Pastoral Psychol (2018) 67:547–562
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-018-0831-3

The Experience of Muslim Prayer: A Phenomenological Investigation

W. Paul Williamson [1]

Published online: 24 July 2018

Abstract Some form of prayer is a central feature of virtually all religious traditions. In Christianity, this practice has been studied periodically by social scientists over decades, although it has received only recent attention in Islam. Among these few prayer studies, none has focused on the awareness of experience in Muslim prayer from a first-person perspective, which is the aim of this study. This investigation conducted phenomenological interviews with seven Muslims of five different cultures to obtain detailed descriptions of their prayer experiences. A hermeneutic-thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews found a pattern of four themes that emerged across all protocols to collectively describe the meaning of the experience of prayer for participants: (1) No Connection/Connection; (2) Particular Feelings; (3) Spiritual Change; (4) and Certain Knowledge. These findings are discussed in relation to the existential grounds of Body, Others, and Time, as well as current empirical literature on Muslim prayer.

Keywords Prayer · Muslim prayer · Phenomenology · Religious practices · Islam

Introduction

Few would dispute that prayer is a central feature of religion (Hood et al. 2009). The General Social Survey (2016) found that 85.1% of American participants pray, and 70% pray at least several times a week. Prayer itself is of wide interest in the larger and practical venue of life. For instance, it is practiced early and throughout life and reflects one's perceptions about life; furthermore, it enhances the ability to cope with a range of stressful issues such as marriage, family life, tragedy, illness, and death (Spilka and Ladd 2013). Although researchers have defined prayer in various ways, most would likely agree that it involves commerce between unequals—that is, between some deity, who is the object of prayer, and one of lesser status, the pray-er. Furthermore, prayer may be offered for a variety of reasons, including praise, adoration, and thanksgiving; personal supplication; intercession

✉ W. Paul Williamson
williaw@hsu.edu

[1] Henderson State University, HSU Box 7854, Arkadelphia, AR 71999, USA

for another; and spiritual communion with a deity (Hood et al. 2009; Spilka and Ladd 2013). As Spilka and Ladd (2013) have observed, prayer "is complex behavior of fundamental importance to the lives of most people, encompassing a broad spectrum of attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and knowledge" (p. 3). Research on prayer must not only address these concerns but also include faith traditions other than western Christianity. This is the concern of the present study.

Salat and *du'a'*: Two forms of Muslim prayer

For this investigation, it is important to make distinction between two types of prayer in Islam: *salat*, which is formal, and *du'a'*, which is informal.[1]

In his comprehensive work on Islam, Küng (2007, pp. 127–129) distinguished *salat* from Christian and Jewish prayer in several ways. First, it is more disciplined—that is, it is to be performed at specific times and requires several elements: the performance of ablution, a minimum standard for dress, and particular body movements (i.e., postures) associated with the practice. Second, it is more concentrated; it is performed for God and for God alone, as reflected in the opening proclamation: *Allahu akbar* ("God is greater" or "God is greatest"). Third, it is universal; wherever *salat* is performed, Muslims pray at the same time, in the same manner, in the direction of Mecca, and in Arabic, although they may not speak nor understand the language. Finally, prayer is authentically human because it physically models the human condition before God. Alternations between standing, bowing, prostrating, and sitting embody humility and openly signify "submission to God," which is precisely the meaning of Islam. The daily performance of *salat* is offered at dawn (*fajr*), early afternoon (*zuhr*), late afternoon (*'asr*), after sunset (*maghrib*), and at night (*'ishâ'*) (Umar 2011). All Muslims are obliged to observe formal prayer, and in doing so, they interrupt their "daily activities, for a few moments, to remember God" (Umar 2011, p. 54).

In addition to *salat,* Muslims may offer *du'a'*, which is a personal prayer of supplication (Küng 2007, p. 129). Whereas *salat* is formal and mandatory, *du'a'* is informal and optional, having no requirements as to frequency, structure, or content. It is widely practiced by Muslims and, in many ways, is similar to Christian prayer. It tends to be more spontaneous and conversational, and its content may include supplications, desires, thanksgiving, worship, and requests for forgiveness of sins. *Du'a'* is offered in one's native tongue and may be practiced anywhere and anytime one needs God's assistance. In the present study, participants described experiences of both *salat* and *du'a'*. Sometimes *du'a'* occurred during or at the end of *salat,* but most often it was practiced at other times.

Empirical research on Muslim prayer

Although prayer is among the five important pillars of Islam, it has been largely ignored in empirical research. In the past two decades, however, investigators have given more attention to this practice—and with various concerns. For example, research interests have ranged from the development of smartphone technology to monitor prayer activity (Al-Ghannam and Al-Dossari 2016) to the measurement of knee and hip flexion during *salat* (Ariff et al. 2015).

[1] There actually are various types of *salat*, or formal prayer. They include the five daily prayers and *jumah* (Friday prayer for men), which are mandatory, but also others that are not mandatory, such as *sunnah*, *nafl*, and certain festival prayers such as that offered at *eid* (Küng 2007, p. 129). When using the term *salat* in this present study, however, the reference is to the five daily compulsory prayers or *jumah*.

Other investigations of Muslim prayer are more related to health and psychological concerns. For instance, the practice of *fajr* has been investigated in relation to daytime sleepiness (BaHammam et al. 2012), and the mimicking of *salat* positions has been studied as a treatment for erectile dysfunction (Ibrahim et al. 2013). The effect of prayer has been investigated among stroke (Mohamed et al. 2015) and cancer patients (Rezaei et al. 2008) and while monitoring the vital signs of heart rate and blood pressure (Rufa'i et al. 2013). Some (Bai et al. 2012) have explored the effectiveness of prayer in psychotherapy, whereas others (Doufesh et al. 2012, 2014; Newberg et al. 2015) have recorded brain scans of participants who are practicing prayer. Aside from these quantitative studies, some investigators have used qualitative methods to study the role of prayer in formulating personal and cultural identity (Lindgren 2005; Reece 1997; Sirry and Omar 2014). What is lacking among all these studies, however, is research that focuses on the phenomenology of Muslim prayer—that is, that describes the structure of meaning in the lived experience of prayer—which is the aim of the present investigation.

Method

Participants

Seven Muslims were recruited for participation in this study from faculty and undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students at a small southern U.S. university. Some were acquaintances of the investigator, and others were recommended by these acquaintances. Before the phenomenological interview (described below) on prayer experiences, all responded to a series of demographic and general questions to provide some basic information. The participants were five men and two women whose average age was 35.86 ($SD = 16.98$). All were highly educated: two held doctorates; one was nearing completion of an undergraduate degree; two were all but finished with a master's degree; and two held master's degrees. All had been born into Muslim families, and their countries of origin included Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Libya, and Uzbekistan. Six identified as Sunni, and one, whose father was a Sunni and mother a Shia, identified as a Sufi. The average age at which they began praying was 9.71 ($SD = 3.04$), and six of the participants practiced *salat* daily an average of 4.14 times ($SD = 2.19$) at the time of their interviews. One had practiced *salat* only once as an adult, when he attended Friday prayers as a U. S. college student along with friends. All participants practiced *du'a'* (informal prayer), mostly on a daily basis at various times.

When asked how much time they took to complete a two-rakah prayer—that is, a prayer with two cycles of ritual movements with recitations, e.g., *fajr*—the six who currently practiced *salat* reported from 1 to 15 min ($M = 5.17$; $SD = 5.19$). When these participants were asked which surahs they recited after *Al-Fatihah* (1. The Opening), they reported one or more surahs (or a few verses), including *Al-Yusuf* (12. Joseph), *Al-Kahf* (18. The Cave), *Ad-Duha* (93. The Brightness of the Day), *Al-Fil* (105. The Elephant), *Al-Kauthar* (108. The Abundance of Good), *An-Nasr* (110. The Help), *Al-Ikhlas* (112. The Unity), *Al-Falaq* (113. The Dawn), and *An-Nas* (114. The Men). Participants found such surahs (or individual verses) personally meaningful and recited them not only when practicing *salat*, but also during informal prayer and at other times when feeling a need for peace, protection, or help from Allah. Only one participant understood and spoke Arabic and read the Quran in Arabic with some regularity (especially during Ramadan); and only one currently read with any regularity an interpretation of the Quran in her native tongue. Thus, most participants did not read the Quran but only recited it.

Phenomenological interview

This study used a phenomenological interview for the collection of participant data (Pollio et al. 1997; Williamson and Hood Jr. 2012, pp. 80–87; Williamson and Hood Jr. 2013, 2015a, b, 2016; Williamson et al. 2000). In such an interview, the researcher assists the participant in providing detailed descriptions of a specific experience that the participant has encountered, which in this case was prayer. Descriptions that emerge from this social discourse allow for knowledge of the experience to emerge as a concrete representation of the phenomenon as lived. In the phenomenological interview, identifying causality is not the concern of the encounter; therefore, "why" questions that seek for explanations are set aside for the use of "what" questions that probe for a thick description of the experience. Hence, the description that is derived from the interview process reveals what is meaningful to the person, and such meanings can be formulated into themes that describe the lived experience.

The phenomenological portion of an interview begins with an open-ended question that asks the participant to think of a specific experience that he/she has encountered and to describe that event in as much detail as possible (Williamson and Hood 2016, pp. 82–84). From this point, the participant is largely in control of the interview, which allows for locating frames of reference for both the participant and the researcher. The researcher avoids leading questions, for such questions can disrupt the conversational flow of dialogue and impede the emergence of descriptive data. The interviewer may ask follow-up questions in the course of the interview to clarify a description and gain better understanding; follow-up inquiries can allow for a deeper connection between the researcher and participant and promote the quality of descriptions. Descriptions that eventually emerge from a phenomenological interview supply a rich source of information that reflects the personal meaning attributed to the experience by the participant.

The practice of including several different interviews concerned with a specific experience provides the investigator with various contexts in which the phenomenon has actually occurred. This use of multiple interviews has been compared to Husserl's technique of *imaginative variation*, in which the phenomenologist imagines and contemplates the various ways in which an event might be experienced (Williamson and Hood 2016, p. 83).

Procedure

For this study, the investigator contacted participants and arranged for an interview at times of their convenience. The interviews took place either at the participant's office or in a study room at the university library, and all interviews were audio-recorded. The average length of interviews was 71 min ($SD = 30.47$) and had two major parts. The first was a structured interview for the purpose of obtaining demographics and answers to directive questions about the participant's practice of prayer. The information from this part of the interview is presented above (see Participants section). The second part was concerned with conducting the phenomenological interview, which always began with this question: "Can you think about a time, when you were praying, that stands out to you, and tell me about it?" From this point, all participants remembered two or more prayer experiences upon which they could reflect and describe in great detail. As the interviews progressed, they took on the flow of an intimate conversation that produced descriptive details of meaningful experiences of both formal and informal prayer. At the end of the interviews, participants were thanked for their willingness to share these important experiences.

Analysis

Once completed, all seven interviews were transcribed verbatim into a protocol format. Each protocol was considered to be authoritative concerning the participant's experience and was analyzed using the hermeneutic circle and thematic analysis (see Williamson and Hood 2016, pp. 85–86). For each protocol, the investigator carefully listened to the audio-recording while closely following the text to identify and interpret meaning units (phrases, sentences, or sections). While going through this process, meaning units were observed in relation to other meaning units in the text to clarify meaning and then in relation to the entire text; the overall meaning of the text was then related back to its parts to clarify their meaning. The interpretive procedure was continued in this circular manner until it arrived at a clearer understanding of the meaning contained within the whole text. After interpreting the entire protocol using this procedure, meaning units that were similar in meaning were grouped together into a theme that captured their common meaning. Through this process, various themes eventually emerged that described different but related aspects of meaning in the participant's prayer experience. When all protocols had been analyzed in this way, protocol themes were compared across all protocols to discover a consistent pattern or structure that emerged to describe the meaning in the experience of prayer for all participants. From this emergent pattern of themes, a global, nomothetic description of the experience was formulated. A check for validity involved presenting this global description to the study participants for feedback (Williamson and Hood 2016, p. 86). Participant responses indicated that the analysis was satisfactory and that it described their experiences of prayer as well as possible.

A few comments here might be useful concerning the research method described above. Critics of phenomenological studies sometimes have objected that an experience itself cannot be studied, only its linguistic expression (Yamane 2000; Yamane and Polzer 1994). James (1890/1983), however, rightly argued that cognition and emotions are deeply intertwined in the expression—not the construction—of experience. For James, the phenomenology of personal experience was concerned with investigating the infinite number of ways in which the world can appear to successive states of consciousness, and these states, said he, were best explored with descriptive methods. Furthermore, Willis (2001) has observed that phenomenological reflection (i.e., contemplation) on lived experience "does not create new knowledge of the phenomenon; it creates a space in which phenomena manifest themselves" (p. 7). The description of such a manifestation—rendered in available language—can reveal what is meaningful in the lived experience of the phenomenon. Thus the method applied here in the present study is phenomenological in nature and concerned with gaining a thick description of meaning in the lived experience of Muslim prayer; it is hoped that the results will assist readers in understanding this experience as the participants experienced it. As the approach here is phenomenological, there is no claim as to causality or ontology, and the results cannot be generalized beyond the experiences of the participants themselves.

Results

Based on the analysis of all protocols, four interdependent themes emerged to describe the meaning of the experience of prayer for participants. These are (1) No Connection/Connection, (2) Particular Feelings, (3) Spiritual Change, and (4) Certain Knowledge (see Fig. 1).

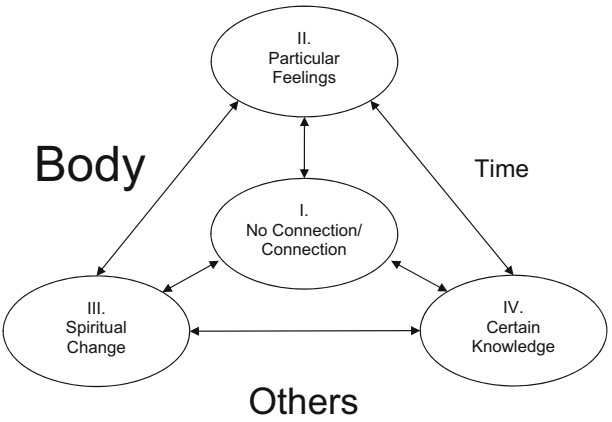

Fig. 1 The thematic structure of meaning in the experience of Muslim prayer, which is largely an embodied phenomenon

The reader will observe that there are lines connecting each theme with all others, which is meant to convey that all themes are interdependent and not isolated in the structure of meaning in the experience of prayer. All are fluid in the experience, which means that, at a given moment, any one of the four themes may become dominant in present awareness as others recede to the periphery of consciousness and provide it support. For example, the participant may be focally aware of Connection with God, as Particular Feelings, Spiritual Change, and Certain Knowledge merge together at the margin of awareness. In the successive state of consciousness, Spiritual Change may occupy the center of awareness in the experience as Connection fades to the margin with others to provide context and support. All themes are interdependent in the experience of prayer and are unreflected—that is, they are experienced, not thought—and none is exclusive.

Each theme is briefly described below, along with various excerpts from participant protocols that provide it support.[2]

No connection/connection

In recalling prayer experiences, all participants described times of feeling No Connection but also times of feeling Connection with God. This theme was central to the experience of prayer because Connection was essential for the emergence of all other themes in the structure of meaning in the encounter. No Connection was described as an occasional aspect of participant prayer experience, although none of the other themes in the analysis appeared with it.

No connection Awareness of No Connection was described most often—but not always—in the course of performing *salat,* or formal prayer. As one participant recalled,

> You know, when you say prayers, you are saying words, and it's hardly that you can form a connection with a higher being. . . . Every day you pray, it's a mechanical thing that you say. You're done with it. There's no spiritual connection right there. (P1)

[2] For purposes of anonymity and protection in this study, I assigned a code to each participant, i.e., P1 through P7.

Another participant described this "mechanical" activity as

> really boring. I'm usually thinking about day-to-day tasks, and thinking . . . "If I can finish this in 3 minutes, then maybe I can start watching one episode [on TV] in 5 minutes," and then . . . "Oh, macaroni and cheese for dinner. Got it!" That's usually what's going on in my head. So I'm usually on autopilot . . . just reciting. . . . It's usually not too magical a moment. (P2)

Another participant described his awareness of No Connection when engaging in Friday prayer:

> At the mosque, when I pray . . . nothing [is going on in my mind]. For me, it's what you need to do. It's the way the Quran says you need to pray, and that's the way it should be. . . . And you just follow. (P4)

This sense of following others also was described by P5 during his first and only attendance at Friday prayer during college:

> To me, the weird thing that stands out was that everybody does the physical movements like you're supposed to do. . . . Personally, I don't connect with that, but that kind of stood out for me. You do all the bowing down and the certain ways and how everybody does it . . . so I was just following along. (P5)

This is not to say that *salat* is only mechanical and is void of *any* connection or spiritual value. Concerning Friday prayer, P5 went on to describe how that, when doing *salat,* there may be a connection with other pray-ers in terms of "community bonding and [a] getting-people-together value." From his experience, this afforded a communal value in itself. Furthermore, when *salat* is done privately, P6 described the way in which he is able to move past the sense of No Connection to spiritual Connection with God:

> I must admit all kinds of things surface in my mind, at that time, even though I am reciting. There's one way I try to . . . Just going back to *kabah* [the sacred structure around which Muslims circle seven times during their holy pilgrimage to Mecca] and the way people circle and so forth . . . I visited that place, so I can picture that. That eliminates all my distractions. I just try to picture this, the *kabah*. Then all other things, I don't concentrate on. (P6)

P7 described a similar way of clearing distractions from his mind and moving beyond No Connection to a sense of Connection: "Sometimes, your mind goes to a bad thing within the prayer, and you say just _____ [speaks in Arabic], which is, you curse the Satan for the interruption."

Based on participant descriptions, the experience of prayer sometimes involves No Connection, just a sense of performing a mechanical exercise of faith for one's own sake as a Muslim. When experienced in this way, it has little spiritual value, but one can move beyond this automated practice and No Connection to a sense of Connection by purposely focusing in some way one's thoughts on God.

Connection In *salat,* all participants acknowledged, it is easy to drift into a distracted mental state in which the concern is simply to get through the exercise to other things of

more interest. However, all participants recalled experiences of *du'a'*, or informal prayer, in which they described a Connection that was spiritual and self-transcending.[3]

For example, one participant described her sense of Connection in terms of communion with God in which nothing is hidden, judged, or rejected:

> I'll feel a sense of belongingness, like I've been panting all day and then finally I can draw a breath slowly. It's like receiving communion . . . like having a meal with God. You get to really enjoy that presence. . . . There's no judgment there. It's calm. It's a very loving presence . . . . God, with me especially, sees me at my most naked all the time. All kinds of nudity, right? Not just physical, whatever. Spiritual nudity, mental nudity . . . But not shameful naked. Not shameful like after eating from the tree of good-and-evil naked. Good naked . . . because I am so spiritually naked, mentally naked, I am able to be very honest with God. (P2)

P3 also described Connection in terms of intimacy and vulnerability:

> After reciting, after saying _____ [recites Arabic], uh, "Glory to my Lord, most high"—you say three times—then I can just start talking to God, telling him all of my concerns, and . . . I don't remember what I prayed about really, but I just enjoyed it, for sure. That's what I remember, that I really enjoyed it. I don't know, I just felt—It just felt right. It really clicked. It was like, "Wow!" . . . You know, just the way you would talk to a friend, and . . . that's . . . especially without wanting to sound politically correct, or perfect, or just . . . you and your own vulnerability, like I told you before. Just knowing that someone is up there. He has the right to judge you, but he is the one who will not judge you, you know, in a human way, like in a harsh type of way. It's just, "Wow!" You can just let it out. (P3)

Another participant described Connection as a consequence of being able to tune out noisy thoughts that interfere with a frequency on which God is unwavering and constantly broadcasting.

> I think that's how God speaks, through intuition. I think it's more of your inner voice thing, you know, you listen to your inner voice. . . . When you really think deep down inside, I think that's more of a connection to God. . . . But, to me, God's always there. It doesn't matter what you do—if you're having a good time, if you're having a hard time. It doesn't fluctuate to me. It's all the same. . . . Like I said, it's always broadcasting. It's the matter of tuning out the noise. I mean, that's the part where the prayer comes in. . . . Say like you'd throw a ball—if we follow like a metaphor—if the connection is good, it will bounce back and you'll hear something. . . . And if not, it just kind of goes dead and doesn't bounce. And it's more of establishing a connection with yourself and with your heart, and . . . To me, I think that's the importance of prayer and meditating. . . . It's not what you say. It's more of how you say it. (P5)

In his experience, the question of God's presence is never an issue. It becomes a matter of connecting with God through a heart that has been tuned through prayer.

[3] Sometimes *du'a'* was offered after recitation in prostration (e.g., P3, P7) or at the end of *salat* when sitting or standing (e.g., P1, P2, P3). At other times, it occurred apart from *salat*—for example, before going to bed, when taking a meal, during solitude and reflection, while driving the car (P5, P6), or when struggling with some difficulty. Some participants described experiences of *du'a'* as a spontaneous event—that is, occurring at the moment of an unexpected need.

According to participants, Connection with God is an important theme of meaningful prayer for it opens the door to spiritual realities. It allows for intimacy, transparency, and honesty (P2, P3, P7), which are necessary for pure relation and self-disclosure; as P3 said, "You can just let it out." Other participants described Connection as being "touched or brushed with a higher reality" (P1) and certainly a "time you feel more close to God" (P6). And as P4 stated, prayer "always keeps me closer to God than distant from God. And I'd rather be close to God than distant." Based on participant descriptions, the experience of Connection is fundamental for the emergence of other important themes in prayer experience.

Particular feelings

The theme Particular Feelings also was experienced in the Muslim prayer of the participants. All participants described a feeling of peace and contentment that displaced previous concern with problems such as personal failure, discontentment, loneliness, and various other troubles. The following excerpts describe such feelings:

> After that, I felt, I felt relieved, as if there was some sort of resolution for my thinking. . . . A feeling of great resolve, as a matter of fact. (P1)
>
> There's no judgment there [from God]. It's calm . . . an inner harmony of peace for yourself. (P2)
>
> All I remember is I felt an incredible amount of peace. Peace, peace, again, and that feeling of "I'm ready to leave [this world]. I *want* to leave. I don't want to be here any—you know, it's just, I don't want to be in this world anymore." Great peace that I never ever felt like that in solace. (P3)
>
> It just brings peace of mind to me. And spiritually, I feel clean. . . . It just brings peace of mind to me. (P4)
>
> You know, I'm not alone. I mean, somebody's with me. Somebody's by me. Somebody's experiencing the same thing as I am, and I'm not, I'm not totally on my own. . . . I'm not all by myself all the time, if I'm having trouble with something. . . . I think it's more of a sense of comfort. (P5)
>
> [Through prayer] I think I'm content. I'm not in deep trouble. . . . That's a feeling also. (P6)

After praying about a desperate issue, another participant described the peaceful relief he experienced in this way:

> I felt like, when I ended the prayer . . . "Whew!" [a long exhale of breath]. You know, like when you are keeping [holding] your breath for a long time? For a long time, you are almost dying? Then . . . [inhales a deep breath] . . . and suddenly you've got this fresh air coming in? This is exactly the way I felt. I felt like, whatever I was feeling in my heart, whatever was there bothering me—all those feelings combined together—I felt like . . . like as if you have something heavy on your heart, and you went like . . . "Whew." . . . It's not there anymore. And during that time, when I felt this way, I don't know why, but I stopped crying because of the good feeling that I felt. (P7)

That was indeed a special moment for this participant, as he was lifted from feelings of turmoil and despair to a restful state of peace.

In addition to peaceful relief, P1 also experienced some unusual tactile perceptions including "goosebumps," body weakness, and a "jolt" as if touched by another's hand. Another participant also described tactile perceptions during prayer:

> It's like feeling . . . like a weight or a warmth around me. It's tactile, it's not in my head. It just feels . . . sometimes warm, sometimes heavy, sometimes—and this happens to me on occasion during prayers—I'll smell something really beautiful, like a garden, like it will be immediate and then it will go away after a moment. It smells really sweet like honeysuckle or roses or something like that. (P2)

In addition to the above, participants described various other feelings that were not necessarily common across protocols. Such other feelings included satisfaction (P1, P6), pleasure (P6), awe (P1, P3), happiness, (P1, P6, P7), love (P2, P3), and humility (P3, P6). When spiritually connected, participants described experiencing a range of Particular Feelings in prayer, although they were commonly variations of peace and contentment.

Spiritual change

In recalling meaningful prayers, all participants described Spiritual Change—an experience of feeling somehow different during prayer than before it. This change sometimes was related to spiritual yearning, preoccupation with trouble, or concern with a pressing need that dissipated through the experience of prayer. One participant described an intense spiritual yearning for God:

> It's like taking a drink of water after being starving—finally I'm here, receiving that communion from God, engaging in that prayer, eating that meal, drinking that water. *This* is the thing I have wanted all day. . . . I'm talking thirst. I'm like, Jesus-in-the-desert-40-days-of-thirst. . . . Ahhhh! And when you're thirsty, you only want to drink one thing. You don't want milk. You don't want rum. You don't want juice. You don't want soda. You want *water*! That's all you want in that state. And you constantly crave God's companionship. (P2)

When experiencing prayer, another participant stated that he felt:

> clean in a sense. . . . Every time I pray, I just feel a different person, spiritually, mentally, consciously. It just makes you a different person. . . . I feel confident about myself. I feel confident about the things I'm doing. . . . I feel confident that I know I can do things, no matter how challenging they might be, because I know that God is watching me, protecting me, and encouraging me. (P4)

For this participant, Spiritual Change meant a renewal in cleanness, mental functioning, and heightened awareness, all of which increased his confidence in meeting life challenges.

After coming to the United States, another participant described how she had struggled over the cultural issue of handshaking:

> I've never practiced that, and it takes really another extra step on your spiritual journey to be able to do that because, before that, you are scared of offending people. You're scared people will not understand, and that's actually part of the reason a lot of Muslims don't practice their religion, because they're like, "Oh, well. They're going to judge me. They're going to think, 'Oh, wow.'" And you water it down, pretty much. You don't

> stand up for something. You don't. Then you're not going to stand up for anything else. You're not going to stand up for God, for your higher purpose. Then, you're just an individual. You're just a number, you know. But when I prayed like that at night—very recently, and usually at home—tell God . . . you know, some day, I want to become like, make me feel like I'm just some sort of awesome superpower! [laughs] . . . So when we started our meeting of GAs [graduate assistants] and all that, one of the guys came up and wanted to shake my hand, and I said—I put it on my heart—and I said, "Nice to meet you." And I felt like "Wow!" I said, "Where did that come from?" It took a huge amount of courage because you do not want to offend people. (P3)

For P3, this "superpower" courage to do what she felt was right came from the Spiritual Change she experienced in prayer.

Participants experienced Spiritual Change in relation to other issues—concerns with cultural problems (P1), college exams (P4), deaths in the family (P6), uncleanness (P1, P4), the search for truth (P7), and personal growth (P5). As P5 said, "So maybe knowing that God's there means that, if I'm having trouble, I'm reasoning it's the hardship that I was supposed to have. It's a hardship to learn something out of it." And in the words of another participant, who was describing an important prayer experience, "I felt that moment was kind of the decider or the point that is going to change my whole life.. .. It changed me personally" (P7). For participants, it is not so much that God changes the situation itself but that God changes their spiritual *outlook* on the situation and inspires the personal qualities they need to meet the challenge.

Certain knowledge

In recalling prayer experiences, all participants described the theme of Certain Knowledge—that is, receiving certainty of some kind of knowledge that either was unknown prior to prayer or known but in need of revitalization as important truth in their lives. They experienced Certain Knowledge in relation to a variety of situations.

P1 and his family had migrated from Pakistan to the United States to complete his doctoral degree but, after two years, had become increasingly frustrated by the challenges of living in a more secular and pluralist culture. Ready to give up and return home, he began struggling with this problem in prayer:

> [It] was that turmoil of thought that was going on, and somebody kind of shook me and said—or at least gave me this impression—no voice, no nothing, no sound, but an impression that, "What you are thinking is not a big deal. I mean, what you are going through is, is . . . child play! . . . You will go through it. Don't worry about it." It was more like an "aha" experience, an epiphany, basically, where you would say, "Oh! I get it." (P1)

With this new insight, his anxiety began to abate, and the following morning he told his wife, "Don't worry about it. I think it will pan out. Everything will pan out." And pan out it did, even until some 25 years later, the day of his interview.

P3 experienced Certain Knowledge about the attributes of God. She recently had been studying a book on God's character, and when she went to prayer, she suddenly received a special revelation from God:

> And when I prayed, I just . . . I don't know . . . I just felt his grandeur, all of a sudden, and how small I was, how insignificant as a creature I was, and how noble

> he was. . . . He is absolute, and he is everywhere by his knowledge. So his attributes . . . I can say that the knowledge of his attributes and his presence, by his power, filled me—but not like in a physical sense. . . . It puts you back into your chair. You know how insignificant you are, but not in an undignified way—no, no, no, no! [But] In a way that makes sense. (P3)

For this participant, the impartation of Certain Knowledge involved a new way of perceiving God and her relationship with him. It brought about the profound effect of humility and changed the way she saw herself as a servant of God.

At 17 years of age, P7 was wrestling with confusion and doubt about the reality of God that was fueled by a litany of tragedies in his life—the complications of living in a country torn by civil war, the witness of his uncle's killing, and the dissolution of his family and its resources. He deeply researched the major religions and scientific literature, seeking truth. "After I did all the research, okay, I understand.. .. It makes sense for me. But the feeling [of doubt] is still there, you know, like, 'What if this? What if that?'" (P7). Finally, he found himself in prayer:

> I was in the prostration, during that time, I was down bawling, and I was thinking of my whole life, or all of what happened with me. . . . I prayed, "God, if you are there, guide me." I really meant it with all my body, with my soul, with everything, all combined together. "If you are there, guide me." . . . At that moment, I *felt* it. It's not like something you can come up with it in your mind, or your mind is making you think this way so you can feel good or not. It's something from the outside I felt . . . I really wanted the truth. As Jesus, peace be upon him, said, "Seek the truth, and the truth shall free you." So I think I really sought the truth, and the truth freed me. (P7)

This Certain Knowledge of truth forever changed his view of life and the way in which he subsequently lived.

Still another participant described his experience of Certain Knowledge in a way that perhaps many other Muslims might encounter it—as the certainty of an answer to an everyday problem or need for direction:

> I mean, if I'm having trouble with something, I say, "Hey, God. What am I supposed to do? Can you kind of show me the right direction?" And if I do, it's just, it's kind of—You ask a question, and the answer comes. . . . Sometimes, it's right away. Sometimes it's a little—takes time. . . . If I need to make a decision, and I ask, "Help me with this," and maybe I get an answer . . . I get that intuition. It's just . . . it's just very sudden, out of nowhere, I guess, you would say. It's just a feeling: "Oh! Oh, okay!" (P5)

Participants also experienced Certain Knowledge concerning other things, such as the immediacy of God as a daily presence (P2, P5); confirmation of being on the right path (P2, P4, P6, P7); an awakened reality of God's existence (P4, P6, P7); and a deeper understanding of personal identity (P2). As described, these impartations influenced the recipients, and when they came, they were experienced with a sense of certainty, beyond doubt.

Based on the above analysis, the phenomenological structure of meaning in the experience of prayer involves the themes of No Connection/Connection with God, Particular Feelings, Spiritual Change, and Certain Knowledge.

Discussion

The four themes that describe the meaning in the participants' experience of Muslim prayer can be combined to offer a global description for all seven participants. The experience of prayer involves the sense of No Connection/Connection with God. The meaning of No Connection relates to the inattentive and mechanical practice of body postures and recitations as the mind is allowed to wander to trivial matters. However, the meaning of Connection emerges as focus brings into the present moment an awareness of the reality of God. With this awareness come Particular Feelings that include a great sense of inner peace and harmony and various other feelings that range from awe to love to humility and sometimes tactile perceptions. The awareness of God gives rise to Spiritual Change that involves feeling different from before, as with cleanness of heart, satisfied longing, or new resolve for meeting challenges that lie ahead. The experience of Connection with God also infuses Certain Knowledge that was previously unknown, such as a new insight that reframes life issues, a deeper understanding of God's character, or illumination of the right path; it also may revitalize knowledge already known but that now is experienced as more convincing truth, such as the immediacy or reality of God's existence. As this global description suggests, the awareness of meaning in the experience of prayer was profound for the participants.

It may be useful to address the relationship of this prayer description to the existential grounds of body, others, and time, which are thought to contextualize human experience (Pollio et al. 1997; Williamson and Hood 2016). Social scientists have long neglected the importance of the body in relation to religious experiences (McGuire (2008), even though the body itself is the medium through which biological and social dynamics are experienced and given meaning based on cultural/religious context (Csordas 1994). If nothing else, Muslim prayer is an embodied experience, even if observed only from an outsider's perspective. As Küng (2007) has noted, body postures assumed in *salat* are infused with symbolism that reflects the pray-er's inwardly felt submission to God. Before the prayer itself, the ritual of *wudo*, or ablution, prepares the body (and symbolically the spirit) for the encounter; such experience instills a feeling of cleanness in the body that makes one ready for presentation to the Almighty God.

All themes describing awareness in the experience of prayer are felt in the body. Feeling No Connection, the body is aware of performing mechanical operations with disinterest. At Friday prayer, P5 was especially aware of his body attempting to keep up with others when assuming correct postures and "trying not to stand out." Connection is felt in the body through awareness that one is standing before the Almighty God, then bowing, prostrating, and sitting in humility and worship. As P6 said, it is in "prostration, after the prayer [recitation], I think I feel more close to God." In Connection, the heart feels attuned to God, and the body feels naked or transparent and that it belongs. Particular Feelings are felt in the body with peace, inward harmony, and other positive emotions; "goose bumps," warmth, or a physical touch on the body sometimes may be felt. Spiritual change is an embodied experience, as one feels different in the body through Connection in prayer. The body is felt to be quenched of dire thirst, sated with a communion meal, cleansed from wrongness, and relieved of worry over matters of life. Certainty of Knowledge infuses the body with new insight into matters that previously brought concern; it affords a convincing new way of seeing things, whether through impartation of new knowledge or revival of the old. For participants, all thematic aspects of meaningful prayer were an embodied experience.

The descriptive themes of Connection and Certain Knowledge were experienced in relation to the existential ground of others. Although P5 felt no spiritual Connection (with God) during Friday prayer, he did describe himself in relation with those who had gathered for the event:

> Everybody does it together. It's more of a community gathering than maybe of a personal, spiritual growth [kind of thing]. . . . Most people had their eyes closed. . . . And everybody faces the east, you know . . . everybody's lined up nicely. . . . Before you pray, before you go in, you go say, "Hi, how are you doing?" and that kind of thing, and then after you pray, you know, "See you, maybe, next week," and that kind of thing, and it's just the tradition of it, and just the weekly ritual kind of thing that people do . . . [a] social connection. . . . It's just a bonding thing. (P5)

In performing Friday prayer, he also became aware of others when following their prayer movements: "In my mind I was thinking,. .. 'Okay. That's how people do it.. .. I'm trying to follow what you guys are doing.'" For P5, performing *salat* at the mosque offered the important value of community in connecting with other Muslims. All participants described the experience of Connection in relation to God, who, of course, is perceived as the Ultimate Other. God was brought into the moment of prayer as a present reality, whether experienced as an immediate presence (P1, P2, P3, P5) or as the Supreme Other whose existence is undeniable (P4, P6, P7). Certain Knowledge also related at times to the ground of others, as when participants experienced deeper revelations about God (P2, P3, P7) or understanding about others (P4, P6) for whom they prayed. The ground of others contributed a meaningful context for the experience of prayer.

No Connection/Connection, in particular, sometimes was experienced in relation to the ground of time. With No Connection, participants described prayer as a mechanical performance—something done on autopilot. During these times, formal prayer was simply something that had to be done before moving on to more interesting things, like supplication (at the end of formal prayer) or even preparations for dinner (P2). In such cases, time was experienced as slowly passing by. In contrast, the experience of Connection in prayer was so compelling for some that it passed by too quickly: "Oh, my goodness! I just want to expand this moment! This prayer, this focus!" (P3). With respect to all existential grounds, awareness of body was predominant in the participants' prayer experiences, although seamless shifts of attention also brought others and time to the forefront at certain moments. What is important to note is that the way in which each ground was experienced contributed to the meaning of lived prayer in a direct and unreflective manner.

As derived from this study, the description of meaning in the experience of Muslim prayer is not meant to explain causality but only to provide illumination about an important religious experience that too often has been merely ignored by researchers. The results, however, can be related to other investigations. Some themes of prayer experience seem to reflect overtones of mystical experience as described by William James (1902/1982. For him, profound religious experience is rooted in mysticism, which is accessed through altered states that reach beyond the marginal realm of consciousness and connect with some higher being. The experience of spiritual connection was perhaps the major theme in descriptions of meaningful prayer as it afforded a sense of transcendence and relation with God, who is perceived as creator of the universe. Furthermore, it was through this connection that participants received certain knowledge, which seemingly relates to the noetic quality that James ascribes to mystical experiences. Connection, as described, also is suggestive of Martin Buber's (1970) notion of

the I/Thou relation—one in which pure relation is experienced—although for P5, his connection with other Muslims during Friday prayer was more of an I/It relation, one in which the other is objectified and, in this case, used as model for guidance in prayer movements.

Some of the empirical findings of this investigation may inform more recent studies. Themes describing peace and certain resolution to life issues may illuminate how prayer benefits the seriously ill who are coping with disease and rehabilitation (Mohamed et al. 2015; Rezaei et al. 2008). Descriptions of spiritual connection and peace may convey meaning to pray-er brain activity that has been associated with lower anxiety, well-being, and "connection to God" (Newberg et al. 2015; see also Doufesh et al. 2012, 2014;). The themes describing connection with God, peace, conflict resolution, and spiritual change may illuminate the meaning of prayer found useful as an intervention in psychotherapy (Henry 2015; Hodge et al. 2016). And finally, the description of Friday prayer—and its value of connecting Muslim with Muslim—may offer insight into its role in formulating cultural identity (Lindgren 2005; Reece 1997). What is important here is to note that the relation of this study's findings to other investigations is not concerned with causality—that is, with explaining any effectiveness of prayer—but only with illuminating what the meaning of prayer might have been in these situations; these observations are not meant to generalize findings but only to be thought-provoking.

Although there are a few empirical studies on Muslim prayer, this investigation approached the topic in a way that is distinct from others. Previous studies have focused on prayer and interests related to physiology, health issues, neuropsychology, and various descriptive concerns. The present study has offered a description of the meaning in the experience of Muslim prayer from the first-person perspective of those who pray. As can be seen from the results, prayer can be a powerful and meaningful religious experience for those who practice it and one with transformative potential for daily life. Perhaps this is best said in a summation offered by a participant:

> Prayer to me is something that actually helps you improve. It causes you to listen. The idea is to—or at least in my mind—the idea is to clean your heart, groom it, make it spic and span, you know, wash it. And if you're lucky enough, and you've got a strong mind, I guess, then your house becomes absolutely clean, then God can come inside and live in it. So in Islam they say that God cannot be circumscribed or put into a space. He's limitless—except in the heart of a moment. (P1)

And to this, all participants in this study might say, "Amen."

Acknowledgments An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Washington DC, October 2017.

References

Al-Ghannam, R., & Al-Dossari, H. (2016). Prayer activity monitoring and recognition using acceleration features with mobile phone. *Arabian Journal for Science and Engineering, 41*, 4967–4979.

Ariff, M. S., Arshad, A. A., Johari, M. H., Rahimin, A., Fadzli, A. S., Mai, A. N., ... & Norhafiza, A. R. (2015). The study on range of motion of hip and knee in prayer by adult Muslim males: A preliminary report. *International Medical Journal Malaysia, 14,* 49–58.

BaHammam, A. S., Sharif, M. M., Spence, D. W., & Pandi-Perumal, S. R. (2012). Sleep architecture of consolidated and split sleep due to the dawn (Fajr) prayer among Muslims and its impact on daytime sleepiness. *Annals of Thoracic Medicine, 7*, 36–41.

Bai, R., Ye, P., Zhu, C., Zhao, W., & Zhang, J. (2012). Effect of salat prayer and exercise on cognitive functioning of Hui Muslims aged sixty and over. *Social Behavior and Personality, 40*, 1739–1748.

Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou*. New York: Touchstone.
Csordas, T. J. (1994). Introduction: The body as representation and being-in-the-world. In T. J. Csordas (Ed.), *Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self* (pp. 1–25). New York: Cambridge University Press.
Doufesh, H., Faisal, T., Lim, K., & Ibrahim, F. (2012). EEG spectral analysis on Muslim prayers. *Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback, 37*, 11–18.
Doufesh, H., Ibrahim, F., Ismail, N. A., & Ahmad, W. A. W. (2014). Effect of Muslim prayer (*salat*) on α electroencephalography and its relationship with autonomic nervous system activity. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, 20*, 558–562.
General Social Survey. (2016). GSS cumulative data file, 1972–2016. http://gss.norc.org/Get-The-Data. Accessed 20 Mar 2018.
Henry, H. M. (2015). Spiritual energy of Islamic prayers as a catalyst for psychotherapy. *Journal of Religion and Health, 54*, 387–398.
Hodge, D. R., Zidan, T., & Husain, A. (2016). Depression among Muslims in the United States: Examining the role of discrimination and spirituality as risk and protective factors. *Social Work, 61*, 45–52.
Hood Jr., R. W., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach* (4th ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
Ibrahim, F., Sian, T. C., Shanggar, K., & Razack, A. H. (2013). Muslim prayer movements as an alternative therapy in the treatment of erectile dysfunction: A preliminary study. *Journal of Physical Therapy Science, 25*, 1087–1091.
James, W. (1982). *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1902).
James, W. (1983). *The principles of psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1890).
Küng, H. (2007). *Islam: Past, present, and future*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
Lindgren, T. (2005). The narrative construction of Muslim prayer experiences. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 15*(2), 159–174.
McGuire, M. B. (2008). *Lived religion: Faith and practice in everyday life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Mohamed, C. R., Nelson, K., Wood, P., & Moss, C. (2015). Issues post-stroke for Muslim people in maintaining the practice of *salat* (prayer): A qualitative study. *Collegian, 22*, 243–249.
Newberg, A. B., Wintering, N. A., Yaden, D. B., Waldman, M. R., Reddin, J., & Alavi, A. (2015). A case series study of the neurophysiological effects of altered states of mind during intense Islamic prayer. *Journal of Physiology–Paris, 109*, 214–220.
Pollio, H. R., Henley, T. B., & Thompson, C. J. (1997). *The phenomenology of everyday life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Reece, D. (1997). The gendering of prayer: An ethnographic study of Muslim women in the United States. *Journal of Communication and Religion, 20*, 37–47.
Rezaei, M., Adib-Hajbaghery, M., Seyedfatemi, N., & Hoseini, F. (2008). Prayer in Iranian cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice, 14*, 90–97.
Rufa'i, A. A., Aliyu, H. H., Oyeyemi, A. Y., & Oyeyemi, A. L. (2013). Cardiovascular responses during head-down crooked kneeling position assumed in Muslim prayers. *Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences, 38*, 174–179.
Sirry, M., & Omar, A. R. (2014). Muslim prayer and public spheres: An interpretation of the Quranic verse 29:45. *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology, 68*, 39–53.
Spilka, B., & Ladd, K. L. (2013). *The psychology of prayer: A scientific approach*. New York: Guilford Press.
Umar, M. (2011). *How to pray: A step-by-step guide to prayer in Islam*. North Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
Williamson, W. P., & Hood Jr., R. W. (2016). *Psychology and spiritual transformation in a substance abuse program: The Lazarus project*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
Williamson, W. P., & Hood Jr., R. W. (2012). The Lazarus project: A longitudinal study of spiritual transformation among substance abusers. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture, 15*, 611–635.
Williamson, W. P., & Hood Jr., R. W. (2013). Spiritual transformation: A phenomenological study among recovering substance abusers. *Pastoral Psychology, 62*, 889–906.
Williamson, W. P., & Hood Jr., R. W. (2015a). Poison-drinking in obedience to the faith: A phenomenological study of the experience. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture, 18*, 199–208.
Williamson, W. P., & Hood Jr., R. W. (2015b). The role of mentoring in spiritual transformation: A faith-based approach to recovery from substance abuse. *Pastoral Psychology, 64*, 135–152.
Williamson, W. P., Pollio, H. R., & Hood Jr., R. W. (2000). A phenomenological analysis of the anointing among religious serpent handlers. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 10*(4), 221–240.
Willis, P. (2001). The "things themselves" in phenomenology. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology, 1*(1), 14.
Yamane, D. (2000). Narrative and religious experience. *Sociology of Religion, 61*, 171–189.
Yamane, D., & Polzer, M. (1994). Ways of seeing ecstasy in modern society: Experimental-expressive and cultural-linguistic views. *Sociology of Religion, 55*, 1–25.