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# Experiments on Distant Intercessory Prayer God, Science, and the Lesson of Massah

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*For if you should enter into the temple for no other purpose than asking, you shall not receive. And if you should enter it to humble yourself, you shall not be lifted . . . it is enough that you enter the temple invisible. . . . God listens not to your words save when He Himself utters them through your lips.—Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet**

EXPERIMENTAL studies on the health effects of distant intercession (prayer) ignore important facets of construct validity, philosophy of science, and theology

while focusing on issues like randomization and double-blinding. These tendencies reflect a desire on the part of researchers to remove nature as a causal factor when intercession seems efficacious. We argue that close attention to construct validity of cause-and-effect variables invalidates distant intercessory prayer as a scientific construct. Further, the application of statistical techniques to metaphysical causal phenomena is critiqued. We conclude that research on the effects of religion and spirituality on health should avoid attempting to validate God through scientific methods.

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COMMENTARY

## Experiments on Distant Intercessory Prayer

### *God, Science, and the Lesson of Massah*

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#### INTRODUCTION

There exist only a handful of recent experimental studies designed to test the efficacy of distant intercessory prayer for health problems.<sup>1-7</sup> Wishing to help fill the gaps in this deficient literature, we—a “representative” cross section of the 3 major Western Judeo-Christian traditions (Catholicism, Judaism, and Protestantism)—attempted to

mate, we became convinced that the very idea of testing distant prayer scientifically was fundamentally unsound. The remainder of this article discusses each of these steps in some detail.

#### ISSUES OF CONSTRUCT VALIDITY

The feeling that all was not right with the intercessory prayer research emerged early and centered around our attempts to address the construct validity of our proposed study. In their seminal work on research validity, Cook and Campbell<sup>8</sup> defined construct validity (with respect to causes) as the extent to which the operations meant to represent the causal factor (ie, the treatment or independent variable) actually reflect some theoretical construct of interest. When operations fail to incorporate critical dimensions of the theoretical construct, “construct underrepresentation” results (ie, low construct validity).

So, we began by attempting to avoid what Cook and Campbell called “inadequate preoperational explication of constructs.”<sup>8</sup> The way to do this is to choose operations depending on the result of a rigorous theoretical and conceptual analysis of the essential features of the causal construct. But what were the criti-

The frequency? The level of fervency? The entity to whom it is directed? The number of prayers per unit of time? Does the number of intercessors matter? Does a team vs individual intercession method matter? Does the faith tradition of the intercessor and/or intercessee matter? Does the power of the intercessor matter? Do the beliefs and experiences of the intercessor and/or intercessee matter? Does the worthiness of the intercessor and/or intercessee matter?

This list, unfortunately, generated questions of its own: If type or form is important, just how many types or forms are there? On what basis would you distinguish them? If “fervency” is important, how would you ever measure it to be able to manipulate it? The same is true if the power or worthiness of the intercessor is important: how would you ever measure them? An examination of the distant prayer studies did not help and only reinforced our growing suspicions. Prayer was not explicated well in these studies. Typical studies used constellations of intercessors from various faith traditions praying in decidedly individual ways.<sup>2-7</sup> For example, the intercessors (Protestants, Catholics, and Jews) in the study by Walker et al<sup>6</sup> were asked to make “general positive intentions as opposed to spe-

design an experimental distant prayer intervention study for major depression. This exercise led to disenchantment with the endeavor rather than a study design. Beginning with questions about research validity, we progressed into arguments about the nature of reality and the philosophy of science. Ulti-

cal dimensions of the construct *prayer*? Prayer, by definition, is “an address or petition to God or a god in word or thought.”<sup>9</sup> But what else matters?

The list we generated began as follows: Is the amount of prayer important? Is the type of prayer important? The form? The duration?

cific requests” but “were free to pray in whatever way they chose.” In an attempt at standardization, the intercessors in the study by O’Laoire<sup>4</sup> were instructed in a 1-hour training session about “theories of intercessory prayer”; the importance of relaxation, positivity, focus, imagery, and “confident but effortless in-

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