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Imagery, Prayer, and Mind Wandering: Kataphatic Prayer

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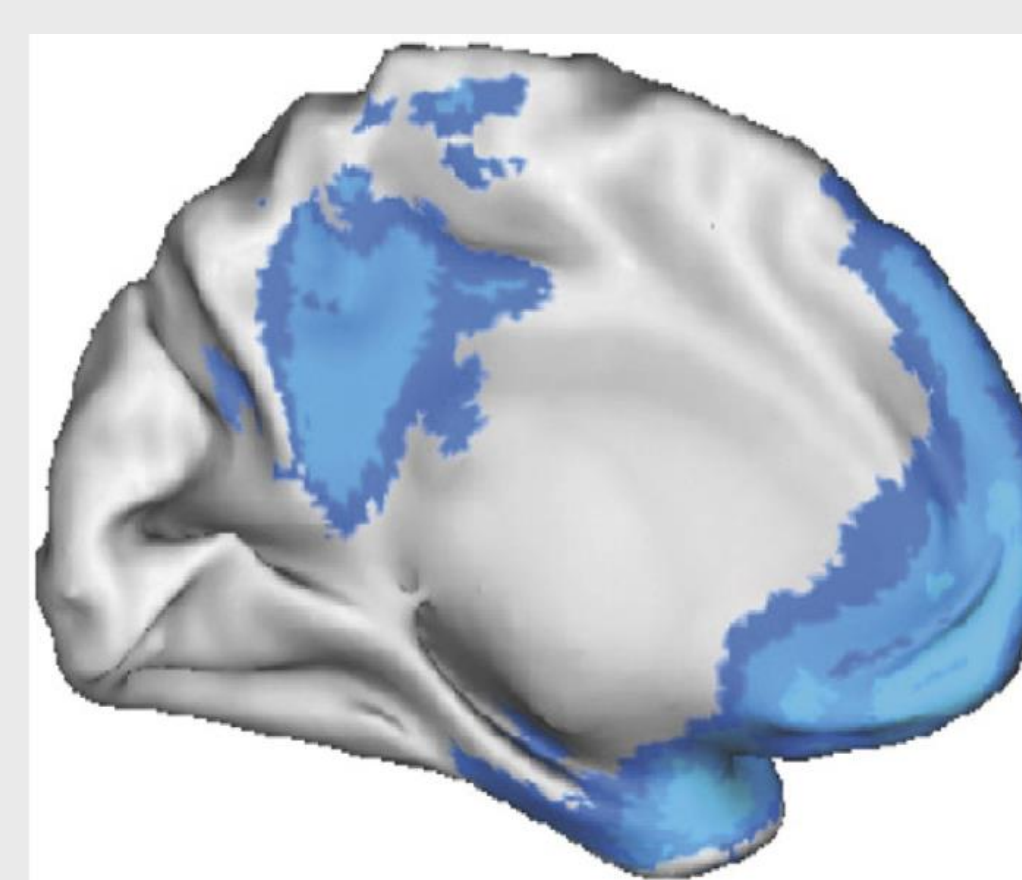
Abstract

Can having petitioners engage in kataphatic prayer block or at least reduce mind wandering? Mind wandering—reduced attention to external events—during prayer could pose a problem for Christians. However, different types of prayer make different cognitive demands. *Kataphatic prayer*, a common type of evangelical Christian prayer, makes use of mental imagery in hopes of experiencing God in a richer sense. Because both mind wandering and kataphatic prayer require imagery, tying up imagery resources in kataphatic prayer should block mind wandering thereby improving focus. Participants in this study prayed as they normally do, viewed a visual task, or engaged in kataphatic prayer while self-monitoring for mind wandering. I did not find any significant difference in the type of prayer engaged in and mind wandering. I did, however, find a negative significant correlation between internalization of Christianity and mind wandering.

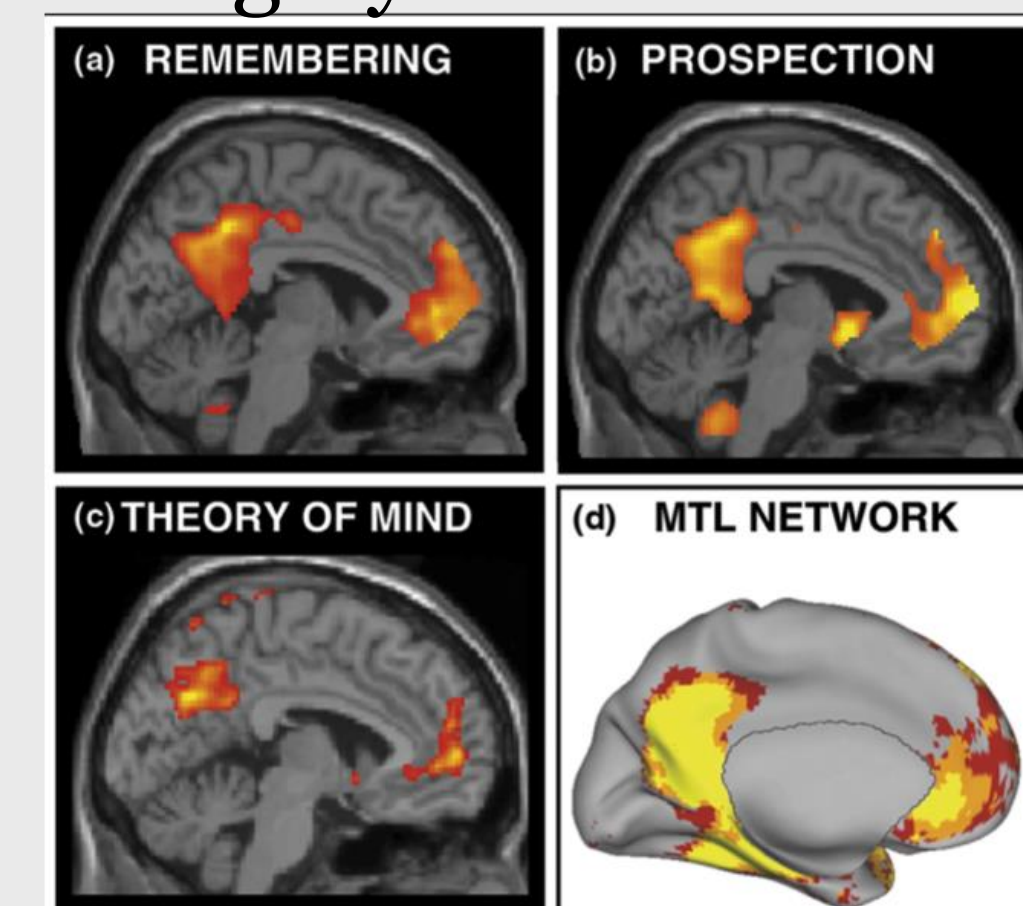
Previous Research

A common problem that people face during prayer is mind wandering. Mind wandering involves reduced attention to external events (e.g. imagery; Smallwood, Beach, Schooler & Handy, 2008). Like all mental processes it is rooted in the brain. When participants take a break from the target tasks in neuroimaging experiments, there is a particular neural network that is still firing (Gusnard et al., 2001). This network, which includes several parts of the brain such as the prefrontal cortex and parietal regions, is called the default mode network and is thought to be involved in mind wandering (Hasenkamp, Wilson-Mendenhall, Duncan, & Barsalou, 2012). This conclusion is not far fetched considering that this network is active when people are not doing something specific or focusing on a task. One theory of mind wandering regards mind wandering as a cyclic activity with two components; one of which includes perception; more specifically the ability to uncouple attention from perception (this is also known as perceptual decoupling) (Schooler et al., 2011). When mind wandering occurs, our minds drift from what we perceive, such as prayer, to inner thoughts. This problem may be curtailed by changing the type of prayer the petitioner engages in. Different types of prayer make different cognitive demands (Ladd & Spilka, 2002). One common type of evangelical Christian prayer session makes use of mental imagery in hopes of experiencing God in a richer sense (Luhmann, Nusbaum, & Thisted, 2013)—this is known as kataphatic prayer.

Mind Wandering



Imagery



Hypothesis

Does kataphatic prayer make a difference in mind wandering of petitioners? I propose that because both mind wandering and kataphatic prayer require imagery, tying up imagery resources in kataphatic prayer should block mind wandering thereby improving focus.

Methodology

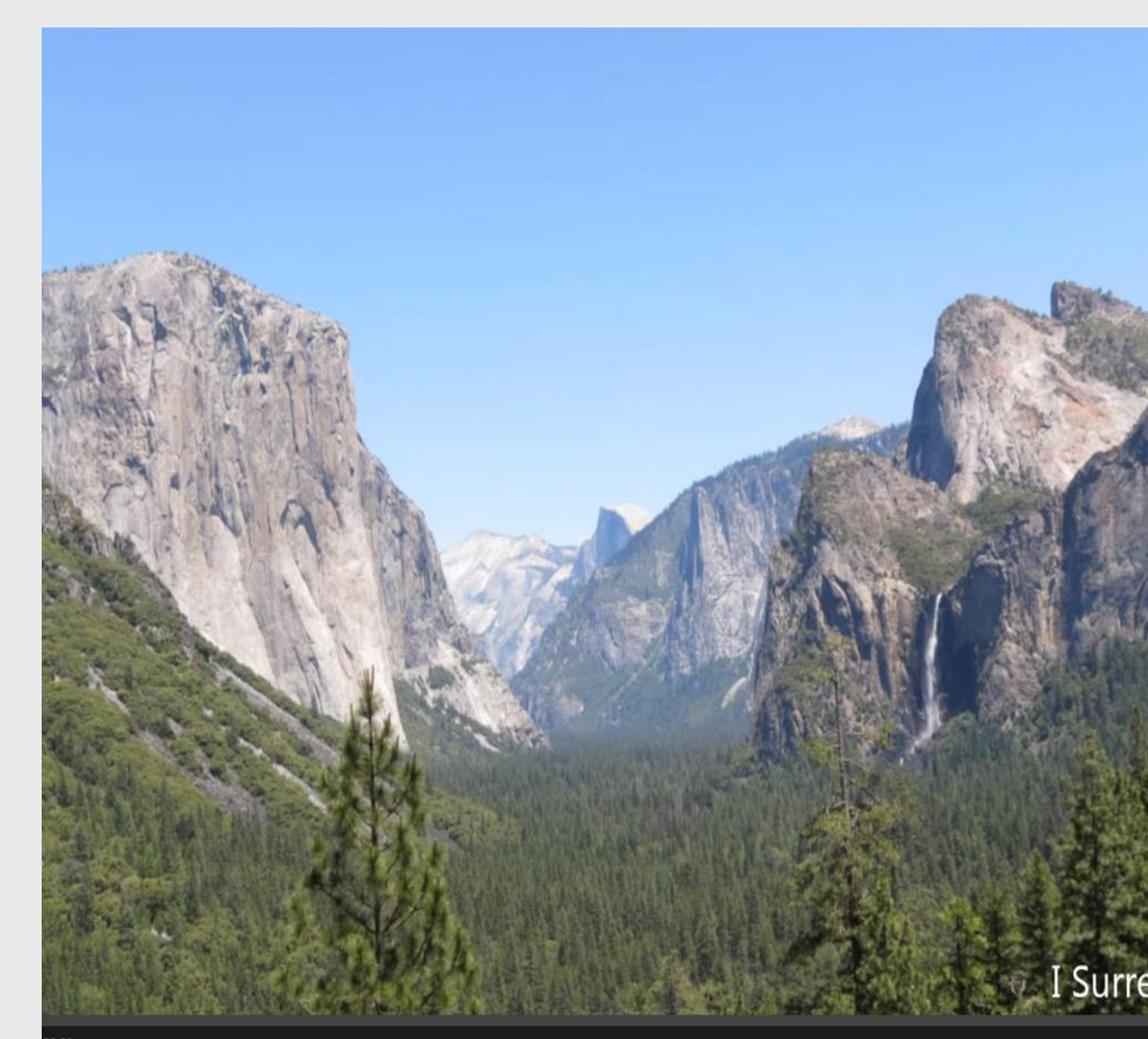
Participants

For this study 15 college students were recruited, both male and female, 18 years or older from Andrews University's Behavioral Sciences Research Participation Pool. They all had to be Seventh-day Adventist for at least 3 months.

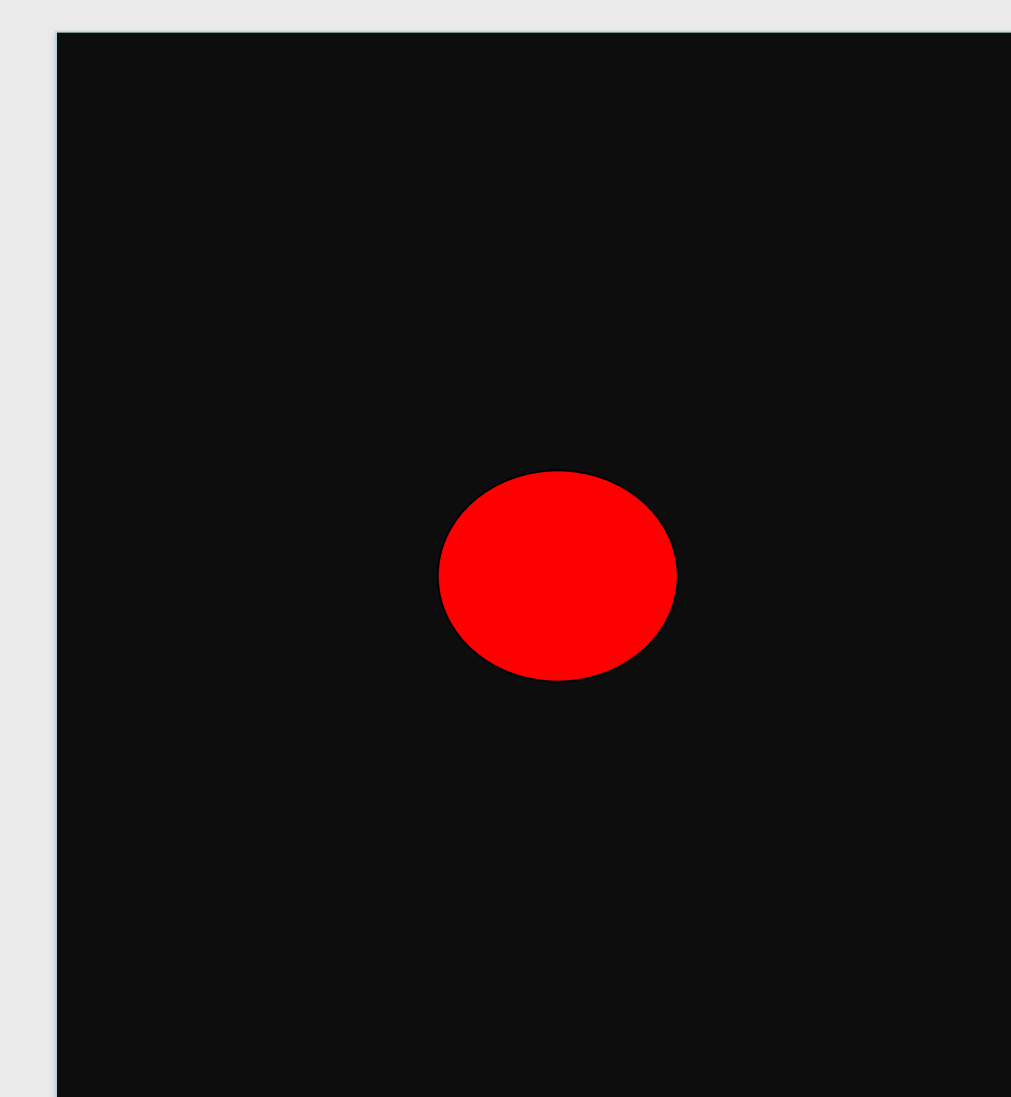
Conditions

The subjects were divided equally into three conditions. The first condition was a visual task. The subjects in this condition watched a YouTube video named "One Hour of Relaxing Hymns on Piano". The subjects in this condition were given 15 minutes to watch the video and were instructed that every time they felt their mind wandering or when the needs to remind themselves to focus, they should toggle any key on the keyboard. This key press would be recorded on a button task window that was opened on the other screen. The second condition will have subjects engaging in kataphatic prayer. They will be read a passage from *Steps to Christ* and they were then instructed to use vivid imagery while praying. They had a maximum prayer period for 15 minutes but were allowed to stop earlier than the allocated time. They also press a key on the computer whenever they experienced their mind wandering while praying. Subjects in the third group were simply asked to pray as they normally do, then press a key when their mind wanders; they were also the an allotted 15 minutes. After this, each subject was given a series of questionnaires to measure other possible correlates. This experiment took no more than 45 minutes to complete.

YouTube



Button Press



Results

Table 1
One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary for Prayer Conditions and Button Presses

Source	Df	SS	MS	F
Between groups	2	79.142	39.571	.827
Within groups	10	478.550	47.855	
Total	12	557.692		

Table 2
Pearson's Correlation

	Internalization of Christianity (CRIS)
Button Press/ Minute	-.669*

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Conclusions

- St. Hilare & Bailey 2014
- My findings replicated in a previous study which had participants pray for about 10 minutes.
- How to get Christians to internalize Christianity

Limitations

- Small sample size
- Length of manipulation
- Highly motivated individual vs. credit

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