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‘MY SPECIAL PRAYER’

On Self, God, and Prayer

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In this contribution we will demonstrate the impact of narcissism – an important personality trait in individualistic societies – on religious behaviour. Present-day Western culture is generally characterised as being expressive individualistic. A dominant trait in this pattern is the tendency of people to ascribe divine (godlike) characteristics to themselves. Psychologically speaking, we are dealing with narcissism. The various varieties in the spectrum of narcissism show that these attempts to attribute divine characteristics to the self do not always succeed. These individuals fantasise about becoming godlike, but their self-image is too fragile to enable these attempts to be successful. The success of this narcissistic aspiration has effects on religious activities, like praying. Based on earlier empirical research and a case study we show how self-deification, narcissism and prayer are related. Those who succeed in becoming godlike pray in a different manner than those who fail in this effort. The former address their prayers to themselves or an anonymous higher power, the latter address their prayers to a personal God.

Keywords: individualisation, self, overt and covert narcissism, prayer, narcissism

„My Special Prayer“: Über das Selbst, Gott und das Gebet: In der Studie wird dargelegt, wie sich Narzissmus, eines der wichtigen Persönlichkeitsmerkmale in individualistischen Gesellschaften, auf das religiöse Verhalten auswirkt. Die heutige westliche Kultur gilt gemeinhin als von expressivem Individualismus geprägt. Dieser zeichnet sich vor allem dadurch aus, dass die Menschen dazu neigen, sich selbst göttliche Charaktereigenschaften zuzuschreiben. In der Psychologie wird dies als Narzissmus bezeichnet. Die Vielfalt von Varianten innerhalb des Spektrums des Narzissmus zeigt, dass die Versuche, dem Ich göttliche Charaktereigenschaften zuzuschreiben, nicht immer erfolgreich sind. Die Betroffenen träumen davon, Gott gleich zu werden, ihr Selbstbild ist aber viel zu fragil, als dass diese Versuche auch zum Erfolg führen könnten. Der Erfolg oder Misserfolg der narzisstischen Bestrebungen hat auch Auswirkungen auf religiöse Aktivitäten wie z.B. das Beten. Auf der Grundlage früherer empirischer Forschungsarbeiten und einer Fallstudie zeigen wir, welche Zusammenhänge zwischen Selbstvergötterung, Narzissmus und Beten bestehen. Diejenigen, die sich erfolgreich selbst vergöttlichen, beten anders als die, die daran scheitern. Erstere richten ihr Gebet an sich selbst oder an eine namenlose höhere Macht, Letztere richten ihr Gebet an einen persönlichen Gott.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Individualisierung, Selbst, offener oder verschleierter Narzissmus, Beten, Narzissmus

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1. Individualisation

Present-day Western culture is generally characterised as being strongly individualistic (BELLAH et al. 1985). Individualism is the belief in the intrinsic dignity of man. It entails that anything that stands in the way of people's right to think, judge and decide for themselves is morally condemned and sometimes even experienced as sacrilege (BELLAH et al. 1985). In practice, this basic idea works out in many ways. Four of these variants are important, and they are known as biblical, republican, utilitarian and expressive individualism. In biblical individualism, the central element is the immediate bond between God and man. Republican individualism is about people taking care of their own public government and the public interest. Utilitarian individualism is about looking after one's own material interests. Finally, expressive individualism stresses the existence of a unique feeling core, the self, which has to be expressed if one is to realise oneself and lead a meaningful life. It is this latter form of individualism that dominates our Western world today and that determines the climate surrounding the religious and the sacred (BELLAH et al. 1985; DIJN 2006; TAYLOR 2002). This is why it is this form that we would like to work out in more detail.

The view of the individual as a person possessing a self that needs to be developed and expressed is the result of a gradual development. For the greater part of the Middle Ages, the self did not really matter. The central element in existence was the Christian hereafter and any emphasis on the self was frowned upon. This self was associated with selfishness, weakness and sin, all of which were far removed from the 'true' divine principles of Christian morality. In this period, the self was minimised. Even as late as 1680, it is referred to in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as an 'anti-Christ' and an 'anti-God' (BAUMEISTER 1991). And yet, in the same 17th century we can already observe a changing attitude toward the self. 'Suddenly', the language turned out to be enriched with words like 'self-love', 'self-knowledge' and 'self-confidence'. These words are evidence to the fact that the self has gained in importance and that inner stirrings and the self are no longer looked upon with suspicion. With the Romantic Age we enter the next phase: it is here that creativity, passions and feelings, everything that the self experiences, take centre stage. Typical examples can be found in poetry, as in that of the American poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892). The first edition of his 1855 collection *Leaves of Grass* starts with the poem 'Song of Myself', the first sentence of which is: 'I celebrate myself' (WHITMAN 1982). Not that far removed from this are the Dutch poet Willem KLOOS's lines, written in 1894: 'I am a god in my innermost thoughts, sitting on a throne in my innermost soul' (p.5).¹ In art, Kloos was looking for what he called the supremely individualistic expression of the supremely individualistic emotion. The emotional aspects of life demand expression and it is increasingly in this expression that the meaning of life is experienced. This turns the here-and-now into the place where 'real' life is taking place.

¹ Our translation. In the Dutch original: 'Ik ben een God in het diepst van mijn gedachten, en zit in 't binnenst van mijn ziel ten troon.'

At the start of the 21st century, the self has become the cornerstone of society. That which at the end of the 19th century was still restricted to a literary elite has now become a *lifestyle*. A nice illustration of this can be found in a survey carried out by the Synovate Interviews NSS research bureau, commissioned by the Dutch quality newspaper *Trouw* (VELDE 2008). One of the questions the 2276 Dutch people taking part in the survey were asked was if they suspected there was 'a god deep inside of you', a question that would seem to be directly inspired by Kloos's famous lines. Almost 20% of them, mostly highly educated respondents, answered with an unreserved 'yes', and 40% answered they sometimes felt that. In short, some 60% of the Dutch participants agreed to a greater or lesser extent.

Today, the central question of our existence is: 'Who am I?' (BAUMEISTER 1991) The first and foremost thing to do is to find oneself, to find out who one is and who one wants to be. The meaning of other things in life depends on the answers formulated with regard to oneself. In expressive individualism, people face the task of building a life for themselves, without having recourse to previously defined views on what makes life worthwhile. Everyone is expected to sail by their own compass and to construct such views themselves. Important values in this form of individualism are: 1. autonomy, 2. being unique and different from others, 3. developing oneself, and 4. expressing one's emotions (ZONDAG 2009a). It is this last value that this form of individualism derives its name from: *expressive* individualism.

This concentration on the self is accompanied by a strong suspicion of traditional religion, education, marriage, fixed role patterns, family, school, politics, etc. In short, it is characterised by a strong mistrust of institutions (AUPERS 2004). These institutions are looked upon as obstructing the development and the expression of the self. It is only in the self, existing in a kind of social and cultural vacuum, that fulfilment in life can be found.

Now the way of the self and concentration on the inner man is an ancient and tested way of getting to God, also in traditional Christianity. Augustine already pointed out that people can get to know God through self-awareness. Knowledge of God and knowledge of oneself go hand in hand (ARMSTRONG 1993).

But once the human individual is considered sacred in itself, the journey 'inward' is no longer a journey 'upward'. There is no more 'up there'! God, the divine, higher things, or whatever else one might like to call it, can now only be found 'inside' and no longer 'out there'.

(AUPERS 2004, 23)

The emphasis on and deification of the self has been expressed in a wide variety of terms by observers of our culture. AUPERS (2004) refers to it as the 'sacralisation of the self', ELCHARDUS and LAUWERS (2000) call it 'self-religion', DEKKER (2004) calls it 'ego-religion' and Van Saane, in an interview, uses the term 'self-spirituality' (VELDE 2008). The common element in all these authors' references is man attributing to himself characteristics that in other times and other places were restricted to the gods. The self is deified. Deifying oneself means one is out to maximise oneself, while traditional religions, by contrast, stress the minimalisation of the self.

2. Narcissism and the self

The last few centuries have thus witnessed the emergence of an ever stronger concentration on the self. Psychologically, this concentration on the self is referred to as narcissism. The broadest and most concise description of narcissism is: a strong psychological interest in oneself (WESTEN 1990). This is an interest that sets little store by the desires of others; is characterised by a strong need for admiration and recognition; harbours fantasies about itself as being strong and almighty (American Psychiatric Association 2000). The narcissistic project is about a boundless involvement with the self, the objective being to arrive at a strong, not to say an excessive appreciation of the self. Increasing and maintaining self-appreciation is the most important task a narcissist sets himself. Whether or not this is always successful is a different matter, which is something we will get to shortly.

When these traits are abundant, narcissists are not pleasant people to be around. However, narcissism is not necessarily pathological. What we are discussing here is what might be called ‘everyday’ narcissism. Pathological narcissism is a personality disorder, whereby narcissistic behaviour is accompanied by manipulative and anti-social behaviour. In ‘everyday’ narcissism, these latter characteristics are absent. This contribution focuses solely on the commonplace variant.

In the past few decades, narcissism has become an increasingly important personal characteristic. A telling statistic in this respect is that in 1950 twelve percent of American teenagers felt they were important, while at the end of the eighties this percentage had risen to 80 percent. The scores on the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory* (NPI), the most important instrument for measuring narcissism in the English-language area, between 1979 – the year the NPI was first introduced – and 2006 went up significantly by as much as 30% (TWENGE 2006). Those close to posing a narcissistic danger in 1979 now took up an inconspicuous position somewhere in the middle of the scale. Trends like these can be spotted not only in the United States but also in the Netherlands (BRINK 2001; DERKSEN 2007).

Narcissism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. An important distinction is that between ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ narcissism (WINK 1991). The way those in whom overt narcissism is dominant experience themselves is determined by the effect they have on others. They demand a lot of attention and want to be known and appreciated by others. They look upon themselves as being influential, leading personalities, big and important, and flaunt these qualities, whether true or imagined, openly, unhindered by modesty. To others they may seem interested and concerned, even if they do not really care, which is often the case. They hide any feelings of vulnerability and smallness, from themselves as well as from others. Overt narcissists generally feel good. They are optimistic and self-confident, they are hardly prey to depressive moods and experience life as meaningful (HICKMAN et al. 1996; RATHVON & HOLSTROM 1996; ROSE 2002; WINK 1991; ZONDAG 2005).

Those in whom covert narcissism is dominant experience themselves through the acts of others; they feel subjected to them. They experience themselves as in-

ferior, uncertain, inhibited and shy, sensitive to the least bit of criticism or anything remotely resembling it and are quick to think that random remarks of others are about them. They are often so taken up by this that they fail to pay attention to what others are feeling. At the same time, they long for admiration, power and esteem. They hide these feelings carefully and secretly cherish them. Those in whom covert narcissism is dominant tend to feel anxious and depressed; they are pessimistic, have little self-esteem, and often suffer from feelings of meaninglessness (HICKMAN et al. 1996; RATHVON & HOLSTROM 1996; ROSE 2002; WINK 1991; ZONDAG 2005).

These differences between overt and covert narcissism should not conceal, however, that in both cases there is a dependence of the self on others. In covert narcissism, this is obvious: those characterised by it feel immediately subjected to the judgment of others. However, those characterised by overt narcissism also depend on others to position themselves and be somebody. Yet the two forms of dependence are not the same. The difference between overt and covert dependence is probably best described as one of different asymmetry. In overt dependence, the self rules over the other; in covert dependence the other rules over the self. In addition, both forms of narcissism share the characteristic that one's personal needs dominate those of others and that fantasies about one's own grandeur play a dominant role. Wink formulates this quite succinctly: 'Narcissistic fantasies of power and grandeur can equally well lurk behind a bombastic and exhibitionistic facade as one of shyness, vulnerability and depletion' (WINK 1996, 166).

In all cases, one's personal needs prevail over those of others. In both cases also, the person in question faces a mental dilemma. For the covert narcissist, the dilemma is that he fantasises about grandeur and fails to realise this (whether it be in reality or in his imagination). He dreams of being God and fails at it. For the overt narcissist, the mental dilemma is that he deems himself great while at the same time being dependent on the admiration of others. If one is as great or divine as the overt narcissist considers himself to be, one should have no need of others. One should be enough unto oneself.

At this point it may be useful to return briefly to the relationship between expressive individualism and narcissism. What is the connection between the two? Expressive individualism relates to the views regarding oneself and society. It can be described as a system of norms and values. Narcissism is a psychological condition closely connected with this (CAPPS 1993). Narcissism could be termed the psychological correlate of expressive individualism. Expressive individualism is characterised by a strongly normative momentum. One has to be autonomous and unique, develop oneself and express one's emotions (SUNIER 2004). In both variants of narcissism, this ideal is shared and one judges oneself on the extent to which this has been achieved. In both cases, the ideal of expressive individualism is one strived for and it is normative for the way one experiences the self. Somebody with a decisively overt attitude manages – for himself at least – to realise this ideal. His or her life is characterised by involvement, fullness and success; that of the covert narcissist by failure, emptiness and listlessness. Overt narcissists experience lust for life,

covert narcissists lose the will to live. In overt narcissism the project of deification succeeds; in the case of covert narcissism it fails (ZONDAG 2009b).

3. Self and religion

As we mentioned earlier, expressive individualism and, by the same token, narcissism is often supposed to be accompanied by indifference towards institutions, traditions and religion (AUPERS 2004; ELCHARDUS & HEYVAERT 1991). Narcissists are assumed not to believe in God, to have an aversion to any kind of church affiliation, and not to make use of religion to cope with the problems encountered in life. In short, a negative relation is supposed to exist between religion and narcissism. Those who deify themselves or entertain fantasies about it have no need of other gods. However, this line of reasoning may not be entirely tenable.

As it happens, narcissism and religiosity turn out not to be mutually exclusive at all. A variety of researchers have concluded that people with a strongly narcissistic attitude may very well take a positive attitude to religion. The investigations we are referring to here are concerned with extrinsic religiosity. This is a form of religiosity whereby the functionality and the use of religion are the most important elements for the persons concerned (WATSON et al. 1987; WATSON et al. 1990). (One should note that the range of these investigations is limited, since narcissism being indicated using the NPI and this instrument only measures overt narcissism.) This means that on the basis of these investigations, nothing can be said about the relation between covert narcissism and religion. Religion first and foremost serves to make their lives better: to provide support in times of trouble, to provide security by providing a place in the universe, a place in the community through affiliation with a particular church, etc. (ALLPORT 1960). People with a strongly narcissistic attitude use religion to make their lives more comfortable.

Another clue that religion and narcissism are not mutually exclusive was provided by some of our own research (ZONDAG & UDEN 2010). (In this investigation, the Dutch measuring instrument 'Nederlandse Narcisme Schaal' was used. This allows the user to map both overt and covert narcissism.) It showed that both people with a strongly overt and a strongly covert narcissistic attitude employ 'religious coping' strategies to solve their problems. Like all coping strategies, religious coping strategies are meant to regain self-esteem and the feeling of being in control of one's life (PARGAMENT 1990). These are goals that every person finds important, but particularly those who are characterised by a strongly narcissistic attitude (MORF & RHODEWALT 2001). It turns out that people with a covert narcissistic attitude used a variety of forms of religious coping. They put their trust in a personal, actively intervening God who takes responsibility for solving their problems. But in addition to this, they would also trust in an impersonal, almost abstract and non-acting (divine) providence. We characterised this attitude as receptive (UDEN et al. 2004). One way or another, things would mysteriously work out all right. Those with a decidedly

overt narcissistic attitude trusted only this providence, opening themselves up to any solutions. God did not play a role in this.

We are not talking about a large number of investigations here, but we do see a pattern emerging. People with a narcissistic attitude do not so much reject religion as they adapt it to their own needs. Research showing that people with few or no narcissistic traits are more intrinsically religiously oriented also points in this direction (WATSON et al. 1984, 1989). In an intrinsic orientation, one is oriented toward God, and belief as the ultimate goal, and the objective is not to make one's life more comfortable, as is the case with extrinsic orientation (ALLPORT 1960). Those who do not have a strongly narcissistic attitude are less likely to use religion for their own good. Although one can also reason in the reverse direction: intrinsic religiosity curbing a possibly strongly narcissistic attitude. Narcissism or the deification of the self provides a clue as to how one deals with the sacred and the divine outside oneself. Expressive individualism and narcissism, and religion are not mutually exclusive, as a number of researchers that we have referred to before had suggested. Religion and the sacred are ultimately imagined and experienced in a form compatible with one's own life project.

4. Prayer

It is this particular thought that we would like to explore further. We would like to do this focusing on the theme of prayer. The reason we have chosen this theme is that praying is the most common religious act. The meaning of prayer in people's personal lives can hardly be overestimated (HOOD et al. 2009). There is an infinite variety of events that prompt people to pray, and prayer is not restricted to any time or place. Even in a culture dominated by expressive individualism and narcissism people still pray on a massive scale. No fewer than 63 percent of the Dutch population say they pray occasionally. Of these, 80 percent pray for solutions to problems and to become aware of themselves (BERNTS et al. 2007). Some 30 percent of the people who pray do so a number of times a day; 25 percent pray once a day; 19 percent once a week; 10 percent once a month, and 16 percent pray a few times a year. There are hardly any differences in this respect between older and younger Dutch people. The young still pray; some 61 percent say they pray occasionally (CAMPICHE 1997). One of the explanations for this is that it is a ritual that can easily be carried out, its execution not being dependent on time or place. Praying is a religious act that links up well with the preference for doing things one's own way. People can pray anywhere they like (at the dining table, in a church, on the beach, in bed); whenever they like (in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, at night); in any form they like (formulaic prayer, personally composed prayer); and whichever way they like (kneeling down, standing up, walking slowly, lying down). Many young people pray at night, at home in their beds (JANSSEN et al. 2000).

Before we go into the ways people with different kinds of narcissistic attitudes

pray, we will first discuss the question what prayer is. In this, we will also go into the various forms of prayer. Research on prayer should not merely be concerned with the question whether or how often people pray. It should also investigate the ways people pray. After all, there are a number of different styles of praying that can be distinguished (LADD & MCINTOSH 2008).

Praying is a ritual act consisting of a situation or event that induced it, or a motive for engaging in it (a problem, for instance), an act that comprises the actual prayer, a direction (God, for instance, a higher power, oneself) and a desired effect linked directly to that which induced the person to pray (for instance, the solution to a problem) (BÄNZIGER 2007; BÄNZIGER et al. 2008). These elements are common to all varieties of prayer, and may be emphasised to a greater or lesser extent in concrete prayers. It is on the basis of this emphasis that we can distinguish four forms of prayer: petitionary prayers, religious prayers, meditative prayers and psychological prayers (JANSSEN et al. 2000; BÄNZIGER 2007).

In petitionary prayers, it is the effect that is central. A concrete and material problem prompts the person praying to direct their prayer to a personal God, asking Him for a solution to that problem. This problem may concern the person themselves (if they are sick, for instance) or someone else (if someone else is sick, for instance). The desired effect links up directly with the question (either themselves or the other person getting well again) – the desired effect and the question thus mirror each other. This variety of prayer is a form of primary control. It is a form of control aimed at a concrete and material change in one's living conditions.

The most important element of a religious prayer is its direction. It is directed to God. In religious prayer, people seek to make contact with a personal God, for instance to thank Him or to ask Him for forgiveness. The core element of this prayer is to confirm the belief in this God (FINNEY & MALONY 1985). The objective is to deepen one's faith and to strengthen one's bond with God. More so than the other forms of prayer, religious prayer takes place in a church or other religious environment. Besides this, it is often accompanied by the bodily posture so closely associated with prayer, i.e. kneeling down.

The characterising element of meditative prayer is the act, which is cognitive in nature. This form of prayer is predominantly about reflection, contemplation, meditation, focusing one's full attention on one's own life and one's existence as a human being. The person withdraws into himself and thus hopes to become a better man. He longs for self-awareness, insight and inner peace. In meditative prayer, he directs himself to a higher power, often also to himself, rather than to a concrete personal God. Of all forms of prayer, meditative prayer is least bound to a particular place or time.

In psychological prayer, finally, the central element is that which prompts one to pray in the first place. These are often problems that life presents: needs, griefs and sorrows. Engrossed by these problems, the person praying directs himself to a higher power, looking first and foremost for support and for someone to pour out one's heart to. Psychological prayer is not so much aimed at getting an immediate solution to the

problem; rather it is searching for a way to deal with life's problems and to manage to get through life as best one can. This is an important difference between psychological prayers and petitionary prayers, the latter being aimed at a concrete solution to the problem, to be offered by a personal God. Psychological prayer is a form of secondary control. This is a form of control where the problem remains, but the person changes. He is hoping the prayer will enable him to cope with the problem. Psychological prayer often takes place in bed at night (JANSSEN et al. 2000).

5. Self, God and prayer

In their research on the relation between prayer and human acting SIÛN and FRANCIS (2009) distinguish three trends. In the first trend the subjective effects of prayer are central. Research on the relation between prayer and happiness in life is an example (ROBBINS et al. 2010). The second trend deals with the objective effects of prayer. The classic research of GALTON (1872) into the relation of prayer and the duration of life of members from the English Royal House is an example. Do they live longer when people pray for their health? (Which proved not to be the case by the way.) The third trend in research finally deals with the insights that we can gain into the religion, spirituality and life of ordinary people from studying their prayer contents. As a typical example SIÛN and FRANCIS (2009) point at the research of JANSSEN and colleagues (2000) into various types of prayer. The research reported in this contribution is in line with JANSSEN and colleagues (2000) and as such situated in this third trend in the research on prayer.

So far, we have distinguished a number of ways in which people can pray and we have subdivided narcissism into two variants. How exactly are these related? Do covert narcissists pray more often than overt narcissists, and do they prefer different types of prayer? Or is it overt narcissists that pray more often? Or does it not make a difference, perhaps?

We answer these questions in two ways: we first provide answers on the basis of the outcomes of an investigation that was carried out, and subsequently we produce answers on the basis of a case study. The investigation took place among 99 students of the Radboud University in Nijmegen (for extensive information on this investigation, we refer to ZONDAG & UDEN 2011). The case was taken from an investigation into the role of religion in the mourning process after the death of a spouse (UDEN 1988).

5.1. Research

We will first discuss the results of an investigation held among students of the Nijmegen Radboud University to see if there is a relation between narcissism and the frequency of prayer. It turns out that no such relation can be established: overtly

narcissistic persons pray just as often, or if you like, just as little as covert narcissists. Thus, being successful or failing at self-deification bears no relation to the frequency with which narcissistic people pray. In other words, the narcissist theme does not cause one to either pray more or less. The next question is whether narcissism, in either its overt or its covert form, might cause one to pray differently. In other words, is there a relation between overt and covert narcissism on the one hand and the four types of prayer that we have distinguished on the other? Does one's narcissistic attitude predispose one to an affinity with the petitionary prayer, the religious prayer, the meditative prayer or the psychological prayer? We will discuss this on the basis of *Figure 1* given below, which presents a summary of the answer to this question.

<i>Overt narcissism</i>	<i>Covert narcissism</i>
Strong self	Weak self
Meditative prayer/Psychological prayer	Religious prayer/Petitionary prayer
God absent from prayer	God present in prayer

Figure 1

The relation between overt and covert narcissism and the four types of prayer

Figure 1 is based on two dimensions. The first dimension is whether one's sense of self, i.e. the value one attaches to oneself, is strong or weak. A strong sense of self is typical of overt narcissism, a weak sense of self is typical of covert narcissism (WINK 1991). The second dimension concerns the role of God in the prayer. Is there a personal God at the centre of the prayer, or is there a personal God taking a more marginal place? In religious and petitionary prayers, the person praying is focused most strongly on a personal God: this God is at the centre of it. In meditative and psychological prayer, God takes up a marginal place: in this type of prayer the persons praying are concentrated on themselves (meditative prayer) or on something higher (psychological prayer).

On the basis of these two dimensions, the results of the investigation can be summarised as follows: the stronger a person's sense of self is, the less their prayer will be directed to a personal God and the more it will be directed to the person themselves or to a higher power. Conversely, the weaker a person's sense of self is, the

more their prayer will be directed to a personal God. In other words: overt narcissists tend toward meditative and psychological prayer, covert narcissists toward petitionary and religious prayer.

5.2. A case

To get a more concrete picture of how the religious dimension manifests itself in a life where the narcissistic theme is evident, we take a closer look at the story of Jan Peters. Jan Peters can be considered a narcissist with predominantly covert characteristics. He shows himself to be a person with a weak self and calls upon God through religious and petitionary prayer, almost demanding that God help him.

Jan Peters is 48 years old. A year and a half ago he lost his wife, who was 41 at the time. She died of cancer, having been sick for about six months. They had been married for 22 years and had three kids. About ten years before, Jan Peters had become permanently disabled, after a number of nervous breakdowns.

Jan Peters: *'No, my childhood years were not very pleasant. By the time I got to be a real boy, I was very introverted. I got anxious easily, had little self-confidence, I was withdrawn, alone a lot. On Sundays, I'd go to the movies two, three times a day. I wasn't very happy. At elementary school, the strong boys were everybody's favourites; all the kids crowding around them. I withdrew. I'm a fearful person. When I went to work this changed. There you're forced to sit next to other people, and you all observe good manners. I got along especially well with the girls, I really understood them. I'd only been at the shoe factory for six weeks, when the boss called me into his office, and I got a pat on the back. Something that took others years to achieve, I'd managed in six weeks. I was esteemed and respected in the shoe factory. I knew my job, I was really good at it. God, I worked so hard there. I'd take soles home with me after work, could work really fast, I was indestructible. I rose to the highest rank in the factory: stitching master. Till I got disabled, that is. I didn't know when to stop. Once, some of the soles caught fire. I took them right off the hot glowing plate and threw them out. But that didn't stop me from trying to pull the scissors over my fingers anyway and continue my work. I was inexhaustible. I'm a fast worker. Also in the automobile business that I got into later, where I was highly appreciated as well, but the work turned out to be too heavy for me. And then I collapsed; I had a total nervous breakdown. They concluded that I was hyper-nervous. I got courses of mental treatment, relaxation therapies, all to no avail. That was it then, nothing left that could be done, I flipped my lid, lost it completely.'*

Interviewer: 'And your wife's death kind of put a stop to that process?'

J.P.: *'That's the way I see it, yes. Grief turns people around. When I drink, I'm alive. Up to a point, that is. I'm a man of character and feeling. I've been through a lot, worked hard, had to take quite a few blows. I got very little help, had to do it all myself. But I'd say I'm a fighter, in spite of everything. Through thick and thin.'*

If it wasn't for that I might have kicked the bucket long ago. I tend to get along with people quite well. But all I want to be occupied with now is myself. I really need help. How, I don't know. That's for the big shots to decide. My case deserves serious study. It shouldn't just be looked at by one man. It's got to be looked at by a lot of people, lots of different opinions, and then get to the core of that. Not just one man, but more people, specialists in their field. But I don't think anyone can help me. They try, but they can't help me. Every time I come here, I go home empty-handed. I walk out just as miserable as I came in. All it's gotten me is you. You've been very kind to me and I appreciate that. But apart from that, I got nothing of it.'

I.: 'What did you appreciate most about your wife?'

J.P.: *'That would be her neatness and her chastity. First and foremost. In fact, I can't think of anything negative about her, nothing at all. Well, if I had to mention something, I suppose it would be that she was a little cold. She wasn't a very sexy person. It all had to be done very quietly, nothing out of the ordinary. Just plain and simple, down-to-earth. Lights out too, preferably. She'd lock the door when she was taking a shower. I like that. Fine woman. These days, they'll leave the door ajar. Hoping you'll come in. Well, she didn't. I appreciate that in her. And yet, people's impression was that she was a bit furtive, being so calm and all. She wasn't furtive, you know, she really was calm and sweet. That's the way she died too, without a word, no tears, without saying goodbye. That's the worst thing. If only she'd said something, something . . . My wife loved me very, very much and that clearly proves she was good to me, to the family. She never cheated on me with another man or anything. That says enough, I'd say. No need to go into that any further. I miss her, period, in every possible way. She was a tidy little woman. Didn't need to do anything myself. Rather like a worker bee, and she was sweet, had a good character, a really rare character. It's as far as my thoughts take me. She had this nice little pendant. I had cut diamonds inserted in it, with an inscription: brilliant woman. The wedding ring? I'm never going to take that off. Nobody's going to make me take that off, not even the prettiest woman in the world. She made no mistakes. She never went out with other men, never looked at other men. Yeah, everything, everything. All the good qualities a woman can have, sweet character. Me, I did make that mistake, I did, I admit it. My wife never did. She never complained, a very sweet woman. Just let things happen to her, good-natured. There's no other woman that compares, there really isn't, there can't be. There's this one woman, she'll do anything for me, but it doesn't make a difference. The girl really tries . . . loves me, takes care of me. When I drink she tries to save me. She knows my problems. But she can't help me. Nobody can.'*

I.: 'How would you describe your relation to the religious side of life?'

J.P.: *'I'm a Catholic in that I was raised a Catholic, I was baptised. My folks weren't observant. We did have to go to church. Until we were old and wise enough and told our parents: You're not going to church, so we're not going anymore either. All those years, I never went to church. Except for funerals and weddings. No, I never*

went to church much, not during my marriage either. It wasn't really important to me, nor to my wife either apparently, or else we would have gone. We did get married in church. Being a Roman Catholic, that was what everybody in the family did, right? And why not? There's nothing wrong with that. Nothing, absolutely nothing. But lately, I've been going to church again to pray for a very special reason. Why now all of a sudden, I wonder. I'm trying to get something out of it. It doesn't get me anywhere, but it's more about coming to terms with things for myself, sort of. I'm trying to get some answers that I can be satisfied with somehow. I'm not doing anything wrong now, going to church now, I can think of her, I can thank the good Lord and ask him, maybe it was all meant to be this way. Maybe it spared her a lot of vexation, you never know. And you don't know all the things you're thinking. Maybe the good Lord wanted it this way. And it's all these things that I want to go to church for. I kneel down. I want to impose that kind of support on me, want to get somewhere somehow. If I manage to come out of it somehow, I'll say to myself: Now that didn't hurt you, did it? If there is something out there, then I did the right thing. That's the way I see it. No, I'm just giving it a try. Who can comfort me? Who? Nobody. No matter how much you want to help me, you're not helping me, you can't. I go to church. I'm not hurting anybody, doing that. I don't know . . . If you see that priest standing there, three masses in a row, you sometimes think, you look at that man and you're thinking: If there was nothing out there, you wouldn't be standing there, would you? You don't know what to think of it all, it's all so mysterious, the church is. I find churches mysterious. Death, life. Life I don't find mysterious, but death I do find mysterious. Somebody you've known very well, somebody you held and then suddenly they don't talk to you anymore and they just lie there like a block of ice. That's very different, that is, something very mysterious. But like I say: You're not harming anyone, they're not harming anyone. The priest doesn't harm you. What could happen? Nothing. So you go there! I've got nothing against the church. Absolutely nothing. In church, nobody can do any harm. I appreciate what those people are doing; they're not harming anyone. They're doing a good thing, trying to keep things together. Sitting and praying in that church for an hour on Sundays I'm not harming anyone. I'm not causing anyone any grief. So what have I got to lose? Nothing. But suppose there is a God, then he's got to appreciate my being there in that church. I always say: If there's a higher power, I didn't do it for nothing. And if there's no such thing, and I did it all for nothing, what have I lost? Nothing, have I?! I won't have lost anything.'

5.3. Some remarks to this case

Jan Peters takes a grand view of himself, even in his misery. But his grandness can be looked upon as presenting a tormented soul in turmoil to conceal his essentially weak self. A weak self that goes back a long way: 'I was very introverted. I got anxious easily, had little self-confidence, I was withdrawn, alone a lot. I wasn't very happy. I withdrew. I'm a fearful person.'

It is not until after his wife's death that the theme of religion becomes explicitly important to Jan Peters. His weak self cannot cope with the crisis of his wife's death: 'All I want to be occupied with now is myself. I really need help. How, I don't know. But I don't think anyone can help me.' Here again, he is grand in his helplessness. It takes big shots to help him. No wonder the only one that could probably help him would be the good Lord himself.

For Jan Peters, religion has a magical function: it helps to keep his fear and his guilt at bay. By going to church and in prayer, Jan finds a form and a place that allows him to let go of his fear and his unrest for a while. Religion, prayer and the church are offering refuge, they are havens of rest, where he is not being forced to do anything, that do not do any harm, where Jan cannot do any harm either. This is where his 'prayer for a very special reason', as he calls it, takes place, 'My Special Prayer'.² Losing something is unacceptable. In the religious domain we thus find the same fundamental patterns that we also find in his self: strong–weak, winning–losing, and good–bad. In his efforts in the religious domain, Jan is trying to get support from God through his prayers.

His is clearly a petitionary prayer. The central element of the prayer lies in its effect, the cause that prompts him to pray is concrete, and his prayer is directed to a personal God who is asked for a solution. But the characteristics of religious prayer are also there. The most important element of religious prayer, as we saw earlier, is its direction. It is directed to God. In religious prayer, the person praying seeks contact with a personal God. It is about strengthening one's ties with God. We also find Jan Peters engaged in this religious prayer, particularly in church, kneeling down. The weak, losing and bad self is to be transformed, preferably miraculously, into a strong, winning and good self.

It is clear how the narcissistic theme colours the sacred field and at the same time offers something to hold on to. Religiosity is, in a sense, moulded into the individual's personality structure. In prayer, the same thing happens: the self in prayer gets embedded in the self.

6. Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn about the relation between narcissism and prayer after the presentation of the research and the discussion of the case? Covert narcissists ask a lot from God, and turn to him a lot. Covert narcissism is characterised by a strongly idealising aspect (KOHUT 1971). Idealising in the sense that in one's life one needs an almighty other, God in this case. One experiences oneself as weak, but this weakness is compensated by a relationship with a strong other who offers protection. The basic principle underlying the covert narcissist's idealisation is: 'You are great and

² 'My Special Prayer' is the title of a song by soul singer Percy Sledge (1941, Leighton, Alabama) from 1969. He is also famous for the classic 'When a Man Loves a Woman'. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnQekVULGBQ>, retrieved 5 March 2014.

perfect and I belong with you.' Covert narcissists connect to God as an almighty other. Prompted by their own lack of power, they want to connect to the almighty other and thus acquire social security and support. They experience themselves as weak, but the psychological balance is redressed through a connection with a powerful other. It is in religious prayer and petitionary prayer that this connection is achieved and maintained.

For more overt narcissists, it is the grandiose moment that dominates (KOHUT 1971). In other words, experiencing oneself as grand. The basic principle underlying the grandiose experience of the overt narcissist is: 'I am great and perfect.' One takes pride in the talents (real or imagined) that one considers oneself to have, and one does not need others, except to be admired by them. In any case, one has no need of an almighty God to turn to as in petitionary and religious prayer. This does not mean to say that all prayer is discarded. Rather, there is more of a tendency toward meditative and psychological prayer. These are forms of prayer directed to the self – meditative prayer – or to an anonymous power – psychological prayer. An anonymous power is acceptable because its abstract and impersonal character does not compete with the grandeur one ascribes to oneself. There would be competition in the case of the petitionary or the religious prayer, directed as these are to a God with strongly personal traits. This way, there is no competition between the gods, the god one considers oneself to be and the God outside of oneself.

Overt and covert narcissism are closely linked to 'god images'. God images are the emotionally strong coloured mental images that are the foundations of an individual's relation to Divine Attachment Figures (DAF) such as God (and other major religious figures like Buddha, Allah, Jesus or Krishna). Overt and covert narcissism demonstrates the relations between an individual's self-image and a DAF. This can go in two directions: by making himself subsidiary to the DAF (as is the case of the covert type), or by claiming divine characteristics (as in the case of overt narcissism). In this last variant the DAF and the self coincide.³

In line with the third trend of research distinguished by STÛN and FRANCIS (2009), our research showed how an investigation into the contents of prayer gives insights into the lives of ordinary people.

As was said before, we did not find a relation between overt and covert narcissism and the frequency of prayer. We did, however, find a relation between the two narcissistic dimensions and the various forms of prayer. This shows that the narcissistic theme in itself is no reason to pray more or less, but that it can be a driving force behind the way one prays. Overt narcissism motivates one to address oneself to an anonymous power or to turn inward in prayer; covert narcissism motivates one to address oneself to God in prayer. Those who succeed in the project of deifying themselves – overt narcissists – do not allow another God beside them; they are enough for themselves. Those who would wish to deify themselves but fail to do so – covert narcissists – connect to a God outside themselves, looking for refuge and support.

³ Strong comment was given on this coinciding of self and Divine Attachment Figures by VITZ (1994), among others. It deals with the criticism on the functional way of gaining narcissistic profit from religion or prayer.

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