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Christian Prayer and the Kingdom Quest: A Dialogue with Our Father across Languages and Cultures

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Abstract: Much has been written about the Our Father (also referred to as the Lord’s Prayer) as it represents a personal and public dialogue with God in daily prayer and liturgy. While its theological and spiritual aspects have been thoroughly investigated, their cultural implications for different speech communities have been disregarded. This study aims to compare the English, Italian, and French versions of the Lord’s Prayer in the Catholic Church in an attempt to examine the role that culture is bound to play in shaping religious response and tracing a preferential interpretive pathway through a sacred text. This comparative analysis is focused on lexical choice and metaphorical imagery and integrated by an examination of the wider co-text, the Bible. The analysis has shown that the versions of the Lord’s Prayer present distinctive features possibly reflective of deeply-ingrained cultural attitudes such as the appeal for elevation in the English prayer, the dual tension between deference and solidarity in the Italian prayer, and the inclination for a grand narrative of heroes and anti-heroes in the French prayer. The study concludes that renewed attention to Christian sources could help bridge the gap between religion and culture, and reconcile our spiritual and social identities in post-secular societies.

Keywords: religion; theolinguistics; Christianity; culture; identity; metaphorical language; translation

1. Introduction

Since the early days of Christianity, the simple yet powerful structure of the *Pater Noster* (“Our Father”), better known as the Lord’s Prayer in English-speaking countries, has provoked reverent reflection as the very essence of Jesus’ teaching, specifically outlining what is truly necessary to lead a good life (Hamman 1952; Koessler 1999; Williams 2009). The number of translations and adaptations of this prayer, from the Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic manuscripts of the Bible, have been countless as the result of a painstaking work of interpretation, not always entrusted to the written word but also based on the oral transmission of liturgy and catechesis, particularly in the early Christian church (Buchinger 2010; Louth 1979; Philonenko 2004). The need or desire to interpret this universal or “strangest” prayer, whose message can be understood and shared by any other religion’s followers (Crossan 2011, p. 8), has resulted in a growing number of tentative translations, personal adaptations, and renderings (Cerbelaud 2010; Davies 2017; Meynet 2005). By way of illustration, a much-quoted version coming from the Maori community can give an idea of how Jesus’ essential words have been embellished in a deeply emotional rendition:

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,

Loving God, in whom is heaven:
 The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
 The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
 Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
 Your commonwealth of peace and freedom
 Sustain our hope and come on earth.
 With the bread we need for today, feed us.
 In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
 In times of temptation and testing, strengthen us.
 From trials too great to endure, spare us.
 From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
 For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever. Amen.
 (The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia 1988, p. 181)

The comparison of this version with the English text gives evidence of the culture-bound nature of translation and interpretation even in the case of a sacred text to which serious limitations would apply (Hare 2014):

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread;
 and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
 and do not subject us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one.

(Matthew 6: 9–13, as quoted in *The New American Bible, 2002*, available online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PVF.HTM accessed on 30 July 2020)

As can be inferred from the Maori version, even concepts such as “our father” and “kingdom”, apparently self-evident for Christian believers, demand metaphorical processing as they are associated with the image of a loving and personal divinity governing a remote or marvelous land (“kingdom”), in stark contrast with other views of the divinity such as, for example, an overwhelming physical force devoid of emotions and affectivity. Thus, the simplicity of the Lord’s Prayer is only apparent as becomes clear when each request or petition is explained and paraphrased in concrete images and non-specific religious language, made accessible to non-Christians and people from African and Asian cultures (Wierzbicka 2018). Indeed, it is the very familiarity of this prayer, deeply ingrained in European cultural literacy and one of the most memorized in the whole world, that leads to its misinterpretation and to an oversimplified and almost automated response (Wierzbicka 2001, 2011).

In order to try to fully understand the multilayered meanings of this prayer, we need to contextualize its specific terminology in Jesus’ time and teaching (see also Ong 2012–2013). By way of example, the initial petition “Hallowed be thy name” entails the believers’ commitment in treating God’s name as holy at a basic level of signification, but at a deeper level it points to the believers’ commitment to act in holiness in so far as a name in Jewish culture meant a person’s public image and true character (Crystal 1965, pp. 126–27): consequently, not just the name but the very essence of God must be sanctified in concrete actions, in line with Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees for the emptiness of their words: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15: 7; all the Bible quotations in English are taken from *The New American Bible* by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002, available on the Vatican website).

We also need to consider the meaning potential of this prayer in contemporary society, given that any text acquires new and sometimes unexpected meanings in different historical periods and cultural traditions as argued by postmodernist theories of reading with their emphasis on the endless potential of interpretation (see [Stevenson 2004](#) on the divide between Eastern and Western interpretations of the Lord's Prayer in the first centuries of Christian church). As an example of the dynamic meaning-making process activated by a text, Martin Luther's explanation of the Lord Prayer's petitions, evolving over a twenty-year period, bears a trace both of the historical scene scarred by fierce religious struggles as well as his own personal concerns over human affliction and sickness, more acute in his late years: for example, evil in the last petition was first explained as a reference to his theological opponents and, later on in his life, to sickness and death ([McNair 2017](#)).

Considering that any religion and religious domain is a "cultural complex which consists of mental representations" ([Downes 2018](#), p. 90), exploring the language encoding of the Our Father in discourse communities belonging to the same Catholic tradition—the English, the Italian, and the French—can contribute to shedding light on the sociocultural adaptations of the Christian message, by foregrounding the reception process of a sacred text. The reason why only these three versions have been selected for study is my familiarity with English, Italian, and French, but I believe that extending this comparative analysis to other languages would yield further insights into the culture-bound nature of religious attitude and identity. The English community referred to in this study encompasses both the United Kingdom and the United States in so far as religious attitude and faith are crucial components of cultural identity, and the strong community affiliation and "corporate worship" of Catholicism can provide an alternative form of identification for Catholics across the United Kingdom and the USA ([Cohen and Hill 2007](#); [Hoge 2002](#); [Wilkins-Laflamme 2016](#)). As my analysis does not take into account other English-speaking countries, or French-speaking countries, the demographics I have used only concern the Catholics in the United Kingdom, United States, Italy, and France with particular regard to their general commitment to church attendance and liturgical prayer. According to [Pew Research Center \(2015a, 2015b, 2018a\)](#), Catholics account for 20% of the total adult population in the US, for 19% in the UK, for 78% in Italy, and 60% in France. These percentages, however, drop significantly where religious practice is concerned, with only 16% of the US Catholic believers showing a high level of involvement in their congregations, as opposed to 20% of British Catholics, 43% of Italian Catholics, and 22% of French Catholics attending church services on a regular basis. Age has also been found to affect people's religious identity, with a heavier concentration of Christians among the elderly and the middle-aged across the United States and Europe ([Pew Research Center 2018b](#)). Although these data cannot yield specific information about the role played in private prayer by the Lord's Prayer within the English, Italian, and French Catholic speech communities, they nevertheless can offer a general overview of some of its most likely recipients.

2. Materials and Method

The Lord's Prayer was recorded in the Gospel as part of Jesus' teaching, in response to the request of a small group of faithful disciples and an immense crowd of casual followers. Matthew and Luke transmit two slightly different versions, but its central themes are also present in Mark and John ([Maggioni 1995](#); [Walker 1982](#)). In Matthew, the Lord's Prayer is given during the Sermon on the Mount after Jesus describes the nature of the beatitudes and the fulfillment of the law based on the unconditioned love of friends and enemies, setting an almost impossible standard of goodness for his closest disciples and the crowds gathered around him. Coming after these highly exacting demands, the prayer may even sound surprisingly simple and unchallenging. The Latin version below, authored by Saint Jerome in his translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, was adopted by Christians across Europe as their official prayer from the end of the fourth century until the 16th century approximately ([Westcott 1881](#)):

Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum.

Adveniat regnum tuum; fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra.

*Panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie,
et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.
Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo. Amen.*

(Matthaeus 6: 9–13, *The Vulgate*, available online: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthaeus+6&version=VULGATE> accessed on 30 June 2020)

In Luke, the prayer is taught to a small group of disciples, after they had seen Jesus absorbed in prayer. However close to Matthew’s prayer in wording and spirit, it differs in length as it consists of a shorter invocation (“Pater”), and only five petitions, having omitted Matthew’s third and last one: *fiat voluntas tua* (“your will be done”) and *libera nos a malo* (“free us from evil”). Although Luke’s version is generally considered closer to Jesus’ original words precisely because of its greater conciseness (Jeremias 1964; Stendhal 1982), there is no conclusive evidence as to which is the more faithful (see Goulder 1963). Early Christians based their prayer on Matthew’s longer version, as they believed it elaborated on two fundamental concepts: the kingdom conceived not as a physical place but as the realization of God’s will, and the nature of evil, closely related to the “temptation” or final test.

Even though textual exegesis of newly discovered manuscripts has entailed a relentless and still ongoing work of translation of the Holy Bible, the Lord’s Prayer is regarded as a well-established text, based on tradition and habit, especially consolidated by Sunday liturgy. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (Thurston 1910), the Catholic English version of the Lord’s Prayer goes back to a 1541 ordinance in England that imposed a uniform translation of all the Christian prayers, the only differences to the prayer currently in use being the modernization of “which art” into “who art” and “in earth” into “on earth.” Unlike the French version, which has undergone a number of changes mostly due to the attempt to reconcile the different Christian traditions in France—i.e., the Catholic, the Orthodox and the Protestant (Petitimbert 2015) -, the English as well as the Italian versions of the Our Father seem to have been more closely anchored to the liturgical tradition and more resistant to change.

Given the large number of variants of the Lord’s Prayer, this study is based on the three versions featured in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, available in several languages on the Vatican website: the Italian version can be downloaded as a series of pdf files with the same page layout as the printed text, while the English and French ones are only available as a sequence of web pages (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993; *Catéchisme de l’Église Catholique* 2003). The comparative analysis of the prayers, focused on lexical choice and metaphorical imagery, is integrated by an examination of the wider co-text, the Holy Bible, with particular regard to keywords and concepts, which have been investigated by the aid of concordancers, i.e., tools that retrieve all the contexts of occurrence for a given word (Stubbs 1996). The concordancers used are freely available on the Vatican website http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_FA.HTM and on two other websites, www.annuairechretien.com/bible/index.php and scroll.bibletraditions.org.

As argued by Crystal and Davy (1969, p. 168), the study of unexpected collocations in sacred texts (e.g., kingdom of heaven) can foster a deeper understanding of religious beliefs as well as promote interfaith dialogue and reflexivity. The stylistic variations across the three language versions have been explained in terms of “cognitive register”, i.e., the way religious language use is interpreted in contexts of situation and culture (Downes 2018, p. 89). Although religious identity is, in many respects, an elusive aspect largely influenced by social and individual factors, (among which, social class, prestige, deference to authority, personhood, etc.) sometimes at odds with each other (Downes 2011), I have tried to relate the distinguishing features of each prayer to the plural and evolving identities of Catholicism within cultural and national frameworks (Baranski and West 2001; Dillon 1999; Garelli 2005; Morrison and Compagnon 2010).

3. An Overview of the Lord's Prayer

The prayer calls for God's intervention in a humble way known to believers, through indirect requests blurring agency by the use of either the passive voice (*santificetur*, "be sanctified") or an inanimate subject (*Adveniat regnum tuum*, "your kingdom come"), or through direct requests for what is essential for a good life: bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from temptation and evil. The interpersonal orientation of this prayer, as well as its petitionary structure, typical of the most basic or primitive form of prayer (Downes 2018), are foregrounded by the alternation of the pronouns *tu/nos* and by the sequence of subjunctives and imperatives (see Table 1). The first part of this prayer, built around the second person pronoun, relates to God (*nomen tuum*, "your name"; *regnum tuum*, "your kingdom"; *voluntas tua*, "your will") and to his power, while the second part, revolving around the first person plural pronoun *nos*, refers to the whole human community and our daily experience (*panem*, "bread"; *debita*, "debts"; *tentationem*, "temptation"; *malo*, "evil").

Table 1. The petitionary structure of the Lord's Prayer.

Clauses	Functions
<i>Pater noster, qui es in caelis,</i>	invocation
<i>santificetur nomen tuum.</i>	first petition
<i>Adveniat regnum tuum;</i>	second petition
<i>fiat voluntas tua,</i>	third petition
<i>sicut in caelo et in terra.</i>	comparison
<i>Panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie,</i>	fourth petition
<i>et dimitte nobis debita nostra,</i>	fifth petition
<i>sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.</i>	comparison/cause
<i>Et ne nos inducas in tentationem,</i>	sixth petition
<i>sed libera nos a malo. Amen.</i>	seventh petition

Between the two sets of petitions, the central reference to heaven and earth marks the tension between the kingdom of heaven and the material world of human beings. In particular, the bread of the fourth petition can be regarded as the one good thing that establishes a positive and empowering connection between God and human beings, burdened as they are by debts or trespasses, temptation and evil (Meynet 2002). The central comparison between heaven and earth asserts the possibility that both worlds comply with God's will, making it clear that the material and the transcendental can be joined and be one. In fact, the correlation *sicut in caelo et in terra* ("as in heaven so on earth") qualifies not only the previous petition, *fiat voluntas tua* ("your will be done"), but also the two preceding ones, *santificetur nomen tuum* ("your name be sanctified") and *Adveniat regnum tuum* ("your kingdom come") (Thurston 1910).

4. A Comparative Analysis

As shown in the parallel prayers in Table 2, the Italian and French prayers read like poems, just as prayers in the Old Testament were in the shape of songs, hymns and psalms, with an inner beat and poetic imagery that ensured their memorability and attractiveness (Crystal 1966, p. 18; Martin 2015). The Aramaic prayer originally spoken by Jesus was, in fact, a true poem characterized by metrical patterns and rhyme (Lohse 2013, p. 15).

By contrast, the English prayer is set in prose, possibly revealing the intimate connection with the Protestant version and the influence of Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* with its aspiration to plain language (Targoff 2001). The structure and sequence of petitions are the same in the three prayers, as to be expected of the translations of a sacred text, and only one minor difference can be noted in the sequencing of the petitions: interestingly, Matthew's line about "thy will" is only split in the Italian prayer in which, additionally, the order of the comparison is reversed in a more faithful rendition of the Greek original: *come in cielo così in terra* ("as in Heaven so on earth") and with greater emphasis on heaven as the "eternal model" (Crossan 2011, p. 118).

Table 2. The English, Italian, and French Catholic versions of the Lord’s Prayer, available on the Vatican website.

English Version	Italian Version	French Version
Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.	Padre nostro che sei nei cieli, sia santificato il tuo nome, venga il tuo regno, sia fatta la tua volontà come in cielo così in terra. Dacci oggi il nostro pane quotidiano, e rimetti a noi i nostri debiti come noi li rimettiamo ai nostri debitori, e non ci indurre in tentazione, ma liberaci dal male.	Notre Père qui es aux cieux, que ton Nom soit sanctifié, que ton Règne vienne, que ta Volonté soit faite sur la terre comme au ciel. Donne-nous aujourd’hui notre pain de ce jour, pardonne-nous nos offenses comme nous pardonnons aussi à ceux qui nous ont offensés, et ne nous soumetts pas à la tentation, mais délivre-nous du Mal.

4.1. The Shifting Identity of *Malo*

Capitalization appears to be an interesting feature of the prayer as it differentiates the English and Italian versions, which only capitalize “Father”, from the French prayer capitalizing all the nouns referred to God, as well as to its opposite, evil, *Mal*. Absence of capitalization in the English and Italian versions, in line with the abstract interpretation of *malo* provided by Saint Jerome in the Vulgate (Petitimbert 2015), points to the familiar aspects of the divinity, a father, whose name, will and the kingdom of heaven are made ordinary for ordinary people to access. By the same token, evil as a common noun loses the malicious power and repulsive attractiveness always associated with the “Prince of darkness” (Russell 1988). By contrast, in the French version, God’s name, kingdom, and will become proper names, distinct from any other name, kingdom, and will and absolute universals. Likewise, evil is capitalized to refer to a superior metaphysical entity, the principle of darkness, i.e., the devil, according to many ancient commentators (Hamman 1952). Considering the sparing use of capitals in present-day France even where religious doctrine is concerned (Collectif Imprimerie Nationale 2002), the capitalization of common nouns such as “name”, “kingdom” and “will” as well as “evil” may suggest an allegory staging the eternal struggle between Good and Evil: *notre Père*, with his distinct attributes, is at the forefront of the fight against *Mal* (“evil”), so as to return his creatures to their original bliss.

The case for interpreting *Mal* as the devil does not rest simply on the use of the capital letter. Many commentators interpret it as an oblique reference to the devil, on a number of accounts (Brown 1961; Carmignac 1969; *Catechismo della Chiesa Cattolica* 2003, p. 749; Meynet 2005; Petitimbert 2015; Philonenko 2004; von Dobschutz 1914; Wierzbicka 2011): (a) the authoritativeness of the Church Fathers such as Tertullian, Origen, and Chrysostom who interpreted *malo* as a reference to the devil; (b) the very ambiguity of *πονηροῦ* in the Greek manuscript, which could refer either to an inanimate neutral entity or to a masculine animate being; (c) the key opposition between God Father at the start, and temptation and evil at the end which would call for a symmetrical personification of evil, and lastly (d) Jesus’ many warnings against the devil throughout the Gospels, as when he condemns the Jews: “You belong to your father the devil and you willingly carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8: 44).

Depending on whether *malo* is personified as the devil or regarded as everybody’s fair share of difficulties and troubles, the worldview encapsulated in the prayer turns out to be significantly different: while the abstract interpretation endorsed by Saint Jerome is more rational, the personified reading favored in the French version—and particularly in the Orthodox prayer with the explicit reference to *le Malin*, i.e., “the devil”—emphasizes the supernatural aspects out of human control. The discrepancy between the version in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), ending with “evil”, and the one included in *The American Bible*, which opts for “the Evil one” (both texts available on the Vatican website), can be regarded as further proof of the ambiguities and contradictions in the interpretations of the Lord’s Prayer. Specifically, it seems worth noting that neither the English nor the Italian Catholic

versions personify *malo*, even though the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993) explicitly identifies the evil in the last petition as Satan, the Evil one: “In this petition, evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God. The devil (*dia-bolos*) is the one who ‘throws himself across’ God’s plan and his work of salvation accomplished in Christ.” (available online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_PAC.HTM accessed on 6 July 2020). This discrepancy between interpretation and translation seems all the more noteworthy in the light of the recent controversy on the translation of the sixth petition: whether God does or does not lead his creatures into temptation is open to debate, but the very identity of evil is thoroughly ignored. As Petitimbert (2015, p. 9) suggests, the Catholic and Protestant churches, permeated by the Enlightenment and its rational trend, have thrown away the supernatural and turned Satan, the traditional opponent and great deceiver of mankind since Genesis, into a literary myth.

4.2. Heaven/s and the Kingdom of God

One of the characteristic features of any religion is the contrast between the human reality of imperfection and decay on the one hand and infinite perfection on the other; the Lord’s Prayer makes no exception in so far as it points to the kingdom of heaven as man’s inner desire and invocation to God, guiding his prayer and his life. While the English prayer uses the same word, heaven, in the starting invocation and in the third petition, the French and Italian versions use the plural word to identify God’s abode (*cieli, cieux*) and the singular (*cielo, ciel*) to identify his kingdom, mirroring the alternation plural/singular in the Greek original. This discrepancy raises the question of whether there is a difference in meaning between the singular and the plural (as in English between heaven and heavens) and what it is exactly. An examination of the concordances for heaven/heavens/*cielo/cieli/ciel/cieux* in the Bible (i.e., the occurrences of words with their surrounding context) shows that their meanings largely overlap and that they are used interchangeably to refer to the act of creation and to God’s abode:

Creation

God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1)

Dio creò il cielo e la terra (Genesi 1:1)

Dieu créa les cieux et la terre (Genèse 1:1)

God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth (Genesis 14:22)

Signore altissimo, padrone dei cieli e della terra (Genesi 14: 22)

le Dieu Très Haut, maître du ciel et de la terre (Genèse 14:22)

Place

what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds as mighty as yours? (Deuteronomy 3:24)

quale altro Dio, infatti, in cielo o sulla terra, può fare opere e prodigi come i tuoi? (Deuteronomio 3: 24)

quel Dieu dans les cieux et sur la terre agit comme tu agis et avec la même puissance? (Deutéronome 3: 24)

the LORD is God in the heavens above and on earth below (Deuteronomy 4: 39)

il Signore è Dio lassù nei cieli e quaggiù sulla terra (Deuteronomio 4: 39)

l’Éternel est Dieu, en haut dans le ciel et en bas sur la terre (Deutéronome 4:39)

Additionally, they are often personified as living beings rejoicing in the beauty of creation:

Living beings

Then heaven, and earth, and everything in them shall shout (Jeremiah 51:48)

Esulteranno su Babilonia cielo e terra (Geremia 51: 48)

Dans le ciel et sur la terre on entendra alors une grande clameur au sujet de Babylone (Jérémie 51:48)

The heavens praise your marvels, LORD (Psalms 89: 6)

I cieli cantano le tue meraviglie, Signore (Salmi 89: 6)

Les cieux célèbrent tes merveilles, ô Éternel! (Psaumes 89:6)

While the English, Italian and the French words heavens, *cieli* and *cieux* refer to an extension of the power of divinity, only the singular heaven is occasionally used as a metonymy for God, as also shown by the upper case use in the quotations below:

God

All the people prostrated themselves and adored and praised Heaven, who had given them success. (Maccabees 4: 55)

Tutto il popolo si prostrò con la faccia a terra e adorarono e benedissero il Cielo che era stato loro propizio. (Maccabei 4: 55)

Le peuple entier se prosterna la face contre terre pour adorer, puis ils bénirent le Ciel qui avait fait aboutir leur effort. (Maccabées 4: 55)

The way the Greek plural *οὐρανοὶς* (and Latin *coelis*) in the first line is translated across the three versions lends itself to being interpreted as evidence of how God's dwelling is conceptualized: as a plurality or a unity; many diverse skies (as in the Italian and French versions) or one and only dimension (as in the English version).

Interestingly, heaven/*cieli/cieux* collocate with kingdom/*regno/royaume* in Matthew's Gospel, marking a radical shift from the way kingdoms had been represented in the Old Testament. In fact, quite unlike the kingdoms of old torn apart, conquered, or restored, whose bloodstained history is extensively recorded in the Holy Scriptures (Philonenko 2004), the kingdom of heaven belongs to the persecuted: not the victors but the victims are the "heirs of God" (Romans 8: 17):

the kingdom of heaven is at hand! (Matthew 3:2)

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5: 10)

unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5: 20)

Even more importantly, the kingdom of heaven is not "a place ('space'), but a state or way of being" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p4s2a2.htm accessed on 6 July 2020). The very petition "Thy kingdom come" embodies a dynamic conception of a form of governance not circumscribed to an observed location (von Dobschutz 1914); in Jesus' own words: "The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For behold, the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17: 20–21). Jesus' insistence on the closeness of the kingdom and on its concrete presence amid his disciples would point to an inner and spiritual dimension of heaven, shared by God and his creatures alike: no longer a heavenly-earthly divide but "two sides of the same coin" (Crossan 2011, p. 49; Stendhal 1982). Its meaning in everyday language can be regarded as further evidence of the unified and distinct nature of heaven as opposed to heavens, *cieli* and *cieux*: "a place, state, or experience of supreme bliss" (Soanes and Stevenson 2003, p. 803). The close association between these two different meanings, religious and general, point to the pervasiveness of the Christian faith in the Middle Ages; as stated by Wawrzyniak (2018, p. 114), "the concept of happiness was grounded in religion and had a different dimension than the contemporary understanding of the idea of happiness. Happiness was not perceived as personal and attainable. There was a close link between being moral, virtuous, and happy." Even though Christianity is no longer the leading paradigm in our secular or post-secular societies (Dobbelaere 1981; Moberg et al. 2012), traces of its past prominence still remain in language use. The expression being in heaven expresses an age-old feeling of blissful

unity between God and his creatures. Likewise in Italian and in French, similar expressions drawn from the religious domain point to the same state of joy and elation: *essere in paradiso; être au paradis*. The image of the sky as divided by medieval astronomers into spheres (Brown 1993a, p. 1208) is used to express perfect joy across the three languages: in seventh heaven; *al settimo cielo; au septième ciel*.

As convincingly argued by Wierzbicka (1999, pp. 49 ff.), emotions are first and foremost concepts influenced by cultural assumptions and social conventions. As such, they call for a singular representation: anger, happiness, shame, etc., do not want the plural; where the plural of emotion words is available (e.g., joys; fears; etc.), this happens simply because it is not the emotion itself which is being referred to, but the causes or behaviors associated with that emotion. In sum, while the use of the singular heaven in the English prayer suggests that the kingdom is one and its spiritual dimension overlaps with pure bliss, the alternation between the singular and the plural in the Italian and French prayers points to a dual vision of heaven as one-dimensional and plural, coinciding with God's will and made up of several skies, in line with medieval cosmology and its vision of human life as a pilgrim's progress from decay to perfection.

4.3. Our Daily Bread

The bread in the fourth petition has been related to material food actually supplied to the Jews: the manna, the nourishment showered upon Moses' followers while they were crossing the desert to reach their promised land (Boismard 1995; Brown 1961; Starcky 1971) and the miraculous bread supplied by Jesus through his disciples to a thousand followers at several points in the Gospel (Crossan 2011, p. 126). The image of our daily bread for this day with its emphasis on day to day consumption is also a powerful reminder of the continuous nourishment provided by God, which makes any attempt at saving it appears futile, as when in the desert Moses' followers had found that the manna in excess that they had kept for the following day had rotten.

Bread has also been equated to a spiritual food of various kinds: the words spoken by Jesus, and the Eucharist, Jesus' body and blood, which alone can respond to people's true needs and realize the union of the divine and the human in Jesus' disciples: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." (Matthew 6: 54–56).

Besides the material and the spiritual interpretation of bread, a third reading is also put forward by some commentators, who interpret it as the bread of God's heavenly table that will be eaten at the end of time (Brown 1961). While the material/spiritual reading, activated by the literal and metaphorical meanings attached to bread, is intrinsic to the prayer (Wierzbicka 2001, 2011), the eschatological interpretation relies on how the Greek hapax *ἐπιούσιον* postmodifying "bread" in the Greek Bible is translated. Faced with the challenge of translating an unknown and unrecorded word, Saint Jerome translated it in two different ways: *supersubstantialem* in Matthew and *quotidianum* in Luke. On the basis of two different etymologies, in fact, it was interpreted as "supersubstantial", either necessary for daily living or destined for the coming day (Citati 2003; Starcky 1971). Both interpretations are possible given the lack of any equivalent term, even outside the Scriptures, which could make the meaning of this word a piece of shared knowledge rather than the result of well-researched speculations. However, it seems worthwhile noting that Erasmus' Latin translation of the New Testament, which privileged *quotidianum* ("daily"), has significantly oriented the interpretation of the fourth petition towards bread meant for daily living (McNair 2017).

The English and Italian versions both use an adjective with the same meaning (daily, *quotidiano*) to qualify "bread", whereas the French version uses a periphrasis, *de ce jour* ("of this day" or "of that day"), which sounds more emphatic, particularly because of its rheme position at the end of the clause. Since the demonstrative *ce* in French can be translated either "this" or "that" depending on the context, *notre pain de ce jour* ("our bread of this/that day") could either refer to today's allowance or to the eschatological food of the end times. While the adjectives daily/*quotidiano* work as a mere attribute that easily accommodates the semantic oscillation between the literal and the metaphorical meanings of the

wheat bread of everyday life and the Eucharist of eternal life, the phrase *de ce jour* shifts the emphasis on the timing of the bread consumption, the present day or the future time of the heavenly banquet, while not excluding the material and spiritual interpretation of that bread.

The version of the Lord's Prayer anterior to the Second Vatican Council had two interchangeable options: *quotidien* ("daily") and *de chaque jour* ("for every day") (De Foucault 1970): the former, *quotidien*, in line with St Jerome's translation of Luke, is closer to the English and Italian versions, while the latter, *de chaque jour*, again foregrounds the temporal element, and in particular the duration and continuity of God's nourishment. As argued by the bishop of Montpellier, Carré (2017, p. 60), when more than one interpretation is available, it is better to keep all of them rather than try to eliminate some. This same view is endorsed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), which explains the "daily bread" in terms of material and spiritual food, the Eucharist, as well as the feast of the Kingdom at the end of time.

4.4. Debts and Trespasses

The image of the debt and debtors central in Matthew's Gospel is only kept in the Italian version, whereas both the English and the French versions use an apparently more direct image ("trespasses," *offences*) doing away with the subtleties and potential for confusion attached to the metaphor. As pointed out by Crossan (2011, pp. 145–48), the debt could be interpreted literally as it was a very common Jewish practice that indigent people would borrow money and even sell themselves or their children as slaves if they could not pay them off. The ideal of justice represented by the kingdom is not at all abstract but starts in concrete daily experience with bread distributed to everybody in the same quantity, with debts to be mutually canceled, and lives rescued and restored from slavery. As a more equal society started to develop discarding debts and slavery, only the metaphorical meaning of the petition was perceived and understood, debts being equated with trespasses or offenses, and debtors with those who abuse or mistreat other people.

In addition to its historical grounding in a patriarchal society that tolerated temporary slavery, the debt/debtor image has a deep religious and spiritual meaning in Christian doctrine: debtors and creditors in the human community are specular reflections of each other and mutually dependent for forgiveness, as in the parable of the wicked servant who had sent his debtor to prison for he could not pay off his debt, although he had just been forgiven his much greater debt by his master (Matthew 18: 21–35). Moreover, unlike a trespass, which pertains to the juridical domain and is to be punished by law, a debt is "something (as money, goods, or service) which one person is under an obligation to pay or render to another" (Brown 1993b, p. 604). Thus, while an offense is necessarily something hurtful, a debt can have an unexpected positive side to it pointing to the goodwill or generosity of the creditor and the gratefulness of the debtor (Petitimbert 2015). In other words, a debtor is by no means the same as an offender as their debt may consist of a lack of love, patience, and dedication rather than any wrongdoing action. The Italian version then appears to emphasize the positive side of human inadequacy, namely the bond of mutual solidarity between debtor and creditor.

4.5. Into Temptation

The second last petition has been the center of many controversies revolving around the leading role apparently played by God in tempting his creatures. The implication that God may deliberately lead human beings into temptation is generally considered an inconsistency and in stark contrast with the salvation project entrusted to Jesus and announced as the gospel (see Tournay 1995). For this reason, the sixth petition was changed into *Ne nous laisse pas entrer en tentation* ("Do not let us enter into temptation") in the French version in 2016, and into *non abbandonarci alla tentazione* ("Do not abandon us in temptation") in the Italian version, which still needs the Holy See's approval to be integrated into the liturgy (Muolo 2017). Pope Francis' declaration that "temptation is Satan's department" and that consequently the wording of the Lord's Prayer must be changed has provoked perplexed or even hostile reactions in English and American news media, especially because it breaks a millennial tradition and "may disrupt the pattern of communal prayer" (Kington 2017; Los Angeles Times 2017;

Povoledo et al. 2017; Sherwood 2017). By contrast, the Italian and French media have commented on this “revolutionary change” in a rather matter-of-fact and unemotional fashion, emphasizing the advantages of this new version for believers and downplaying the controversial aspects, e.g., the possible accusation that the previous versions of the Lord’s Prayer recited for countless years during Mass had been inaccurate or misleading (Bastié 2017; La Repubblica 2017; Sauvaget 2017; Trevi 2017, just to mention a few). One may wonder why this difference in response across these countries and, particularly, why the English appear to strenuously resist any change to the wording of this prayer whatever be the purpose of such a change, whether to accommodate evolution in theological studies or address the hard-felt need to modernize a language far removed from everyday usage.

In the light of the deviant use of the *Pater Noster* for charms and magical rituals through the Middle Ages (Menner 1942, p. 40; Morini 2007), the issue whether the Lord’s Prayer may still be regarded today as a powerful tool against bad luck or evil is not ludicrous. However, despite the undeniable appeal of ready-made efficacious formulas even in our techno-savvy society, a better explanation for the English attachment to their consolidated century-old translation could reside in their fondness for tradition and their respect for the past (Massie 2013; Paxman 1999, pp. 153–54):

To English-speaking Catholics, the words of the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary were so familiar and uncontested that they survived the post-Vatican II changes intact, including such phrases as ‘hallowed be thy name’ or ‘blessed art thou among women.’ (Heneghan 2017)

Regardless of one’s religious affiliation, to know the Lord’s Prayer (as well as the Christian foundations) means, particularly for English Catholics, to be connected to the past and value one’s own roots. On the other hand, for Italian and French Catholics, historically aligned with the Pope (Jansen 2009), accepting this new wording could be regarded as a sign of allegiance to the religious authorities.

4.6. An Archaic Style

The differences between the three versions may so far appear subtle and unobtrusive, and could, to some extent, be ascribed to the influence of different translations, especially as the history of the translations from the Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic manuscripts of the Bible into the various national languages is particularly intricate and complex. However, even a superficial reading of the three prayers easily uncovers the presence of archaisms as the distinguishing feature of the English prayer. While the Italian and the French prayers are written in simple, everyday language, the English text stands out for its archaisms. In particular, the following features are worth noting:

- art: an archaic form of the present simple, 2nd person of the linking verb “be”;
- hallowed be: archaic use, passive verb form in the present subjunctive characterized by inversion;
- thy: archaic possessive adjective;
- trespasses: archaic or literary use for sins or offenses; in present-day English, a specialized legal term meaning “an unlawful act deliberately committed against the person or property of another” (Brown 1993c, p. 3385);
- lead us not: archaic negative imperative.

Additionally, a formulaic structure can also be noticed at various points in the prayer:

- Thy will be done on earth
- lead us not into temptation

The whole prayer may indeed sound like an endless sequence of formulaic units, i.e., stereotyped sentences that are made to appear unalterable because of the extreme familiarity they have gained over the years and through liturgical services (Crystal 1964, p. 1966). Likewise, the Italian and French prayers also present a formulaic style from the initial invocation to the final petition, to the extent that entire lines may be repeatedly or deliberately (mis)quoted. However, unlike the English prayer, the Italian and French prayers do not resort to archaic words and expressions; even the words and

expressions pertaining to the specialized lexis of religion (e.g., *santificato; sanctifié; cieli; cieux*) are of common knowledge and do not apparently pose any difficulty for those who read and recite the prayer. Indeed, the very familiarity of this prayer learned in catechism since childhood may somehow turn it into an automatic sequence of lines that have lost much of their revolutionary meaningfulness.

5. Discussion

The comparison between different national versions of the Lord's Prayer has highlighted significant differences in terms of style and cognitive register, which, even when associated with their different translation histories, inevitably points to differences in interpretation and reception. The use of words such as "heaven" (in place of the cosmological term "heavens"), and "trespasses" (in place of the metaphorical "debt") in the English version defines the polarity of the prayer and the underlying Christian paradigm: pure bliss in heaven vs. human straying ("trespassing") on earth. The cognitive register of the Italian prayer is framed by the alternation of *cieli/cielo* and mutual interdependence between debtors and creditors: the kingdom appears both as a oneness to be attained and as a plural space for human beings to journey to; their shifting roles as creditors and debtors emphasizes the bond of mutual solidarity founding Christian brotherhood, while the emphasis on *cielo* ("heaven") as the ultimate goal of all creation, as well as the conception of a hierarchy of heavenly spheres (*cieli*, heavens) conveys the sense of awe of Christian believers. As in the Italian prayer, also in the French one, heaven appears as a spiritual dimension shifting between oneness and plurality; however, human beings are burdened with offenses rather than debts and threatened by Evil-Devil. The present perfect *ont offensés*, as well as the ambiguous temporal reference of *ce*, disrupt the apparent timelessness of the prayer featuring the ancient struggle between God's will and the Evil one (*Mal/Malin*). Despite the similarities, these three versions of the Lord's Prayer present some distinctive features possibly reflective of deeply-ingrained cultural attitudes such as the appeal for elevation in the English prayer, the dual tension between deference and solidarity in the Italian version, and the inclination for a grand narrative of heroes and anti-heroes in the French prayer. They also appear to connote the God-man relationship in a slightly different way: God forgiving offenses in the English and French prayers and, therefore, teaching the value of forgiveness in a society characterized by mutual disrespect; God canceling debts in the Italian prayer and consequently emphasizing the need to be generous and ready to accept each other's failings.

Crystal (1964, p. 153) remarks that "A religion as old and tradition-based as Catholicism is naturally going to embody much formulaicness, largely unalterable because of the privileged, accepted position it holds in the eyes of most of the Catholic speech-community". Although he fully acknowledges the popular and familiar dimension of Jesus' language since "Christianity is for all; it must, therefore, be comprehensible to all" (Crystal 1965, pp. 136–37), he nevertheless goes on to outline the principles of a liturgical language which "needs to be sufficiently removed from ordinary language to be characterized and respected as God's, but without reducing intelligibility too greatly" (Crystal 1965, p. 153). In much the same vein, a New York Times opinionist remarks that "The most powerful religious language is often a little elevated and incantatory, even ambiguous or just plain hard to understand" (McGrath 2011). The use of archaic words and expressions in the English prayer confers on it a tone of remote solemnity that seems absent in the Italian and French prayers, characterized by simple, everyday language. Quite unexpectedly, considering the different rhetorical traditions in English and Romance languages (Bennett and Muresan 2016), while the English prayer presents a high-flown and elaborate style, the Italian and French prayers adopt an apparently simple and reader-friendly language. Their different style can be seen to reflect a different attitude to faith: more solemn in the English prayer and more familiar in the French and Italian prayers.

6. Concluding Remarks

Religion is not only a foundational aspect of society but also of the individual, affecting at different levels the system of values as well as emotional dynamics and general wellbeing. However, despite

its central role at an individual, social and political level, it tends to be increasingly relegated to specialized domains, which often prioritize the study of the sacred message and its original meanings over its reception. The present study is an attempt to address this imbalance and foreground the role that culture is bound to play in shaping religious response and possibly, even tracing a preferential interpretive pathway through sacred texts. As pointed out by Crystal (2018), in advocating the development of theolinguistics, religious discourse represents a rich, multifaceted and interdisciplinary field of research relating the formal and functional properties of religious experience to other aspects of human behavior. As recent studies have pointed out a consistent decline of religious feeling across Europe and a systematic loss of “Christian literacy” (Bréchon 2008; Lambert 2004), going back to Christian sources and exploring their cultural resonances and manifold layers of meaning could help us bridge the increasingly widening gap between religion and culture, and reconcile our spiritual and social identities in post-secular or agnostic societies (see Grimley 2007).

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