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## 2. Project Narrative

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### Bullshitting God: Polyphonic Prayer and the Virtue of *Parrhesia*

*Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have  
boldness [παρρησίαν | parrhesian]  
before God, and we receive from him whatever we ask...  
– 1 John 3:21–22a (NRSV)*

Jesus famously advised his followers to pray humbly and sincerely, rather than performing “at the street corners” to be “seen by others” (Matt. 6:5).

This research project aims to illuminate Christ’s instructions, exploring the *polyphonic* nature of prayer by deploying socio-political speech act theory to analyze the complicated texture of utterances made simultaneously to more than one recipient.<sup>1</sup> Roughly, a ‘polyphonic’ element of speech is an utterance where the speaker communicates multiple messages or performs multiple speech acts simultaneously; as Bakhtin puts it, the multiple pragmatic phenomena *harmonize* together “into one unified context” (1973, 116).<sup>2</sup> And, although fundamentally directed towards a divine audience, prayers can *also* experience uptake amongst human receivers in a manner that produces important polyphonic effects.

For example, in his analysis of “communicative prayers,” Arcadi (2022) argues that at least some prayers function as *commissives* (or promises) pledging one’s allegiance to God. Now consider a parishioner participating in a corporate recitation of the Lord’s Prayer: while God is certainly a key target of the speech act, God is not the *only* target, for by knowingly making the prayer *publicly*, the parishioner is also (I contend) *simultaneously addressing their fellow humans*, performing what Austin (1975) dubs a *behabitive* speech act signaling their orthodox alignment as an denominational in-group member.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, such prayers pledge allegiance to God *and to their fellow churchmembers*.

Such a phenomenon entails at least two interesting results: firstly, it speaks to a long-standing puzzle for philosophers of religion about the nature of divine providence in and through God’s people; secondly, it sheds light on a contemporary puzzle for philosophers of language about the possibility of so-called *barefaced bullshit*.

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<sup>1</sup> In this way, my project echoes the reconstructive theological project of David Fergusson — who also adopts ‘polyphony’ as a conceptual scheme to undergird his dogmatics of providence — but while his analysis explicitly leans away from the work of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (2018, 315n25), my proposal engages directly with Bakhtin’s dialogical views.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Bakhtin explains this phenomenon as “an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages’, two semantic and axiological belief systems” (1981, 304).

<sup>3</sup> Because it expresses the speaker’s recognition of God’s holiness, it is also what Kukla and Lance call a *recognitive* (2009, 45).

In the first case, consider a prayer publicly beseeching God to intervene favorably in the speaker's life — a prayer requesting God's aid. Understanding this as a polyphonic speech act allows us to recognize it simultaneously as a declaration triggering second-order duties for audience members bearing certain honor-bound relationships to the speaker and their primary addressee (God). Much like how overhearing a public insult to one's family member or the public invocation of a historical debt can activate a hearer's duty to respond accordingly, public prayers can catalyze the rightful servants of the addressed Lord. Insofar as the human audience acts out of respect for their God's reputation (and their duty as God's servants), then we can understand their behavior as a manifestation of God's own providential activity through what Bakhtin calls a *dialogic harmony* where the wills of two agents (like the author of a novel and the character in that novel) are distinct, but intertwined. Similarly, this framework highlights how the praying person can perform an exercitive speech act requesting God's help while simultaneously speaking expositively to their fellow humans, reminding them of God's commands to act with love and care towards others (and, perhaps, even performing a verdictive from God *assigning* such a response to the audience directly).

This first case might be understood as a “positive” example of prayer's polyphonic capacities. On the other hand, a second case this project will consider is more nefarious: insofar as prayers function as religious shibboleths, they can allow insincere supplicants to manipulate their human audiences, even though their omniscient audience is not fooled by their bullshit (in the Frankfurtian sense).

For context, philosophers of language typically understand a *lie* as an assertion made knowingly as a falsehood (Saul 2012), possibly with the intent to deceive one's audience (Stokke 2013), or otherwise insincerely (Marsili 2021); a lie is *barefaced* (or “bald-faced”) when both the liar and their audience know the speaker to be lying (Sorensen 2007).

In contrast, Frankfurtian *bullshit* is a claim “produced without concern for the truth” (1986, 94). Whereas a liar knows that their statement is false, the bullshitter is indifferent to their utterance's truth value, only caring that their statement furthers some pragmatic goal (Stokke and Fallis 2017). Accordingly, Frankfurt holds that bullshit does not misrepresent “what [a speaker] takes the facts to be,” but rather their “enterprise” or what they are “up to” insofar as they falsely present themselves as holding to alethic discursive norms (1986, 96). This means that *barefaced bullshitting* is seemingly impossible: if an audience knows a speaker to be bullshitting, then that speaker will have failed to successfully misrepresent their discursive enterprise. Nevertheless, Kenyon and Saul have recently argued that some contemporary political discourse, particularly claims from figures like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, qualifies as barefaced bullshit (Kenyon and Saul 2022; Saul 2024).

Analyzing the polyphonic potential of prayer — particularly prayers made publicly in a context where the speaker knows they will be overheard by others — offers another, arguably more familiar (and more problematic) example of barefaced bullshit.

A fundamental feature of prayer is that it is directed towards a divine audience. So, even when a speaker knowingly prays in a fashion that they can expect other humans to overhear their words, it remains the case that they must be *primarily* addressing God in order for their prayer to be sincere. If, instead — against Christ's prescription — someone prays on a street corner, intending to be seen by passersby, then their communicative intentions are misplaced: they are (at the very least also, and possibly only) addressing their fellow humans alongside God. So, insofar as the performing pray-er presents themselves as being “up to” one thing (addressing God) while actually being “up to” something else (addressing passers-by), then the pray-er is guilty of bullshitting *even when everyone involved is aware*

of their true actions and intentions. That is to say: Christ’s warning in Matthew 6 is precisely against the performance of bare-faced bullshit.

In each case, a better understanding of prayer promises to highlight the virtue of *parrhesia* — *speaking frankly* — both to God and each other, as when the book of Acts concludes with Paul in Rome, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ *with all boldness* [παρρησίας | *parrhesias*] and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). This kind of bold speech is what Plato says the healthy-souled citizens of the ideally democratic city enjoy<sup>4</sup> and is described by Foucault as:

*a verbal activity in which the subject expresses his personal relation to truth and risks his life because he recognizes that telling the truth is his own duty, so as to improve or to help other people.* (2019, 46)

Indeed, the freedom to authentically live and speak as so — in sincere relationship with the truth and seeking for others to be likewise — aligns well with the Christian spirit seeking, as Paul says in Ephesians to “make known with *boldness* [παρρησία | *parrēsia*] the mystery of the gospel” (6:19). It also helps draw the distinction between the *implicitly* polyphonic prayer pledging allegiance to both God and the Church and the *explicitly* polyphonic prayer spewing barefaced bullshit in the street: the former maintains the straightforward sincerity of *parrhesia* that the latter lacks.<sup>5</sup>

Paul concludes his letter to the Ephesians by asking them to “Pray that I may declare [the gospel] *boldly* [παρρησιάζωμαι | *parrēsiāsōmai*], as I must speak” (6:20). The virtue of this *parrhesiastic* boldness is the core of this project’s analysis, filtering the nature of polyphonic prayer’s connections with providence and truth into the light of a philosophical anthropology grounded in our ability to harmonize with God, each other, and ultimately ourselves.

**Word Count (w/o refs): 1431**

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<sup>4</sup> On democracy, see book VIII of the *Republic* (557b) and book III of the *Laws* (694b); on the soul (and “frankness”), see the *Gorgias* (487a).

<sup>5</sup> There may be a connection worth exploring here between Bakhtin’s notions of unifying centripetal forces and diversifying centrifugal forces — things that can be valuable for language, but (perhaps) not for one’s soul.

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