



WE CAN INFLUENCE GOD

WHY PRAYER WORKS

IN CONTEXT

KEY MOVEMENTS
Process theology and open theism

WHEN AND WHERE
Late 20th century, USA and Europe

BEFORE

From prehistory Many primal belief systems use prayer and ritual to seek the favour of supernatural forces or beings.

First millennium BCE

The Bible tells that God answered Moses's prayer to change his mind about destroying the Israelites after they worship the golden calf.

AFTER

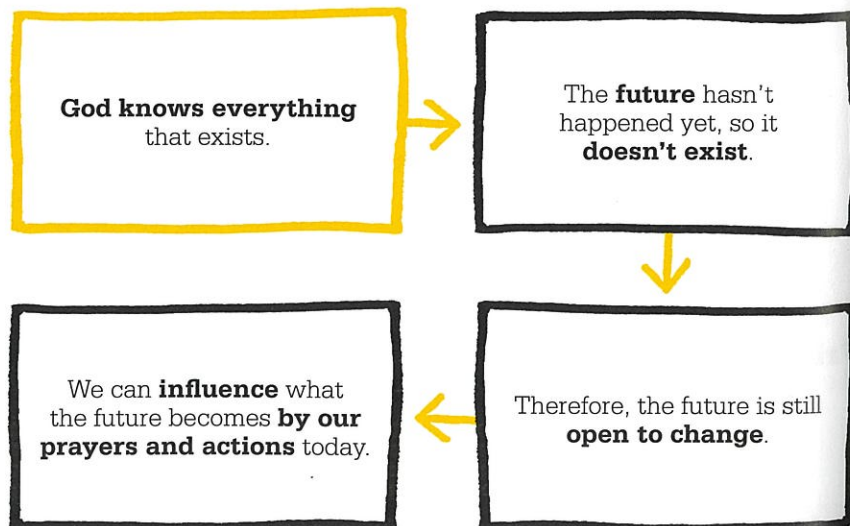
1960s The Liberation Theology movement in South America emphasizes social and economic justice, maintaining that God responds especially to the prayers of the poor and oppressed in society.

From the earliest times, Jewish and Christian theologians have wrestled with complex issues surrounding the nature of God and the relationship of God to humankind. To some he is a vengeful God, who not only stands in judgment at the end of time, but also chooses whether or not to respond to those who pray. To others, he is perceived as an all-knowing presence who has decided the course of world history and has reasons for all events, so

that every detail of the future is mapped out in advance. In this latter representation, God is immune to appeals from humans for help because he has absolute prior knowledge of the outcome of every situation.

The relevance of prayer

How the relationship between God and the things that happen is understood has deep implications for the role of Christian prayer. If God already knows the past, present, and future, then prayer –



See also: The battle between good and evil 60–65 ■ Divining the future 79 ■ Devotion through puja 114–15
■ Jesus's message to the world 204–207 ■ Augustine and free will 220–21

Theologians of hope

The rejection of traditional theological concepts such as God's foreknowledge (his awareness of future events), immutability (his unchanging nature), and impassibility (his freedom from emotion and independence from other beings) was not confined to any one school of theology during the 20th century. The ideas have been labelled in various ways, including process theology, the openness of

God, and open theism. In the later 20th century, a group of theologians emerged who have been loosely termed the "theologians of hope". These include, in Germany, Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, and in the USA, Robert Jenson. One of their principal arguments was that because the future does not yet exist – even for God – the essential characteristic of Christianity is hope.

“
God... is so related to the world that there is between him and that world a "give-and-take"...
He is influenced by what happens.
W. Pittenger
”

communicating with God by offering verbal praise or requests, through thoughts and meditations, or in the form of deliberate acts of worship – seems irrelevant. Merely telling God what he already knows would carry no hope of changing what will happen. However, if the future is not already determined by God and is truly open, then prayer becomes an essential part of shaping that future.

Inside the mind of God

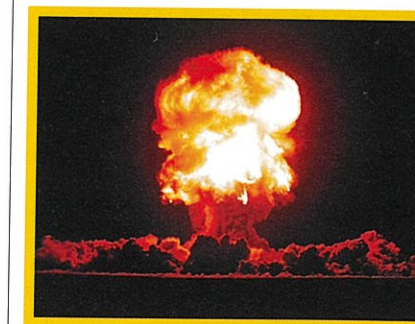
Although Christian theology has traditionally regarded God as omniscient, possessing a complete knowledge of all things past, present, and future, in the 20th century some theologians began to reject the idea of his "foreknowledge" (knowledge of the future). If God knows what will happen, then the future must already be set in stone, which, they argued, would remove true freedom and spontaneity from history. This would also raise questions about God's essential goodness, and whether he is complicit in evil if

he has prior knowledge of it, but takes no preventative action – as may be evident, for example, in his knowledge, even before the creation, that humans would bring suffering and wickedness into the world.

The future is open

The classic Christian view of God's foreknowledge depends upon the belief that God exists outside of time, so that what is in the future for human beings (and hence is nonexistent and unknowable) is in the past for God (and therefore both exists and is knowable). However, this view owes more to ancient Greek philosophy than genuine Christian thinking. The Bible describes a God who actively accompanies his people through time, not simply watching them from a distant position outside of time. Moreover, Christians believe that the coming of Jesus as a human being should be understood as the clearest indication that God is not outside of time or the reality of human life

on earth, since he lived a human life, with all its limitations. Consequently, if the future does not yet exist for either humans or God, then it can be truly open. Seen from this perspective, God is not a distant observer but an active participant in the historical process, a presence who listens to the prayers and appeals of people, responding to their needs and walking beside them in their journey through life. ■



The misuse of weapons of war, such as nuclear bombs, indicates the human capacity for evil – in the future as well as the past. Does God know about this and choose to do nothing?