

**THE PSYCHOLOGY
OF PRAYER.
[CHICAGO-1909]**

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The Psychology of Prayer. [Chicago-1909] by Anna Louise Strong

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ANNA LOUISE STRONG

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BY

ANNA LOUISE STRONG

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1909

TO MY FATHER AND MOTHER,
FROM WHOSE LIFE AND SPIRIT I KNOW MORE OF THE
REALITY OF PRAYER THAN ALL ANALYSIS
CAN EVER TEACH.

PREFACE

“We hear in these days of scientific enlightenment a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given us why we should not pray, whilst others are given us why we should. But in all this very little is said of the reason why we do pray.”—So wrote Professor William James nineteen years ago. The temper of the age has changed much in the past score of years and perhaps in nothing more than in its attitude toward religion. Twenty years ago the question was insistently and even clamorously asked: Is religion true? Today we have tacitly concluded to let this question rest while we ask two other questions that seem to need answering first, namely, What is religion? and, What do we mean by “true”? Nothing might seem less in need of investigation. Surely religion is too well known to require any description, while to inquire what we mean by “true” sounds like willful sophistication. And yet both these questions are proving most fruitful in stimulating investigation and reflection. With the second of these we have nothing to do here, directly. That may be left, for the time being, to the Pragmatists and their critics. But we may dwell for a moment on some implications of the first question, as showing the reason for studying the psychology of prayer which includes among other subjects “the reason why we do pray.”

There are some few parts of what we know and feel and do that seem to require only a world of things, on the one hand, and a mind capable of sensing and responding to them, on the other. But by far the most interesting and most important parts of life involve relations to other persons. Language, the means of communicating with others, is an almost if not quite indispensable tool for all thinking. In cooperation or in competition with others we carry on our work, build the structure of home and state, and in short, transform bare existence into a genuine life. Personal relations evoke largely the emotions which give value alike to thought and to action.

Religion, whatever else it may signify, belongs to the social aspects of our experience. It is relation to some other. It matters not that the other is not seen. The man of faith lives "as seeing him who is invisible." He finds terms for this other in language borrowed largely from human society. God is Father, Lord, King, Redeemer, Friend, the Great Companion. As implying social relation religion belongs therefore with other parts of life which involve this adjustment to others, this union with others, to produce and become what would be impossible for any one by himself alone. Whatever we may think of religious experience, it takes its place in human life and human history along with science, morality, and art, as a sphere in which man has developed a personality, a self, of peculiar range and quality.

These aspects of human life as being in themselves most significant have repeatedly invited attention. The eighteenth century made brilliant investigations in this field. The nineteenth century turned its interest largely to chemical and biological problems, and we reap the results in our industries, and in our control over disease. In its closing decades, a measure of scientific activity was directed upon the mental life, attacking at first chiefly the simple problems which could be studied in laboratories. But now with some of these more elementary problems on the way toward solution, interest is naturally turning again to what is after all of deepest interest—the world of personal relations. We have as yet scarcely made a beginning in applying to the more complex and more vitally important fields of life the scientific spirit and method which have disclosed new meaning and value in the world of nature. We are seeking to understand more fully what mind and spirit mean in those capacities and activities due to social forces.

To study in this spirit the meaning of religion and prayer does not, of course, answer all questions. A philosophy of religion has still its task. But the first step toward a true philosophy is as full a knowledge as psychology can give of just what religion is as a matter of personal experience. If we study religion and prayer in this manner, we shall better know how to distinguish the lower from the higher, the transient from the essential. And perhaps as we explore the life of the spirit in its pro-