastern," and Jean Leclercq, "Ways of Prayer and Contemplation: Western," in eds., McGinn, Bernard, et al, *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 1: 395-426. Contemplative Prayer is the normal development of the grace of baptism and the regular result of *Lectio Divina*. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. Contemplative prayer is the opening of mind and heart- our whole being- to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions. We open our awareness to God whom we

C.S. Lewis has traced two different classes of prayer in the New Testament.[57] The first, characterized by submission to the will of God, is formulated conditionally: "If it is Thy will. . . then. . . " The second expects that whatever is asked for in faith will be received. Psalms of lament must be categorized in this second group. For within each element of the lament's structure, the anticipation of response gives unity: "petition is already implicit in lamentation and assurance is already implicit in petition."[58] Thus, the motivational clauses (*ki* clauses) which are found in the laments (e.g., Ps. 6:6, MT) do not convey the sense of, "If it be they will . . .," but rather, boldly assert, "because it is your will . . . . The request is for God to be God – to do what is appropriate to his own nature, namely, to deliver his people. Brueggemann captures this stubbornly anticipatory stance of the laments:

> . . . Israel's speech is complaint and not lament, i.e., protest and not resignation. There is an expectation and even insistence that Yahweh can be moved to act and that he will act. And when Yahweh acts, he will bring things to a new life-order.[59]

Again, this readiness for the divine response is evident in the very structure of the laments, where "the conclusion of vow, praise and 'assurance of being heard' face forward."[60]

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know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing- closer than consciousness itself. Contemplative Prayer is a process of interior purification leading, if we consent, to divine union.

[57] Capps, "The Psychology," 138.

[58] Donald Capps, *Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counseling* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 63.

[59] Walter Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A suggested typology of function," *JSOT* 17 (1980): 7.

[60] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 28.

The authors of the laments, it will be noted, partake in their own form of role-taking. Regarding the lament structure, no response to the petitioner's complaint actually ushers forth (though there may have been some response in the ritual context). Nevertheless, the one who prays takes the role of God, confessing assurance that his or her plea will issue in an answer from God. Language, in this case, is viewed as creative and evocative. It does not rest at ease with merely describing what is: it imagines what will come to pass. That is not to say that this prayer is a form of positive thinking. The best adjective might be "hope." For this speech is situated in the midst of the contingencies of historical existence; but it refuses to stay there quietly. Christians today need to learn how to pray in the imaginative, metaphorical language of hope. "The work of prayer," says Brueggemann, "consists in the imaginative use of language to give the extremities (of experience) their full due and to force new awareness and new configuration of reality by the boldness of our speech."[61] A role-taking model of prayer can provide a structure that will enable us to learn this "boldness of speech." As Bonhoeffer correctly insists, we are not able to pray on our own – we must be taught how to pray.[62]

But who is it that we identify with? Is it not in the seat of the author that we put ourselves? His words become our own words – as if we had spoken them ourselves. Reading narrative, we enter into the situation of another, i.e., a set of circumstances, but in poetry, we join ourselves to the other's experience. As Bakhtin's discourse theory explains, quoting another's word embodies the essential dialogic principle of prose

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[61] Ibid., 27.

[62] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible*, trans. by James H. Burtness (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), 9.

fiction and allows for the interplay of many voices in all their diversity. Of course, even with historical and narrative texts we role-take the author to a certain extent (though in most cases without being conscious of it), for the authors and redactors are the ones who determine our understanding of a particular story. Each author tells his story selectively, from a certain point of view. And although we may disagree with the author's judgments, choosing instead to side with the villain, this is usually not the case.[63]

One of the reasons why it is so natural for us to step into the lamenter's shoes is that the language used is very stereotypical. For instance, Patrick D. Miller, in his article "Trouble and Woe,"[64] has pointed to the open and metaphorical language about enemies in the biblical laments. Open language first of all allows for wide contemporary appropriates. Words such as "evildoers" or "the pit" are easily transferable to a modern *Sitz im leben*. In the second place, Miller suggests that figurative speech "creates possibilities for the relationships between the laments and the past experiences of the community of faith...." This can be achieved "...by relating the laments to narrative and historical context...."[65] Miller has demonstrated that metaphorical language is essentially "historical;" that is, it arises out of situations in the community. Exegesis, then, acts to keep our subjective appropriation of imagistic words in check: to keep them concretized. This form of interpretation can already be seen taking place with the addition of the superscriptions.

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[63] In the case of parables and stories where role reversal is intended there is an obvious exception. The point here, however, is that few people identify themselves with King Ahab or King Jeroboam.

[64] Patrick D. Miller, "Trouble and Woe," *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 1:32-45.

[65] Ibid., 36.

Penitential Psalms[66]

Penitential Psalms provide another illustration of how, in praying the Psalms, we role-take the author and God at the same time and, in so, doing, become a partner in the divine discourse. Consider Psalm 51: in spite of the superscription, which connects the Psalm to David's sin of adultery, Christians throughout the history of the Church have employed these verses as a means of confessing their own sin. As with the laments, the words are highly descriptive of human feelings – in this case, feelings of the weight of guilt, sin and failure. Because the particular sin is never mentioned, we can apply the prayer directly to our own situation. Thus, in those times when we disappoint ourselves and God, when we become despondent on account of our misdeeds or prideful thoughts, we allow the Psalmist to pray for us. These groans and utterances voice the pain that we ourselves cannot express. And after we have prayed Psalm 51 on several different occasions, it ceases to be the words of the Psalmist: it becomes as though we had written them to God in our journal; as though in the stark still chapel – alone on bended knee – we silently confessed our deepest remorse to him. We step in his shoes, crossing the "relational divide," and we become present with the past. A ritual evocation has occurred.

Indeed, Psalm 51 is a "personal" prayer, one that has its inception in the human heart. At the same moment, however, it calls for God to respond in forgiveness. The evocative pleas for a new state of being in fact dominates the Psalm (vv. 1-2, 6-12, 14a, 15a, 18a). Just as in the case of the laments, the penitential Psalms look forward to a new reality that at the present does not exist. Presently, the person is broken in spirit. In the

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[66] Westermann treats these Psalms under the rubric of individual lament (The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message, pp. 67ff), while Anderson does not (B.W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, revised edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 235-38.

liturgical setting, absolution may have been proclaimed by the priest at the shift to assurance (cf. Psalm 6:8-10). This provides a clue for our praying of the Psalms today (whether individually or congregationally). What appear at first blush to be "breaks" in the Psalms may instead indicate "reversals" which only make sense "when one realized that the supplicants received answers from outside themselves."[67]   For the Hebrew worshipper, the function of the priest is to signify God's forgiveness at this point. For the modern reader of Scripture who lacks the priest's liturgical direction, the role of God as "the one who pardons" can be dramatically imagined and anticipated. Role-taking, then, can become the functional equivalent of the priest; though, of course, in most formal worship services an assurance of pardon is included.

<u>Storytelling Psalms</u>

The following Psalms are often characterized as narrative or story-telling Psalms: 78, 105, 106, 135, 136. The storytelling Psalms employ a narrative mode to describe the history of Yahweh's "mighty deeds" and to paint a picture of Israel's all too frequent acts of disobedience. Indeed, one way in which God communicates through the creation is in history, which is revelational.[68] A significant part of religious life with Israel, for instance, was introduced by historical event. The Passover is a re-creation, a ritual evocation, if you will, of the exodus event that brings history together with the present as a means "through which God still speaks."[69]

By praying the Storytelling Psalms we enter into relation with the God of history. We are led to identify ourselves with his people, only to discover that this story of

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[67] Westermann, cited in Capps, *Biblical Approaches*, 63.

[68] Webber, *God Still Speaks*, 79.

triumph and failure is also our own story. As the dialogue between Yahweh and Israel is dramatically represented through prayer – just as it can be through liturgical recital – we come to expect that Yahweh will work today, in our world as well as in our minds and hearts. God has influenced human history in certain ways in the past and on this basis we anticipate how he will make himself present again.[70]

Some might object that this limits God to how he can and cannot operate. But this need not be the case. First, in response to this accusation, it is necessary to assert that God, as we understand him through the Scriptures, has imposed certain limits on Himself. The confession of God as creator, for instance, assumes this: by graciously allowing other beings to "be," God has to some extent put restrictions upon himself. And so, as Barth stated:

> [Yahweh] desires to be the God who has been man in Jesus Christ. Therein lies his glory, his omnipotence. He does not then impair himself by yielding to our prayer; on the contrary, it is in doing so that he shows his greatness.[71]

For us, God's self-limitation means both our redemption in Christ and our communication with God in prayer. Secondly, it is one thing to claim to know precisely when and how God will act (this would imply knowing the mind of God itself). But it is quite a different matter to affirm that we know Yahweh relationally, in terms of how he

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[69] Ibid.

[70] As Webber explains,

> there were times when God revealed Himself directly—through dreams and visions and by speaking audibly. But for the most part, God's method of revealing Himself was through history, at a particular time and in a special place. The exodus, for example, was an historical occurrence. God remembered the covenant He had made with Abraham, so He sent Moses, His human instrument to His people and through him brought the Israelites out of Egypt. In this event God made Himself known. The people of Israel came to know God as one who faithfully kept His promises. (79).

[71] Cited by David Willis, "Contemporary Theology and Prayer," *Interpretation* 34 (1980) 3:261.

characteristically behaves or what his deepest concerns are. The latter is all that is implied in a co-orientation prayer paradigm.

BUBER'S DIALOGIC, BAKHTIN'S DISCOURSE THEORY AND ROLE-TAKING

As noted up to this point in the discussion, the continuities between role-taking, dialogic communication theory, Bakhtin's discourse theory and the Counter-Enlightenment thinking that combats Enlightenment driven models of prayer are unmistakable. More specific, in many respects, Role-taking theory draws upon and extends to a new context the key presuppositions embedded in the works of Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Dialogic communication theory meets head-on the Enlightenment's notion of individual autonomy and human freedom in a way not accomplished by Vico and Dilthey. Dialogic communication theory as understood from Buber's perspective integrates human freedom with moral order, balancing the individual within the community – much in the same way that the role-taking theory attempts to bridge subjective experience of prayer with its objective reality. It stands against the individualistic paradigm, pure subjectivism, which in the end has little moral substance because of its individualistic ethos.

Buber's dialogic is decidedly anchored in the Vico-Dilthey line, reflecting Aristotle's tripartite anthropology. As such, Buber's dialogic I-Thou makes a decisive break with the Enlightenment's anthropology—an anthropology that characterizes linear models of prayer and communication. It develops a perspective on human nature and communication that helps overcome the subject/object and fact/value dichotomies so

firmly engrained by Enlightenment thinkers. It removes both the theoretical and egocentric from prayer and religious experience. John MacMurray explains:

> Our [the Western] philosophical tradition . . . is both theoretical and egocentric. It is theoretical in that it proceeds as though the Self were a pure subject for whom the world is object. This means that the point of view adopted by our philosophy is that of the Self in its moment of reflection, when its activity is directed toward the acquirement of knowledge. Since the Self in reflection is drawn from action, withdrawn into itself, withdrawn from participation in the life of the world into contemplation, this point of view is also egocentirc. The Self in refection is self-isolation from the world which it knows.[72]

Buber makes *anthropos* his cohering center. Existence in its authentic form is communication. Life is dialogue. Buber's epistemology gets swept into his anthropology, a departure from Enlightenment thinkers who clearly separated the two. Reality can only be understood, in this formulation, when we have gotten inside the "self-in-relation," where "I" and "Thou" unite in unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding. In the language of Role-taking Theory, the "I" assumes the role of the "Thou." The two poles of communication come together as co-orientation unfolds. The dialogic circle, in Capp's words, is complete in Buber's I-Thou, the relational in-between.

Note that for Buber, the dialogic relation is a primal notion, for "in the beginning is the relation." Buber intends this ontologically, as a category of being. "This irreducible anthropological phenomenon—the relational reality, the reciprocal bond, the person as interpersonal—cannot be decomposed into simpler elements without destroying it." All Enlightenment-like dualisms that depict or represent the individual and society as two analytically independent domains are rejected. Contrary to most modern conceptions of prayer, which deconstruct prayer along epistemological lines requiring verifiable proof, Buber's dialogic situates prayer in the realm of community, which can only be

understood ontologically, and which provides its own verification in the relational in-between that cannot be reduced to empirical controls.

Monological communication – Buber's I-it modality – is the imperative mood, a one-way flow of communication for the purposes of control. Transmission or linear models of mainline communication depict this modality. For example, Norbert Weiner's conceived of communication as a form of human engineering, for the purpose of power and control. Theories depicting prayer as auto-suggestion or projection also fit this mold. Jacques Ellul agrees with Buber's depiction of "I-itness," explaining how human beings are used as means to and end when the I-it modality prospers.[73]

Dialogic theory also provides a revolutionary alternative that understands communication from the *emic*, from the inside out (that is, from *within* the community), from the ground up. In this sense it is consistent with the Role-Taking or co-orientation theory with its emphasis on "stepping into the historical shoes of another," or seeing the world from the other's viewpoint, or situating the petitioner within the communal context. Against the monologic modality, the "I-It," stands Buber's dialogue, where human acceptance is the basis for any exchange of meaning. Authentic communication brings persons into being, and authentic communication can only be achieved in the encounter known as "I-Thou." Our primary aim of humankind, according to Buber, should be to restore dialogic communication. For genuine dialogue is to our humanness what blood is to the body: When the flow of blood ceases or becomes diseased, the body dies; when dialogue stops, love disappears and hate and resentment are born. That prayer

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[72] (1579, 11), as cited in Christians, "Dialogic Communication Theory," 3-31.

[73] His concept "la technique," the characteristic of industrialized societies, is used to describe I-itness in the mass media.

could be anything but dialogic would seem contrary to the purpose of existence or the essence of communication.

Values espoused in Buber's understanding of communication include: dialogue (as a model for communication that leads to intimacy), reciprocity (in terms of commitment), openness (reflective of honesty), experiencing the other side of the relationship (as in empathy grounded in unconditional positive regard and a respect for diversity), concern for relationship, and the "between." These core values ultimately form the basis for what one might call authentic community and can only be achieved as one *takes on the role of the other*, the "Thou." In that existential moment we see I-Thou *co-orientation* of past with present, present with present, present with future. Human beings are primary relational beings who derive their essence from relationship and intimacy. Genuine community (and hence communication) begins with a discovery of the metaphysical character of reality and rests upon the belief in this reality.

Bakhtin's Discourse theory, as alluded throughout, shares similar ontological and epistemological roots (and terminology, for that matter), with Buber's idea of "I-Thou." According to Bakhtin, the one who understands (empathizes) becomes a participant in the dialogue. Bakhtin's dialogic is based on the dynamics and potentialities residing in all conversational dialogue. Dialogic is open-ended, indeterminate, it values relational truth situated between and within speaking subjects (Buber's idea of the "narrow ridge"), and rejoices in the diversity of plurality. The antithesis of dialogic is monologic (Buber's "I-It"), which asserts proposition truth (in abstraction from a speaking subject), and demands monovalent unity.

The primary building block in Bakhtin's theory of dialogic is the utterance, that is, any written or spoken statement integrated within a discourse and embodied in a clearly defined speaking subject. Between any two utterances there exists the possibility for a dialogic event, provided that these utterances in some way collide, or "meet between." Every utterance is also internally dialogic, for in Bakhtin's view, all speech is linked to the words, ideas and utterances of others. In this sense all human discourse inhabits an intertextual universe; no discourse utters the original word on any subject. And so every discourse embodies within itself the utterance and ideas of others, as it is spoken from a specific situation to a specific audience. No utterance, and by extension no person, arrives at completion or conclusion. Monologic attempts to sum a statement, to finalize a life, or to somehow reduce an utterance are anathematic to dialogic thought and process.

When the Psalms are considered from Bakhtin's view, the quarrel with others and oneself both lead to quotation. In the first case, the quoted words relate to an external, political struggle for dominance and in the latter to an inner dialogue in which the speaker may seem to be quarreling with another's words but is really quarrelling internally over the nature and power of God. In both external and internal Psalms, the poets struggle toward "an "internally Persuasive discourse"[74]. The Psalmists are intimately involved with the words of others, both supporters and detractors of the one true God. Through this contest of quotations in the Psalms we observe "the ideological becoming" of human beings, seen in the "process of selectively assimilating the words of

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[74] Levine, "The Dialogic Discourse," 345.

others"[75]   This allows God's word to become again internally persuasive for the psalmist's generation. God does not need to be made into a subject by a visionary poet, but rather needs to be brought back into a conversation that God started and human beings feel has been interrupted. By turning their inner quarrels into speaking voices, the psalmists created an image of a voice that continues to live in our culture, just as, Bakhtin argues, great novelistic images continue to be transformed by generations of writers.

IMPLICATIONS OF ROLE-TAKING THEORY

There are many questions that remain unanswered at this point. For example, how are we to pray the imprecatory Psalms or the Psalms claiming innocence before God? (the latter of which are implicitly present in a number of laments). These are important questions, questions that deserve careful consideration. Brueggemann and others have dealt with them at length. With regard to a role-taking theory of prayer, this raises the issue of appropriateness; i.e., why one Psalm and not another, and whether self-deception is not inevitable. The community, at this point, must provide a regulatory function, helping the individual to avoid the temptations of distortion and self-deception. For our present purposes, we would like to conclude by mentioning several positive results which follow from our praying the Psalms according to a role-taking model. Expressed succinctly, the Psalms hold the contrasts of religious life in proper tension – especially when viewed from the perspective of role-taking.

First, as discussed earlier, a balance between the individual and the community ban be maintained. The language of the Psalms is frank and expressive enough to match the heights and depths of individual human experience. Although no one person

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[75] Ibid., 341.

experiences all of the situations described in the Psalms at one moment, someone in the body of Christ will be in that position at any given point in time. You may be offering confession while a sister in Palestine is lamenting. This teaches us to pray as the body of Christ instead of merely individualistically. Social responsibility is maintained as we pray the Psalms using the role-taking framework.

Secondly, because the Psalms are structured, they can teach us how to pray. Their form can direct us away from irresponsible or lazy praying. Freedom of expression is by no means endangered, however, for the power and flexibility of the Psalm's images and metaphors are ever present. Furthermore, since most Psalms are a manageable length, they encourage responsible reading of God's word. We can easily read through several Psalms in one sitting, or one Psalm several times, until our prayers become informed by their content. Our experience can also be structured by the content of the Psalms; for instance, Capps proposes we use the lament structure in grief situations.[76]

Third, the Psalms encompass the breadth of human experience. The reason that we are able to sometimes interpret the Psalms Christologically is because of the Incarnation: both the Psalms and Jesus Christ proclaim what it means to be truly human. Brueggemann illustrates how the Psalms address the situations of orientation, dislocation and reorientation in our existence.[77] When we pray the whole Psalter (as opposed to selected favorites), then we pray with all of humanity. If we have moved through expostulation and lament to a period of reorientation, we do not forget those who still lament. The Psalter teaches us that human experience always hovers between lament and

[76] Capps, *Biblical Approaches*, ch. 2.

[77] Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith."

praise and that when we have the privilege of rejoicing we are not allowed to forget those who still mourn.

In final analysis, it might be argued that at some level, doubt over the viability of a communicative (dialogic) prayer theory is in one sense only a reflection of a broader theological dilemma, namely, how we are to understand God as working in our world. As Peter Baelz remarks, "at the heart of all our difficulties concerning Christian prayer . . . is the problem of understanding the being of God in general and the relation of God to the world and to ourselves in particular."[78] For if God is both transcendent and immanent, then he is at the same time both above—set apart from— and actively or purposefully engaged with His creation in intimate, meaningful, perhaps dialogic, ways.[79] In this light, there is a strong connection between the "God-sustained creation and communication."[80] God communicates both with creation and through it.[81]   Role-taking provides a

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[78] Cited by Don E. Salier, "Prayer and the Doctrine of God in Contemporary Theology," *Interpretation* 34 (1980) 3:226.

[79] In this respect, as a "reply" to the message communicated by the Fall, God reinitiates the "dialogue" with human kind through Christ Jesus. Robert Webber, in God Still Speaks (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), 124-30. Moreover, transcendence and immanence mirror or typify a divine give-and-take. God is both perceiver and recipient of all that transpires in His created order, and active agent, responder and initiator as He providentially feeds back into his created order through redemptive history, symbol and revelation.

[80] Ibid., 73.

[81] As Webber explains,

> while God's relationship to the creation is known generally and universally through the whole creation, He is known more specifically and particularly through time, space, and history. In the first place, the biblical concept stresses the revelatory nature of time and space. The heavenly luminaries are not simply lights that "sit up in space." We can see from Psalm 19 that they are telling the glory of God, declaring His handiwork, pouring forth speech, and revealing knowledge. Their voice has gone out through all the earth and their utterances to the end of the world. The creation is alive, and the luminaries are in the business of telling spatial time. The chief task of the luminaries is to separate light and darkness, day and night (Ibid., 78.)

communication paradigm in which the two ends of the dialogic exchange can not only be

imagined but realized.