

# Prayer of the Heart as an Essential Activity of the Self: A Cross-Disciplinary Enquiry into the Cultural- Historical Modes of Spiritual Practice

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[[This is a statement of the problem for the Prayer of the Heart research – book in progress. Please cite the URL for this page]]

This research will examine the religious body-based praxis from the perspective of the comparative history of religions. Research will focus on the particular example of spiritual practice, Prayer of the Heart, found to be common to all world religions. The historical forms of Prayer will be researched and reconstructed, using the scriptural sources, art and historical artifacts, and linguistic evidence. The structure, contents and the historical canvas of the practice will be analyzed in connection with the analysis of the dynamics of the cultural-historical forms of self.

The research of the cultural hermeneutics of the Prayer of the Heart as the inner (esoteric) tradition, valuable in itself, will serve to answer the questions of the more general order, such as what is the role of body-based praxis in the overall history of religions. Here, body-based religious praxis is differentiated from ritual, myth, art, scripture or other parts of religious tradition.

Praxis as an activity of human being involving the use of the body (Cole, 1996), has never been examined in relation to religious matters. However, cultural studies demonstrate that praxis is the necessary component of transformation, evolution and changes in the self in the particular socio-historical era (Cole, 1996; Cushman, 1995; Storey, 1996). Kippenberg (2003) states that human history is, in fact, the history of religions. Consequently, sacramental, religious and spiritual practices involving the human body are likely to play a role in mediating history, especially as related to the historical dynamics of the human self.

Defined as a body-involving activity, religious praxis includes spiritual exercises such as meditation (Goleman, 1977), internal rituals and visualization (Bhattacharyya, 1999; St. Simeon The New Theologian, 1995), psychosomatic forms of prayer etc., i.e. activities that cause psychospiritual transformation while engaging the human body. In the prior studies, the present author introduced the term “psychosomatic mysticism” that designates the dimension of religion that observes, utilizes, and focuses on the various forms of spiritual insight associated with the awareness of the lived body (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). Even though the awareness of the lived body constitutes the very foundation of the self (ref), the connections between body-based religious praxis, and the socio-cultural and historical self was not studied. The historicity of the body (Cohen, 1994) has never been acknowledged in regard to the religious praxis, neither was the religious praxis examined in its body-centeredness in the historical context. Research was done regarding the conceptualization of the body in religion, not regarding the actual participation of the bodily forms of awareness in religious consciousness. The ways by which spiritual practice, as a particular use of the body, provides for the transformation of the self and development of the religious function of the psyche, have not examined. How do religious practices originate in history, and what happens in the process of cross-religious transmission of practices, is not known. This creates a disturbing epistemological vacuum in contrast to the wide public use of multicultural body-centered spiritual practices such as yoga, Tantra, meditative running, focused mantra-japa etc.

As indicated lately by Kippenberg (2003), the comparative history of religions recognizes the historicity of the elements of human existence beyond the realm of rationality. The place of religious praxis in history, its dialectical and dialogical relation to a person has yet to be examined. Indian historians of religion such as Bhattacharyya (1999) developed approaches to understanding of the body-based praxis in the overall dynamic of religious traditions. Bahattracharyaa, for example, separates the body-engaging religiosity as a “parallel” Tantrik tradition”, which provides the forms of religious knowing different from those in the dominant Vedic tradition. In western thought, the only research done in this direction has been within the interdisciplinary field of transpersonal studies (Goleman, 1977; Shapiro & Walsh, 2003). However, these works isolate the various forms of spiritual practice from the socio-historical context, and focus on perennial truths overlooking the self-praxis hermeneutic modalities. The current project is intended to fill the existing gap in knowledge, leading to series of publications both in the academic press and for general public.

### **Personal Rationale for the Research**

In this study, the analysis of body-centered religious/spiritual practice will focus on a particular case of the Prayer of the Heart. The author has done 20 years of field study of this Prayer in Hesychasm (Christian mysticism, in Russia, Estonia, Romania), Shakta Vedanta (India), Sufism (Turkey), Hellenistic cults (Cicily), as well as the contemporary forms of the Prayer of the Heart in the Unites States. The author was introduced to the Prayer of the Heart while working as a neuroscientist in Russia (Kungurtsev & Louchakova, 1977); this exposure had a profound personal impact causing a reorientation of career which lead to this research.

### **Prayer of the Heart**

The Prayer of the Heart was transmitted from the early Desert Fathers to Byzantine Monks, and was preserved until our days by Russian hermits and pilgrims. This unique religious practice transcends the frames of Christianity: corresponding forms of spiritual practice exist in Islam (*dhikr* of Divine names), in Shakta-Vedanta (bodily forms of *atma-vichara*, self-enquiry). In Christianity, the Prayer of the Heart takes the form of the Jesus Prayer, and is presented largely in the collections of *Apophthegmata*. Indications of similar practices can be traced through the history of all religions of the Mediterranean region.

The practice of the Prayer of the Heart involves devotional repetition of the names of God (dess), cultivation of internal stillness, examination of various functions of the psyche: subtle spiritual states, experiences of faith, trust etc. It is associated with the focusing on the various somatic faculties, such as breath, sensations, degrees of awareness in the introspective space of the body. Then, it develops into the focus and work with the Spiritual Heart, a psychospiritual center of consciousness associated with the chest of the human body, (Spidlick, 1986), generally associated with the notion of the Self and the noetic experience of I-Thou.

### **Current Stage of the Study and the Projected Outcomes**

Research shows that body-based forms of spiritual practices are primarily a part of the oral tradition (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). The field studies of the author have produced a considerable body of findings regarding the cultural presence and phenomenology of the of the Prayer of the Heart.

Current status of the research requires

- a) the analysis of scriptural sources, artistic productions and other cultural artifacts, to define the historical presence and forms of the Prayer of the Heart
- b) philosophical analysis of the phenomenological hermeneutics of the Prayer
- c) examination of the cultural anthropological aspects of the Prayer in its relation to human development and self

d) comparative religious analysis of the Prayer as a central body-involving religious praxis

Suggested study of the psychosomatic aspect in the history of religions disputes the view of religious experience as exclusively an experience of faith, and emphasizes the aspects of body-based perception and praxis. Consequently, methodology will be eclectic, influenced strongly by works of Kippenberg (2003), Cushman (1996), Indian historian Bhattacharyya (1999), and resonating with feminist methodologies of Gross (2001) and O'Flaherty (1984).

This interdisciplinary analysis and conceptualization will explicate the nomothetic and idiographic elements of praxis in religious history and lead to both publications and academic courses in the comparative history of religions. Applied outcomes may include suggestions for the medical use of Prayer of the Heart in medical practice in reducing stress and preventing cardiovascular diseases.

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