

Article

The Prosociality of Prayer in the Literary Fiction of Felix Timmermans

Marcin Polkowski *  and Joanna Włodarczyk-Kaziród *

Faculty of Humanities, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, 20-950 Lublin, Poland

* Correspondence: marcin.polkowski@kul.pl (M.P.); joanna.wlodarczyk-kazirod@kul.pl (J.W.-K.)

Abstract: This paper examines the ways in which Christian prayer in the literary fiction of Felix Timmermans is represented as a spiritual practice that produces behaviour that is prosocial, or in other words, beneficial to others. The authors combine readings of two texts (the short story *Triptych of the Three Kings* and the novel *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm*) with insights stemming from recent sociological debates on prayer and prosociality to show how Felix Timmermans' prose can prove helpful for understanding how praying transforms individuals by allowing them to behave in a more altruistic way.

Keywords: prayer; prosociality; sociology of religion; Flemish literature; Felix Timmermans

1. Introduction

The idea that “faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:26) has set a norm among Christians for relating religious belief to actions that result from the commandment to love one's neighbour. While Protestantism has typically laid a stronger emphasis on the saving grace of faith alone, Roman Catholicism has retained and developed the idea that one of the criteria of the authenticity of one's faith is how it manifests itself through good deeds in everyday life. One of the fundamental expressions of religious faith is prayer. But can one say, paraphrasing Jas 2:26, that “prayer without works is dead”? A major part of recent sociological research on religiosity has been dedicated to answering the perplexing question of whether praying leads individuals to commit themselves more strongly to actions that are altruistic, generous, and charitable toward others, or in other words, prosocial. The problem of the prosociality of prayer can be approached from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. In this article, we argue that literary studies, geared towards the investigation of social representations, have the potential to provide useful insights for understanding in what ways prayer stimulates altruistic behaviour.

This research, which should be treated as a case study, takes as its object of investigation two works of fiction by Felix Timmermans (1886–1947), a Belgian writer and graphic artist whose extensive literary legacy consists mainly of novels and short stories depicting nature, rural life, and Catholic religious traditions in Flanders (for biographies, see [Van Remoortere 1972](#); [Durnez 2000](#)). [Goedegebuure \(2009, p. 532\)](#) locates Timmermans' prose at the intersection of regional fiction and vitalism, both characteristic of European modernism. In his fiction, Timmermans celebrated exuberant, sensual, and down-to-earth protagonists, most of whom have a profound, if somewhat idiosyncratic, spiritual life. This category includes his most famous characters: the peasant Pallieter (whose name has become synonymous in Flanders with a bon vivant) and Root, the hero of *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm*. Literary historians have judged Timmermans' prose to be marked by a “mythologizing or idealizing” tendency in its depiction of agrarian life ([Goedegebuure 2009, p. 492](#)). The



Academic Editor: John McDowell

Received: 23 December 2024

Revised: 13 March 2025

Accepted: 9 April 2025

Published: 13 April 2025

Citation: Polkowski, Marcin, and Joanna Włodarczyk-Kaziród. 2025. The Prosociality of Prayer in the Literary Fiction of Felix Timmermans. *Religions* 16: 496. <https://doi.org/10.3390/re16040496>

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

narrative fiction of Felix Timmermans has traditionally been diagnosed as strongly imbued with references to Catholic Christianity (Vanclooster 2006). The emphasis on religious experience within social contexts is what makes Timmermans' fiction particularly well-adapted for exploring the literary representation of Christian prayer.

Despite the passage of time, Timmermans' novels are still relevant today. The Flemish author's fiction has been widely translated, resonating far beyond the Dutch-speaking world (Absillis and Mus 2023). Recently, *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm* was translated into English by Paul Vincent (Timmermans 2023). Despite the profound social transformation of Flanders in the period from the mid-20th century until the present, Timmermans' prose has remained an important part of the literary heritage of that part of Europe (Van Deinsen et al. 2022). Timmermans' works have a small but vibrant following and have attracted contemporary Flemish artists to create innovative film adaptations (Van den Berghe 2010) or performances (Coffrée 2018).

2. Approaching Prayer and Prosociality in the Fiction of Felix Timmermans

The preoccupation of modernist literature in the West with prayer correlates with the social, political, and economic debates over the status of religion at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Lewis 2006, p. 21). Although Timmermans was not a typical modernist in the sense that he did not belong to the avant-garde, but rather a Heimat writer who tended towards vitalism (Goedegebuure 2009, p. 532), he shared the concern of the literature of his time with the challenges of modern society and responded to them by celebrating a return to rurality, tradition, and religious faith. What Lewis identifies as a "conflictual" relationship of modern literature with prayer (Lewis 2006, p. 23) is also true for Felix Timmermans' work as a novelist. The importance of prayer in the life of an imperfect individual is one of the central themes of Timmermans' most successful novel *Pallieter* (1916, translated by Charlotte Beatrice Bodde, 1924). It is the story of an innocent, epicurean, but also intensely spiritual peasant whose life takes on Franciscan overtones (Absillis and de Bont 2020). Timmermans combined the life-transforming message of the Nativity with the mundane realities of occupied Belgium during the First World War in *The Christ Child in Flanders* (1917, translated by Elinor C. Briefs, 1960). The Flemish author's *Very Lovely Hours in the Life of the Beguine Symforosa* (1918, translated by Nell V.L. Boni, 1922) tells the story of how the daily routine of a young Flemish beguine is interrupted by her falling in love with a young gardener who eventually joins a monastic order. The young woman experiences one of the most satisfying moments of her life when, through prayer, she realises that giving up passion can lead to spiritual peace. The "hours" of the title refer, ambiguously, to the experience of illicit love and to a communal monastic prayer. Religious considerations strongly influence the decisions of the protagonists of Timmermans' *Triptych of the Three Kings* (1923, translated by H.L. Rippenberger, 1936). Its dramatic adaptation, *En waar de ster bleef stille staan* (And where the star stood still), co-authored by Timmermans and Elias Eduard Vettermans, was notably transformed by Gust van den Berghe into a film with actors with intellectual disabilities, *Little Baby Jesus of Flandr* (Van den Berghe 2010), demonstrating how its themes of loss, hope, and salvation have the power to transcend social boundaries. *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm* (1935) (Timmermans 2023) is a first-person narrative by a sturdy Flemish farmer, Root, whose religious experiences, especially an intense Christocentric spirituality, are projected onto the comings and goings of his household and the seasonal rhythms of nature. Other novels by Timmermans that explore the topic of a complicated relationship between imperfect individuals and God include *De Pastoor uit den bloeyenden wijngaerd* (The priest from the blossoming vineyard, 1923) and *The Perfect Joy of St Francis* (1931, translated by Raphael Brown, 1955) (Timmermans 1955). The latter novel was a

product of a wider Western interest in the figure of Francis of Assisi ([Absillis and de Bont 2020](#), pp. 49–59; cf. [Zajączkowski 2024](#)).

The Flemish author, not unlike the modernist poets referred to by [Lewis \(2006, p. 23\)](#), often used the terminology of prayer (including the associated literary genres) as a stylistic and rhetorical device in his prose fiction. Prayer can be recognised as a key instrument for structuring the narrative and outlining the characters in Timmermans' novels. As we will see in the subsequent analyses, the Flemish writer pursued a strategy of balancing the seriousness of prayer as an activity with a high symbolic value and profound religious significance against the narrative tension and sense of irony created by the transgressions of his protagonists, thus creating an effect of distance between the reader and the literary image of religious activities.

That a fascination with individual and collective religiosity underlies much of Timmermans's fiction was noted early on by Flemish scholars ([Claessens 1935](#)). [Mertens \(1986\)](#) emphasised that Timmermans was neither a folklorist nor a Catholic apologist. His artistic merit, according to that researcher, was essentially to depict forms of religious experience. Timmermans' religious faith oscillated between childlike naivety and searching critique but avoided the twin extremes of rationalism and dogmatism. Mertens further argued that Timmermans eschewed a ritualistic religiosity, concluding that the essence of the writer's religious experience was charitable love, manifested in fiction as the protagonists' self-renunciation combined with an attitude of disinterested gratitude to God ([Mertens 1986](#)). In more recent studies, the focus has tended to shift from an emphasis on the uniqueness of Timmermans's religious vision to an understanding that his outlook was influenced by external, sociological, or socio-literary factors, and from an emphasis on his Catholicity to approaches from a variety of Christian perspectives. [Dom \(1986\)](#), for example, explored Timmermans' spirituality through the lens of Hjalmar Sundén's role theory. In recent decades, scholars have found Timmermans' fiction to reflect various aspects of Christian spirituality. Timmermans was receptive to Rhineland mysticism ([Braekers 2015](#)), an author whose life was a search for God ([Van de Perre 2018](#)). [Verstraeten \(2010\)](#), who placed Timmermans' prose in the context of Flemish writers' attitudes towards mystical experience, noted a search for balance between an ecstatic mysticism and a more practical, down-to-earth spirituality that did not exclude morally imperfect individuals. [Absillis and de Bont \(2020\)](#) have also pointed to the existence of previously unexamined mystical tropes in his work. [Absillis and Mus \(2023\)](#), on the other hand, have shown how the international reception of Timmermans' novels resulted from the use of an image of a sensuous and pious Flanders that flourished in other European literatures.

Below, we focus on two samples of Timmermans' fiction as illustrative of their author's representation of prayer in the lives of ordinary individuals, either living on the margins of society or belonging to the peasant population. While the function of prayer in the medieval or early modern West has been explored in a variety of publications (see, for example, [Gibson et al. 2017](#) for the period 1600–1800), a comprehensive approach to this phenomenon in the modern period seems more challenging, but not impossible ([McLeod 1981](#)). Specific studies on the relationship between prayer and theology ([Prevot 2015](#)), prayer and science ([Ostrander 2000](#)), and prayer and literature ([Lewis 2006](#); [Domestico 2016](#)) abound for this period, foregrounding phenomena and products of a high cultural significance. On the other hand, the prayer experience of ordinary people, especially for the period before systematic sociological surveys were conducted, still seems to be under-researched, although studies dealing with the post-war period, such as [Billiet and Dobbelaere \(1976\)](#) or, more recently, [Gevers \(2014\)](#), have succeeded in shedding light on the transformation of the Catholic community in Flanders. The evidence in these studies

points to Christian prayer as prevalent throughout all ranks of society in Flanders and in the Western world as such by the mid-20th century.

Literary studies have the potential to fill even more of the gap in our knowledge of the religious experience of ordinary people. Evidently, the depiction of any social phenomenon in literary fiction should not be misunderstood as a transparent, objective representation of society and its processes. Nevertheless, the sociology of literary works (“sociologie des oeuvres”) (Sapiro 2023, pp. 75–112), a sub-discipline of literary studies, demonstrates that it is scientifically valid to explore how literature (while by no means a mirror-like image) reflects the social world. While literature, including fiction, is autonomous through its artistic language, it has the potential to capture what is “lost in translation” between the arts and sociology (Váňa 2020).

The modern period marks the beginning of scientific interest in prayer from a sociological point of view. Since then, many definitions of prayer have been proposed and basic research problems have been identified (Tatała and Wojtasiński 2021). From an anthropological perspective, following the insights of Marcel Mauss (2003), prayer is a social act that involves an exchange of gifts. Recent research has established that prayer has a “social life”: besides the contact between a person and the divine, prayers are “a form of action in and on the world” (Bandak 2017, pp. 12–13; 2019). Taking note of various strands of current research on prayer as social action, Bandak identifies, among other things, the search for consolation in times of crisis, building a religious self-identity and achieving a balance between work and prayer (or between action and inaction), affective investment, and dilemmas about the right (or wrong) way to pray as crucial aspects of this phenomenon (Bandak 2017). Regardless of the type of religion, prayer forms a “triangular” (Sun 2016, p. 122) engagement between the believer, the deity, and society. The vertical dimension of this relationship is also social. Sun advocates an “understanding of prayer based on action rather than belief” that is transformative and a socially performative action, even if the motive in question may vary or even be deficient according to certain norms (Sun 2016, pp. 123, 127–28).

While significant methodological input has come from the sociology of literature, particularly in the area of “literature and social representation(s)” (Sapiro 2023), the subject matter of this study also situates it within the growing field of religion and literature, which seeks to map the interrelations between theology, literary works, and literary theory (Knight 2016, p. 2). Studies in religion and literature offer practices of textual enquiry that are relevant to the study of prayer as a literary trope. In studies of religion and literature, prayer belongs to the broader field of devotion, which has recently been increasingly studied by scholars as a “transformative practice” (Craig et al. 2021, p. 3). The key to this new approach, then, is to read a text in order to detect a transformation of behaviour or affect. Seen in this light, prayer has a clear-cut social dimension: the enactment of devotion means that the believer takes specific actions in his or her social environment. This line of thought aligns itself closely with the sociological perspective outlined above. The next step that can be taken in literary studies, then, is to apply the concept of prayer as a socially transformative action to literary fiction, making the characters and their behaviours part of the picture. It seems particularly useful to focus on how the protagonists’ prayer actions touch on the areas explored by Bandak (2017), which can easily provide a common ground for sociological and literary enquiry, while distancing oneself from an assessment of the motives of the fictional characters (cf. Sun 2016), focusing instead on how prayer, as represented in literary fiction, can be understood as a social performance.

This research adopts the concept of prosociality from sociological studies of religion. Synonyms for prosociality (Oviedo 2016, p. 70) include terms such as altruism, cooperative behaviour, volunteering, generosity, or kindness. Recent research offers a mixed assessment

of whether religiosity, in general, or prayer, in particular, contributes significantly to prosocial behaviour. [Van Cappellen et al. \(2016\)](#) have shown that mass attendance promotes prosociality, although self-focused emotion emerges as a mitigating factor. [Oviedo \(2016, p. 182\)](#) questions this link, suggesting that religion thrives in a variety of complex ethical and social relationships without necessarily producing altruistic actions. A decline in religiosity does not necessarily indicate a decline in prosocial behaviour; that the opposite may be true is illustrated by a study by [Prouteau and Sardinha \(2015\)](#). Indeed, as Oviedo notes, scholars of the impact of religious behaviour on prosociality reach opposite conclusions even when referring to the same evidence ([Oviedo 2016, p. 170](#)). However, a study by [Meijer-van Abbema and Koole \(2017\)](#) shows that positive beliefs in God may help to promote generosity, increasing trust and decreasing hostility among members of a religious community, thus building a platform for altruistic activities. Given that the existence of a straightforward correlation between religion and prosocial behaviour is a matter of debate, in this paper we use the method of literary studies to inquire into the existence of such a relationship within the world of fictional representations.

The question addressed below, therefore, is: how does prayer transform the protagonists in Timmermans' fiction, and in what ways that transformation is essential in helping them to become more generous towards others? In doing so, we will assess how the sociological perspective described above relates to the findings of a literary analysis of fictional representations of prayer.

3. Representations of Prayer and Prosocial Behaviour in Literature: A Case Study. Two Fictional Texts by Felix Timmermans

The fiction of Felix Timmermans is a rich source of material that can be used to study prayer from different angles, including the one chosen here. Of course, the choice of one or more texts is always an exercise that runs the risk of being subjective. Admittedly, a novel like *Pallieter*, *The Perfect Joy of St Francis*, or a novella like *The Very Lovely Hours in the Life of the Beguine Symforosa*, would have suited our purpose well. A juxtaposition of *Pallieter* and *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm* in particular would have produced rich insights into the representation of prayer. While both protagonists are farmers, in comparison to Root, the hero of *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm*, *Pallieter* is a more exuberant, freewheeling figure whose spiritual experience evolves with little direct contact with the institutional Church. *Pallieter*, like Root, is a character who prays very often, and whose prayers, in many cases, are an expression of gratitude. A difference, however, seems to be present in the more escapist nature of *Pallieter*, whose engagement in social life appears to be less strong than Root's.

In selecting *A Peasant's Psalm* ([Timmermans 2023](#)) and *The Triptych of the Three Kings* ([Timmermans 1936](#)), we have been guided by two considerations. Firstly, we have chosen texts in which the protagonists belong to two different social groups—a peasant and representatives of the village poor. Secondly, we have chosen to focus on the laity, rather than on a group identified as specifically religious (e.g., a priest or a beguine), in order to provide a more neutral perspective in relation to prayer as an activity. We sought to examine both an early work, in which (like in *Pallieter*) Timmermans resorted to an extradiegetic narrator, with one that represents his later period, where he abandoned external description in favour of an internalised, homodiegetic narrative ([Goedegebuure 2009, p. 532](#)). Finally, we wanted to include a well-studied and critically acclaimed text alongside one that occupies a marginal position in Timmermans' work. The result is a compromise that attempts to do justice to the diversity of Timmermans' oeuvre, while not losing sight of the sociological approach to literature.

3.1. *The Triptych of the Three Kings*

Timmermans' *Triptych of the Three Kings*, a novella on the theme of the Nativity, has not fared well at the hands of critics, who have generally considered it a qualitatively lesser work than the rest of his oeuvre (Verstraeten 2010). Notwithstanding this, despite its superficial simplicity, it has the potential to reveal profound religious problems (Verstraeten 2010, p. 1270). One of these, apart from that of the mystical experience already examined by Verstraeten, is how prayer transforms the characters, producing altruistic behaviour.

The novella, whose title and structure alludes to an altarpiece, has as its heroes three ne'er-do-wells: Pitjevogel, an eel-fisher, Suskewiet, a shepherd, and Schrobberbeeck, a beggar. In the social structure of their Flemish village, they represent those who are marginalised, unlike the well-off farmers or artisans. The three men have a tradition of walking together from door to door on Christmas Eve dressed as the Three Kings. Singing songs, they collect food and small change as a reward. However, one Christmas Eve turns out to be different and will transform their lives.

The events of the first chapter of the novella, "The Centrepiece", begin with a scene of "a creaky little kermis wagon" passing through the town. It is little more than a cart, drawn not by a horse but by an old man and a dog. Inside, the narrator tells us, is "a young, slender woman" with "large and troubled" eyes. The reader is invited to focus on this brief scene from the perspective of a bystander. The villagers, however, soon forget what they have seen (Timmermans 1936, p. 5).

During the evening, Pitjevogel, Suskewiet, and Schrobberbeeck experience a strange 'feeling of oppression' which, as the extradiegetic narrator explains, is different from anything they had seen or felt before. Talking to each other, they alleviate this anxiety by referring to the sense of comfort that Christmas Eve brings them. Their idea of Christmas is shaped by folklore. Christmas, for example, is a time when bees are said to awaken. At this time, Suskewiet believes, "God will be born anew". Schrobberbeeck questions this belief, "thinking of his sins", but Suskewiet insists that it is true, even if "He only comes for one night" (Timmermans 1936, pp. 7–8).

To dispel the fear they all feel, the three men spontaneously begin to pray. Prayer, as they understand it, offers protection against evil:

'Let us pray,' begged Suskewiet, the shepherd, 'then no evil can happen to us.'

The beggar and the shepherd mumbled a Hail Mary. Potjevogel began to mutter, for since his First Communion he had forgotten how to pray. (Timmermans 1936, p. 9)

As they walk, they see "a friendly light in the distance". No longer afraid, they spot the kermis wagon. On the way there, they recognise all the signs of Christmas that they know from popular belief. Inside the wagon, they found a young woman with a newborn baby. Spontaneously, the three men kneel and feel, as the narrator tells us, "a heavenly happiness greater than any joy" (Timmermans 1936, pp. 9–10).

The extreme poverty of the people in the caravan soon becomes obvious to Pitjevogel, Suskewiet, and Schrobberbeeck, even though they too are hardly well off. Instead of ending up at the village inn as planned, unexpectedly the three men offer their earnings to the inhabitants of the kermis wagon:

[. . .] Filled with confusion and compassion, the Kings looked at the old man and the young woman, at the child and the bony dog. Then they looked at each other. Their thoughts were as one, and lo, the stocking with its money was emptied into the lap of the woman, and the sack of food was turned inside out and all that was in it was laid on the shaky little table. (Timmermans 1936, pp. 10–11)

The act of praying precedes the encounter and is present during the scene itself. In the kermis wagon, the "Three Kings" perform the ritual gestures associated with praying.

There, they experience something that may be called a mystical state of consciousness and seem to be engaged in contemplation. The heterodiegetic narrator does not in any way suggest an interpretation of this encounter, which only occurs afterwards to one of the characters.

Although the three men's motives are not altruistic initially, as they set out to earn money and collect food, the new situation coupled with the experience of prayer transforms them. As their previous attitude gives way to generosity, now it is they who are penniless. In hindsight, the "Three Kings" try to come to terms with what they had done. Neither of the three, except for Suskewiet, can come up with a valid reason. The latter not only seems to recognise a resemblance between the situation they had witnessed and the Nativity but even asks, "Couldn't the child have been God?". The others, however, are not satisfied with this attempt at an explanation. "'But why did we give everything away then?' 'I'm breaking my head about that, too', said the beggar, whose stomach began to rumble" (Timmermans 1936, pp. 11–12). That their generosity was religiously inspired seems, after all, to offer them an inadequate explanation. The narrative leaves it up to the reader to decide what caused this change of behaviour.

The following year (as narrated in the "Left wing" of the triptych), the lives of the three beggars take a different turn. Suskewiet, who is now ill, had undergone an inward transformation. He started praying frequently and in public, saying "childish" prayers. We do not learn why these prayers are so-called by the heterodiegetic narrator, or why the reader is invited to understand them as deficient. Elsewhere, however, the narrator mentions explicitly that he said the rosary, did penance, and started talking to people about religious topics. His experience of meeting the three figures in the caravan, whom he has taken to be Christ, Mary, and Joseph, changed the way he behaved, but this transformation only earned him the undeserved ridicule of the villagers. Even the village pastor did not appreciate Suskewiet's way of talking about that event (Timmermans 1936, pp. 15–18).

Suskewiet's relationship with his comrades Pitjevogel and Schrobberbeeck has changed too. Shortly before Christmas, the former suggests that the three should again give all their earnings away:

'Are you mad?' cried Pitjevogel, the eel-fisher.

'Are we not poor enough?' asked Schrobberbeeck, the beggar with the bleary eyes.

'No', said Suskewiet, 'all that you have you must give to God. And whether we give it to God or give it to the poor is all the same'.

'Then we will stay home', said Schrobberbeeck. 'Do you think that I am going to sing myself hoarse for others? One does that once and not again'. (Timmermans 1936, pp. 18–19)

Verstraeten has interpreted the three characters as exemplifying three modes of religious experience. Suskewiet, who is the most radically transformed by the meeting with the three inhabitants of the caravan, can be understood as representing a mystical type of faith. Although, out of the three, Suskewiet seems closest to God, Verstraeten argued that his mysticism was downplayed by Timmermans (Verstraeten 2010, p. 1272). After all, the shepherd is called mad and his story is spurned even by the pastor. However, Suskewiet is not rejected entirely, and he does receive the Last Rites after he falls ill (Timmermans 1936, p. 19). It appears to us that Timmermans did not criticise Suskewiet's religiosity but left a window open to other interpretations. The ones who called Suskewiet mad, for example, were Pitjevogel and Schrobberbeeck, that is to say, precisely the ones who at that stage were not yet open to a more radical religious transformation in their lives (as we will see, this changes in the course of the plot). Other passages seemingly implying Suskewiet's rejection are a rendering of how the village population focalises him. Not proceeding directly from

the extra- and heterodiegetic narrator, such items of information are less authoritative for the reader.

We would like to argue, then, that the three men represent three different but essentially equivalent paths to religious transformation, in the course of which it is Suskewiet who most strongly builds a religious self (cf. [Bandak 2017](#)) by engaging in a variety of religious practices. Suskewiet's transformation is so radical that it shocks the villagers. As compared to Pitjevogel and Schrobberbeeck, Suskewiet is the one whose religiosity, a part of which is his life of prayer, expresses itself in an urge to behave in an altruistic way, being open to sharing even the small possessions he and his group may acquire. However, this comes at a price. After pressuring his friends to adopt the same radical model of generosity (which we may understand in the light of Christian *caritas*), Suskewiet becomes an outsider even within the circle of marginalised people to which he belongs ([Timmermans 1936](#), p. 19). Abandoned by his two companions, Suskewiet dies, but before that happens, he sees in his fever a child inviting him to a wonderful palace, which the reader can identify as a vision of Christ and heaven ([Timmermans 1936](#), pp. 20–25). Suskewiet's transformation is signalled by the narrator, who states that the shepherd's soul has been "transfigured" ([Timmermans 1936](#), p. 25).

The two other characters, Pitjevogel and Schrobberbeeck, lead far from model lives, yet they too (in the "Right Wing" of the triptych) are eventually inwardly transformed by their religious beliefs. Three years have passed. Pitjevogel, meanwhile, has met an unfrocked priest who was a Satanist, and come under his influence, and Schrobberbeeck has grown afraid of God. Attracted to the sacred but afraid of it, Schrobberbeeck could be an illustration of someone for whom God is an authoritarian enforcer (cf. [Oviedo 2016](#), pp. 173–74). Although he prays, for example "mumbling an Our Father", it is only while begging that he does so, which points to the deficiency of his motives. Schrobberbeeck also reverences local religious statues of the Virgin Mary. The perspective of Christmas Eve fills him with dread that "something holy might happen to him" ([Timmermans 1936](#), pp. 32–33). Yet, neither praying nor a fear of God seem to prevent him from stealing ([Timmermans 1936](#), p. 31).

Schrobberbeeck, however, eventually undergoes a religious experience, which forms the climax of the narrative, and which due to its length and level of storytelling detail should be seen as equally important as Suskewiet's one. On Christmas Eve, Schrobberbeeck starts off for the midnight Mass. Walking alone he is astonished by how the figures of the Virgin Mary, one by one, come to life, leave their chapels, and walk to the Cross of Christ some distance away. This strange fact is not rationalised or challenged on the level of the hetero- and extradiegetic narration. Schrobberbeeck even has a conversation with a figure of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows and helps to carry her, answering her plea. From the statue, which came to life, Schrobberbeeck learns that Pitjevogel, now contrite, will be saved through Mary's intercession ([Timmermans 1936](#), pp. 33–37).

That night, Schrobberbeeck experiences a mystical moment, witnessing the wound in Christ's heart, which the beggar calls "heaven" ([Timmermans 1936](#), pp. 38–39). Schrobberbeeck's life is transformed by this vision and that of the figures of Mary coming together to meet with Him under the cross, yet it is an ambiguous transformation, which does not produce altruistic behaviour. On the contrary, although later he "longed for more of such solemn moments [. . .] and in church, too, he looked out for them", it turns out that "not even the strongest emotion of his soul could get that [i.e., begging and stealing] out of him" ([Timmermans 1936](#), pp. 38–39). The evolution of Schrobberbeeck as a character disproves, on the one hand, the idea that religiosity, or a life of prayer in particular, contributes to more altruistic behaviour (cf. [Oviedo 2016](#)). On the other hand, it tends to support the

assumption that belief in God leads to a more empathetic relationship with others in the same community (cf. [Meijer-van Abbema and Koole 2017](#)).

3.2. *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm*

A Peasant Farmer's Psalm can be called a prayer in its own right, born out of Timmermans' fascination with the religiosity of Flemish rural dwellers. Lia, the writer's daughter, recalled in her biographical book *Mijn vader* (My Father): "Very often, when we wandered in the fields and saw a peasant, working on his knees in the field, our Dad would say: 'Is there a more beautiful prayer than that which is the fulfilment of simple daily tasks? If one is a believer, of course'" (translation by the author) ([Timmermans 1951](#), p. 78). Indeed, the main character of *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm*, Root, keeps referring to God, thanking him not only for happy days and hours but also for the harsh experiences, the sufferings that God sends upon him (e.g., Amelieken's illness, the death of wives, sons). He develops (with the help of the pastor) an understanding of physical work as a religious activity that offers an alternative to traditional forms of prayer without replacing them entirely. *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm* illustrates this literary theology of prayer through work in two ways: by Root's daily labour on the farm, and more symbolically, by his carving of a figure of the crucified Christ in wood:

'You don't have to pray all God's day', he says, 'all you must do is dedicate your work to God at the start of the day, and in that way your work will be praying' [...] If that's true my life is one great prayer. ([Timmermans 2023](#), p. 41)

A Peasant Farmer's Psalm has invited readings through the lens of theology and spirituality. Herman-Emiel Mertens, for example, has argued that the novel is a "narrative theology of creation" (*narratieve scheppingstheologie*) ([Mertens 1986](#)). According to Urbain van de Voorde *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm* is not only a novel of rural life, but also, or even primarily, one about faith in God and trust in his providence. Van de Voorde also assessed Root's faith as blind but profound ([Van de Voorde 1989](#), pp. 23–29). The farmer is reconciled to God's will; his philosophy of life is based on accepting even the greatest suffering and not losing fortitude in the process. This is not surprising, given how the novel employs prayer as a narrative device. One of the first sentences of the novel is a prayer of thanksgiving: "God, I thank you for making me a farmer" ([Timmermans 2023](#), p. 9). Root gives thanks to the Almighty for the field, for the harvest, for the flowers, the leaves, for his first and second wife, and for his children. His gratitude refers not only to the favours he has received, but also to experiences and moments that are extremely difficult and require sacrifice and suffering: "Life is no laughing matter, and yet who would want to die, O Lord! For you gave me children, one of them is even blind from birth, and you gave me the field. Two gifts that are hard to bear" ([Timmermans 2023](#), p. 24). This higher level of gratitude manifests itself in how Root gives thanks for everything, and in spite of everything, in prayer-like inner monologues. Because Root, the novel's sole character-bound narrator, is also the focalizer ([Bal and van Boheemen 2009](#), p. 27), the choice of prayer as a narrative instrument has the effect of offering the reader an inside, "here and now" perspective on his developing spiritual identity.

Timmermans' fiction has an episodic character, and his plots do not tend to progress at a fast pace. The prayers in *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm* are an interruption in the stream of events, a pause delaying the plot. They present a form of auto-focalisation on the part of Root. The farmer repents in prayer-like words for his sins and asks for the Lord's forgiveness (in this case, betraying his wife with farmer Twister's maid): "God never again, never again. I'd rather cut my throat, so help me, Your poor Root!" ([Timmermans 2023](#), p. 32). After such a situation, he praises God with a prayer of thanksgiving, vowing renewed obedience to Him:

Thank God! Everything comes from You and through You. I suddenly felt and saw that then deep in my heart. Now I know now You count and arrange the seeds that we throw in whole handfuls into the furrows. So many for the birds, so many for the farmer. I know that the good and bad weather depends on our actions. I shall listen to You. No one but You and me! (Timmermans 2023, pp. 33–34)

As the story unfolds the reader is likely to experience this type of prayer as more sincere than the conventional ones that Root offers on other occasions, especially when his religious actions are not particularly disinterested (Timmermans 2023, p. 10).

When Root carves the figure of Christ on the cross, this action adds another layer to his prayer experience. The protagonist identifies to some extent with the suffering Christ, investing his feelings of sorrow and disappointment into his work. In the act of carving, he experiences God's help in resolving personal problems. He plunges into thought: "But I've already said: I don't feel grief, I've just withdrawn into my odd thoughts and strange fancies about sin and eternity" (Timmermans 2023, p. 106). Root's moral self-awareness increases greatly during this action:

Our dear Lord, I am carving You in wood. In the winter it's become almost a daily prayer, like our Fien praying the rosary by the hearth every day. Under my hands You are just a piece of wood, but gradually You are coming more and more to life. [...] With You I seek consolation for my misery, and immediately I feel my misery more acutely than at other times. Because I think more of mine than Yours. Forgive me. (Timmermans 2023, p. 72)

This statement is followed by an extended monologue, again in the form of a prayer. In it, Root renounces the idea of asking God for any favour. This prayer of self-renunciation may be called Root's kenosis, paralleling that of Christ on Calvary.

Carving, a very physical, tactile interaction with a religious image, serves as a metonymy of physical labour. At the same time, for the protagonist, it becomes an alternative form of prayer that brings consolation after a crisis. After Fien's death, Root intended to place a carved Jesus on her grave (Timmermans 2023, p. 103). However, after marrying his second wife, Frisine, and the crisis having abated, he abandoned this idea. He did not carve for some time, devoting his time to his spouse. When he returned to work, he found it difficult to reproduce the eyes of Christ, which ended up not being carved correctly (Timmermans 2023, p. 114). One could argue that Root subconsciously did not want to carve the eyes of Christ, disturbed by the fear that God would see his transgressions more clearly: „Jesus did not want to have eyes. I can understand. He no longer wants to see me. He's right" (114). Frisine died too, and the heartbroken protagonist, who was partly to blame for this happening, wanted to have the sculpture of Jesus on his own grave: "Christ on the Cross stands waiting against the wall to be planted on my grave. I'll plant it, or better have him planted, because I need him most" (Timmermans 2023, p. 163). The final effect of this work, however, the finished sculpture, was not as important as the process of carving, which can be read as one protracted prayer.

The novel has a frame-like structure. It begins with the aforementioned phrase "God, I thank you for making me a peasant", and ends with "Thanks in advance!" (Timmermans 2023, p. 171)—and this is also a phrase addressed to God, which like an Amen completes this novel in the form of a prayer. Coincidentally, the Danish translation of the novel's title, *Paa vorhaand tak*, reads like this last sentence (Timmermans 1937). The expression "in advance" shows the total trust that Root places in God while praying. It is a theme that resounds in a mystical prayer, in which the main character renounces the very idea of asking God for anything, expressing an experience of almost total kenosis (Timmermans

2023, p. 72). Root believes in God and knows that even when difficulties arise, the Almighty will never abandon him.

Root mentions that just after the so-called Three Gardeners (St. Pancras, St. Servatius, and St. Boniface), a procession with the relics of the Holy Cross can be seen among the fields in mid-May. The farmer then carries an image of St Anthony together with his neighbour Oxhead. It should be noted that the author of the novel himself took part in the procession with the relics of Saint Gummar (664-ca. 714), to this day a popular saint in the Lier region, who founded a monastery and later, according to legend, built the town of Lier. Timmermans' daughter recalled that her father was very fond of the field processions, and enjoyed taking part in them, both in the sunshine and in the pouring rain (Timmermans 1951, p. 118). On Palm Sunday, Root would place part of a holy palm in the four corners of the field to ensure an abundant harvest. Then, at harvest time, he concludes: "The palms that we planted at the four corners at Easter have given their blessings. They say that an angel stands on watch by each corn stalk. You watched well, angels!" (Timmermans 2023, p. 45).

Prayer of this kind is transformative both for the individual, Root, and for the community, whose members experience a shared sense of satisfaction that their prayers and religious rituals have produced the expected effects. When the world is transformed by seasonal agricultural tasks, the protagonist of the novel finds himself changed (and in a sense, renewed) by a fresh appreciation of the efficacy of prayer. Prayer, therefore, resolves an inherent tension in the community between the emotions evoked by the risks and expectations associated with the beginning of the agricultural process and the fulfilment of those expectations at harvest time. For the villagers, it is like a mental template marking the beginning and end of a logical sequence of actions in the world.

The end of the harvest coincides in the village with an indulgence feast, which is an important holiday for all the inhabitants of the parish. It is the end of the cycle. The farmer rests on this day, and the rest is well deserved after the hard months of work on the land (Timmermans 2023, p. 47). Religion in the novel is a social event no less than a private one. Root makes pilgrimages to the shrines in Brabant—Scherpenheuvel and Kruiskensberg, first as a bachelor and later as a father asking for a miracle of healing for his sick son Polleken and his blind daughter. The protagonist continually commends his affairs and problems to God. He invokes the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Child during the flood of the River Nete. He kneels in the water and prays (Timmermans 2023, p. 19). When he gets out of prison, where he is serving a sentence for poaching, his first steps are towards the church and he starts praying the rosary (Timmermans 2023, p. 78). Prayer, once again, gives comfort in times of crisis. It reconnects Root as a wayward individual with the community and with God, restoring social relations to a state of equilibrium.

In the life of the protagonist and his family, a local priest is constantly present, acting as a spiritual director. Root talks to him very often, often resolving his spiritual dilemmas during such meetings: "But our priest knows very well how fragile human beings are; he relieves us of the worries of faith" (Timmermans 2023, p. 41). Root and the priest share a deep friendship. For the peasant, the vicar is a confidant, a psychologist, a comforter, a teacher, a philosopher, a sage, and, finally and most importantly, a friend. He also resolves Root's doubts about the proper way of praying (cf. Bandak 2017). Reducing his anxiety about saying conventional prayers, the priest teaches Root to see his daily routine as an alternative, non-verbal prayer.

At times, the grief-stricken protagonist asks the clergyman about the meaning of the suffering inflicted by God and bares his soul to him in the most difficult moments, when he experiences the pain of existence. The priest always has a good word for his parishioners. His statements have not only a theological but also a philosophical dimension, and what is most important, the ordinary farmer can comprehend them (Timmermans 2023, p. 87). The

priest is an invaluable adviser to Root in difficult and complicated matters. When Root's son Fons goes missing, he is found dead in Antwerp a few months later. Root identifies the body and, at the priest's insistence, does not tell his wife about this fact lest her heart should break that her son had committed suicide. The priest's spiritual life is paralleled by his wisdom and psychological acumen.

Root is no learned man; he is not thoroughly familiar with the doctrines of the Catholic faith. However, he firmly believes in all the truths of the faith and does not torment himself with what he sees as pointless theological questions. His faith is nearly boundless; moreover, through daily contact with nature, Root is quite unconsciously close to the mystery of existence, discovering the truth that it is a Higher Power that rules the world. And Root knows that this is God.

In reflecting on Root's faith, however, it is important to emphasise the 'bipolarity' of his attitude. As we know, on the one hand, he is a believer and tries to live according to his conscience and religion, but nevertheless believes in certain superstitions. Thus, for example, he adheres to them in fieldwork (Timmermans 2023, p. 42). Root claims that Amelieke's blindness is the result of a lunar eclipse that had taken place during Fien's pregnancy. The parents also see the cause of Polleken's death in the "evil hand" (Timmermans 2023, p. 21). This is because their son died a few hours after a woman selling matches visited their farm. She touched the child's head and from then on the sudden deterioration in the boy's health began. Vercammen reports that in recalling this event, Timmermans referred to the authentic fact of the analogous death of a child, Nolleke Wellens from Kessel, in 1906. The population of the Lier region was very shocked by this event and the story was told for many years (Vercammen 1971, p. 152).

The novel is narrated in the first person singular by Root, who focalises the events of the story. He gives an intensely personal account of the past events of his life, but at times changes the manner of narrating and addresses the Creator with great respect, glorifying his creation. Mertens states that this way of structuring the novel makes the work similar to St Augustine's *Confessions*, where the proper addressee of the narrative is God himself (Mertens 1986, p. 44).

4. Discussion

4.1. *Prayer in Felix Timmermans' Fiction: More than an Inducement to Altruism*

Our research into how prayer produces altruistic (prosocial) actions has confronted us with the fundamental question of what prayer is and how it should be defined in relation to faith and action. The vertical dimension (communication between the human being and the divine) is understandably emphasised in the vast majority of definitions of Christian prayer. Prayer is thus defined as a form of religious communication that can take different forms (a request, an expression of gratitude, but also, for example, an outcry in suffering). Prayers have a temporal and spatial dimension through the form and function of a given ritual, and prayer is "an essential element of religious praxis" (Oberlies 2006, pp. 1486–88). Because of its many forms, prayer is considered "difficult to define"; it is not only communication, a link between the human and the divine, but also has the potential to bring about communion or even union with God (Louth 1998, p. 1124). Prayer has been described in terms of act, text, and dimension of religion (Gill 1987, p. 489). During Felix Timmermans' lifetime, prayer in a Catholic context was defined, as it is today, in the words of St John Damascene, as "the raising of the mind and heart to God or the asking of good things from God" (Cornelissen and Brandsma 1935; CCC 2019, art. 2559). These definitions show that the ability to encourage altruistic (prosocial) behaviour is only one aspect, and certainly not the most prominent one, of the working of prayer.

Generosity and sharing, on the other hand, is a horizontal dimension of religiosity. A specific focus on this aspect, although important in itself, should not lead to the conclusion that other ways in which prayer manifests itself, either in actual experience or in its fictional representations, are less relevant or less significant to a discussion of this complex religious phenomenon. Although more emphasis is placed on this 'horizontal' dimension in this study, both should be considered. In the discussion of literary analysis that follows, we examine the overall function of prayer in the narrative and then consider how prayer is represented as corresponding to altruistic behaviour on the part of the protagonists.

Prayer, in the case of the protagonists of Timmermans' fiction, certainly cannot be reduced to an activity that merely promotes community building or solidarity. For Timmermans, prayer is first and foremost an individual's ascent to God; it is communication leading to communion. Although, in some cases, prayer may ultimately lead to action for the benefit of others, this aspect is certainly not the most important. A good point of departure for examining the vertical dimension of prayer in Timmermans' fiction is Pallieter, although a separate study would be required for a complete examination of this topic. As [Absillis and de Bont \(2020\)](#) note, Pallieter has a vibrant prayer life characterised by a radically non-egoistic praise of God and thanksgiving for His gifts (p. 53). Such disinterested prayer was highly valued in Catholic theology ([Cornelissen and Brandsma 1935](#)). However, Pallieter went a step further by refusing to pray for personal salvation or for any personal need ([Absillis and de Bont 2020](#), p. 53). This was certainly not an orthodox position in the light of standard contemporary theological definitions of prayer ([Cornelissen and Brandsma 1935](#)). Pallieter ridicules a maid, Charlot, when she asks God for material things. His prayer often takes the form of ejaculations, but there are also other highly idiosyncratic expressions of faith that might have been regarded as disrespectful by Catholic readers of the time: "Pallieter swallowed the last of his food, waved his arms, and called out, while Charlot let her eyelids fall and murmured a paternoster: 'O Lord, my belly jumps with joy like a grasshopper. It is as if Thou hadst placed a concertina within me'" ([Timmermans 1924](#), p. 7; see also [Absillis and de Bont 2020](#) on the controversy around Pallieter). The character Pallieter enjoys more organised forms of devotion, such as processions and litanies, preferring those that take place in the open air ([Timmermans 1924](#), pp. 229–30). He seems to find God more easily in nature than in the church, and it is in nature that he has what [Absillis and de Bont \(2020, pp. 53–56\)](#) identified as his mystical experiences. Prayer in the novel is not ultimately limited to verbal communication or wordless contemplation. An artistic activity such as playing music can be prayer. The village priest prays through his music ([Timmermans 1924](#), pp. 233–34), anticipating Root, who prays by carving. Pallieter's personality and carefree lifestyle preclude greater social involvement. However, he is portrayed as a generous and helpful individual to those around him.

The connection between contemplative prayer and action is the theme of one of Timmermans' later novels, *The Perfect Joy of St Francis*. Once again, the focus is on contemplative prayer as a means to union with God. However, Timmermans does not treat the mystical experience of St Francis of Assisi as an isolated phenomenon, but narrates the biography of the *Poverello*, creating scenes that capture the moment when communication through prayer leads to action for the good of the religious community of the Church. One such key moment is when Francis, praying before a crucifix, experiences a vision of Christ and, as a result, takes it upon himself to rebuild the Church ([Timmermans 1955](#), pp. 38–41). Here, Timmermans showed how Francis' transformation, which dramatically changed his life, was the direct effect of mystical communion with God. This transformation, which was not restricted to Francis's interior life, enabled him to act selflessly, transcending personal limitations.

4.2. Prayer and Altruism in Two Fictional Texts by Felix Timmermans

The literary representations of prayer in the fiction of Felix Timmermans can be attributed several narrative functions. When the protagonists are confronted with a moral or spiritual dilemma, prayer provides a context in which the protagonists' internal struggles and motives can be subjected to scrutiny. Furthermore, it impedes the narrative progression, prompting the reader to engage in intellectual reflection. Praying often leads the protagonists to consider new courses of action, influencing the trajectory of the narrative towards new, occasionally unanticipated scenarios. In this way prayer, though devoid of action, builds dramatic tension and contributes to the progression of the narrative. The characters created by Timmermans create prayer situations in their lives in reaction to various obstacles. Providing the reader with insight into the protagonists' intellectual and emotional activity, prayer is an effective technique for creating complex, well-rounded characters. The quality of the prayer or the motives are of lesser importance, however. The inability to pray in a manner that is perceived as 'proper' or the recital of prayers that are deemed to be naive from a theological standpoint—both of which are present in *Triptych of the Three Kings* and *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm*—may be regarded as deficient. *Pallierter*, an earlier novel, can be read as a debate on the merits of various types of prayer. However, from a literary perspective, such techniques are effective in portraying protagonists as more vulnerable and relatable, thereby fostering a deeper connection with the readers.

4.2.1. Triptych of the Three Kings

On initial observation, Timmermans' *Triptych of the Three Kings* appears to present a somewhat ambiguous view of the effects of prayer. The encounter with the migrant family in the caravan is a mystical moment that leads to an expression of solidarity on the part of the three beggars. This situation begins with prayer and is accompanied by typical religious gestures. This creates an interpretative framework in which an everyday interpretation of this event is replaced by a religious one. The extraordinary nature of the event, accompanied by prayer and interpreted in a religious way, is what drives the characters to act charitably. In his case, we can observe the prosocial effect of prayer, though it only lasts for one of the three, Suskewiet. Schrobberbeeck's life is eventually also transformed by his religious experience, but the process takes much longer. Superficially, prayer does not produce any observable behaviour for the good of others. On the contrary, or so it would seem, despite his commitment to religious activity (and prayer), his actions transgress social norms. If an inner transformation takes place in his life, it is inconsistent. No observable prosocial effects can be found in the life of Pitjevogel, who only prays out of contrition at the very end of his life. On an individual level, this prayer has psychological significance, allowing him to die in peace, reconciled with God. However, it cannot have an effect on society at large, except possibly through its impact on Schrobberbeeck. Schrobberbeeck's solidarity with the dying man can be seen as the third example of charitable behaviour induced by prayer in the story.

The *Triptych of the Three Kings* allows us to identify three prosocial effects of prayer, without, however, any of those being dominant. On the contrary, the narrative seems to suggest that individuals tend to respond to religious experience (or prayer) in different, very personal ways. Some, arguably a minority, go to great lengths to act charitably, while for others the change brought about by prayer is limited to a psychological transformation that may or may not have a tangible impact on the protagonist's relationships with others in their community. Sometimes, the effect of prayer is limited to the individual concerned, helping him or her to resolve a difficult, traumatic situation or find a solution to an existential crisis, which may (or may not) inspire others.

4.2.2. A Peasant Farmer's Psalm

We see a similar pattern in *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm*. The novel realistically depicts Catholic religious traditions in early twentieth-century Flanders, such as the observance of fasting, festivals and processions, and other local traditions. Giving a gift of eggs to the Sisters of Mercy as a means of stopping the rain (Timmermans 2023, p. 45) is one form of religiously motivated gift-giving that is mentioned, though it too may be found deficient in theological terms. However, such explicit examples of a link between devotion and generosity are rare in the novel. One might argue that the prosocial effect of prayer is present elsewhere. It is manifested in the positive effect that prayer has on the resolution of the not infrequent crises in Root's life. An imperfect individual, prone to violent, irrational, or hedonistic behaviour, and thus a polar opposite of Pallieter, Root's personality is held in check by prayer.

It is this restraining function, preventing antisocial acts from being committed (or being committed more often) that seems to be one of the main social effects of prayer. Root's charitable behaviour towards others, as has been noted, is not frequent, and his character, at first glance, tends to support the view of Oviedo (2016) rather than of the proponents of a strong correlation between prayer and prosociality. However, this would ignore the fact that Timmermans builds his protagonist as someone whose perseverance as a farmer is a direct effect of having a religious life. In this respect, there is a positive correlation between Root's prayer and his ability to contribute to society. Prayer offers Root a solution to the intractable problems posed by illness and death. It could be argued even further that going on a pilgrimage to ask God to find a remedy to a serious, untreatable illness, as Root does when confronted with his daughter's blindness, is an expression of solidarity. On the other hand, the idea of God favoured by Root tends to restrict altruistic actions. Root believes that it is God who should act in response to prayer, whereas the individual is seen as powerless. It would seem, then, that the nature of the mental representation of God has to be factored into the picture (cf. Meijer-van Abbema and Koole 2017). A prayer of complete self-abandonment is less effective in producing prosocial behaviour than one that emphasises the need for the individual to take action to perform acts of generosity.

This does not mean, of course, that prayer in *A Peasant's Psalm* is limited to this one 'horizontal' function. God might be for Root, in his struggle as a farmer, "the Boss upstairs", which implies distance, but prayer, as religious praxis, bridges that gap, becoming a conversation with a God who, in the words of the village priest, "is within us" (Timmermans 2023, pp. 11 and 39). It is a prayer which, like Pallieter's, is not concerned with one's own needs but with praise and thanksgiving. Root's prayer life springs from a response to immediate events. It is a transformative act, even in the most literal sense of carving a figure of Christ in wood. Like Pallieter, Root's experience of prayer lifts him up to God and creates a sense of community that restores meaning to his life. Such prayer has a motive for the good of others, but it turns out to have another, more powerful effect, allowing the farmer to see himself in union with God, even though in his own perception he is far from the standards of holiness or morality. The unconventional form of prayer, and the Passion meditation that accompanies it, transforms Root, giving him greater insight and self-knowledge. The social impact of this prayer is indirect, as it increases social cohesion within the community by restoring harmony to one of its members.

5. Conclusions

This reading of Felix Timmermans' *Triptych of the Three Kings* and *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm* has shown that no prayer is without "works". One reason for this is that prayer, as represented in fiction, is an action that challenges and transforms the one who prays. Prayer, for this reason, is important not only in its horizontal, social dimension but also

in its vertical dimension, in which this transformation takes place in an experience of communion with the divine. The study of what prayer is, then, is essential to a proper understanding of its social impact, whether in reality or in literary fiction. The works by Felix Timmermans discussed here offer manifold examples of praying as a crucial trope that shapes the plot through its capacity to transform the lives of the protagonists. Among the fictional situations examined here, we have found several that suggest that religious experience, and prayer as part of it, is correlated with greater altruism. Prayer is shown to inspire the protagonists to act generously towards others, illustrating a positive relationship between prayer and prosocial attitudes. Prayer, in general, has a positive impact on the protagonists' ability to function in society (or allows them to regain this ability) while also helping to prevent antisocial behaviour. Prayer helps the protagonists of Timmermans' novels to regain their psychological well-being in times of crisis. In this way, his protagonists ultimately contribute to society through their work or by showing solidarity with others.

Looking at the relationship between prayer and altruism in the literary fiction of Felix Timmermans analysed here, we discover a subtle understanding of religiosity. Both texts show how prayer not only serves to achieve personal communion with the divine but also helps to bring about a transformation in the protagonists that fosters self-awareness and a deeper connection to one's community. The characters of the three beggars in *The Triptych of the Three Kings* and of Root in *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm* allow us to witness how prayer can inspire generosity and solidarity, even when the motives for such actions are complex and ambiguous.

Prayer in Timmermans's narrative fiction does not merely function as a catalyst for prosocial acts. Instead, it reflects a fundamental tension between individual spiritual quests and communal dynamics. The transformation of the trio in *The Triptych of the Three Kings* illustrates the power of prayer to evoke compassion, while Root's confrontation with God and suffering shows how spiritual practices can shape ethical attitudes. However, finding explicit links to lasting social outcomes within the fictional world of the novel can be challenging.

This research highlights the need to reflect on the wider implications of prayer as a practice of devotion. Further research is necessary in order to have a deeper understanding of prayer and its functions in Felix Timmermans' oeuvre, with a focus on a more comprehensive selection of his texts than the one that can be achieved within the scope of this article. Both the role of prayer as a communal bond that sustains social relationships and helps to cultivate altruistic behaviour and its significance as a personal consolation or potentially mystical experience need to be explored. This complexity brings us closer to understanding the interplay between religious belief and action and suggests that prayer, both in reality and through its fictional representations, remains a crucial element of human experience.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.P. and J.W.-K.; Investigation, M.P. and J.W.-K.; Resources, M.P. and J.W.-K.; Supervision, M.P. and J.W.-K.; Validation, M.P. and J.W.-K.; Writing—original draft, M.P. and J.W.-K.; Writing—review & editing, M.P. and J.W.-K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding. The APC was funded by the "Initiative of Excellence—Research University" (IDUB) Publication Fund 2025, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank the referees of this paper for their helpful comments and criticism.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Absillis, Kevin, and Francis Mus. 2023. Between Heimat and world. Belgian perspectives on the success of Felix Timmermans's novel *Pallierter* (1916) in Germany and France. *Perspectives* 32: 984–1000. [CrossRef]
- Absillis, Kevin, and Marlou de Bont. 2020. Een vrolijke Frans: Felix Timmermans' *Pallierter* (1916) en de navolging van Sint-Franciscus. In *Literatuur en Religie = Literature and Religion*. Edited by Veerle Fraeters, Tijl Nuyts and Gwennie Debergh. Gent: Academia Press, pp. 47–62. Available online: https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/fbf8691b-391b-417b-a663-e09d6444760e/academia_cahier.literatuurwetenschap.2020.12_v1_OAPEN.pdf (accessed on 5 December 2024).
- Bal, Mieke, and Christine van Boheemen. 2009. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bandak, Andreas. 2017. The social life of prayers—introduction. *Religion* 47: 1–18. [CrossRef]
- Bandak, Andreas. 2019. Prayer. In *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Hoboken: Wiley. [CrossRef]
- Billiet, Jaak, and Karel Dobbelaere. 1976. *Godsdienst in Vlaanderen: Van Kerks Katholicisme Naar Sociaal-Kulturele Kristenheid?* Leuven: Davidsfonds.
- Braekers, Marcel. 2015. Felix Timmermans als aandachtige lezer van de Rijnlandse mystiek. In *Felix Ereburger*. Edited by Marc Somers. Lier: Felix Timmermans-Genootschap, Jaarboek van het Felix Timmermans-genootschap. vol. 43, pp. 113–24.
- CCC. 2019. *Catechism of the Catholic Church. Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II. Includes Revision of Paragraph No. 2267 Promulgated by Pope Francis*, 2nd rev. ed. Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Available online: <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/> (accessed on 12 March 2025).
- Claessens, Frans. 1935. De schrijver en het religieuze probleem: Felix Timmermans. *Nieuw Vlaanderen Turnhout* 9: 4.
- Coffrée, Pierrette. 2018. "Begijntje Symforosa". Available online: <https://www.pierrettecoffree.com/werk/begijntje-symforosa/> (accessed on 29 April 2024).
- Cornelissen, L., and Titus Brandsma. 1935. Gebed. In *Katholieke Encyclopedie*. Amsterdam: Joost van den Vondel, vol. 11, pp. 477–19.
- Craig, Eleanor, Amy Hollywood, and Kris Trujillo. 2021. Introduction: The Poetics of Prayer and Devotion to Literature. *Representations* 153: 1–10. [CrossRef]
- Dom, Ignaas. 1986. *Felix Timmermans de Pelgrim*. Lier: Liers Genootschap voor Geschiedenis.
- Domestic, Anthony. 2016. Modernism and Religion. In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*. Edited by Mark Knight. London: Routledge, pp. 38–47.
- Durnez, Gaston. 2000. *Felix Timmermans. Een Biografie*. Tiel: Lannoo.
- Gevers, Lieve. 2014. *Kerk in de Kering. De Katholieke Gemeenschap in Vlaanderen 1940–1980*. Kalmthout: Pelckmans.
- Gibson, William, Laura Stevens, and Sabine Volk-Birke. 2017. *Early Modern Prayer*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Gill, Sam D. 1987. Prayer. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan, vol. 11, pp. 489–94.
- Goedegebuure, Jaap. 2009. Between Two World Wars, 1916–1940. In *A Literary History of Low Countries*. Edited by Theo Hermans. New York: Camden House, pp. 463–572.
- Knight, Mark, ed. 2016. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*. London: Routledge.
- Lewis, Pericles. 2006. Religion. In *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*. Edited by David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 19–28.
- Louth, Andrew. 1998. Prière. In *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*. Edited by Jean-Yves Lacoste. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 1123–30.
- Mauss, Marcel. 2003. *On Prayer*. Edited by W. S. F. Pickering. New York and Oxford: Berghahn.
- McLeod, Hugh. 1981. *Religion and the People of Western Europe, 1789–1970*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meijer-van Abbema, Marieke, and Sander L. Koole. 2017. After God's Image: Prayer Leads People with Positive God Beliefs to Read Less Hostility in Others' Eyes. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 7: 206–22. [CrossRef]
- Mertens, Herman-Emiel. 1986. De geloofsboodschap van Timmermans. *Ons Geestelijk Leven* 63: 247–55.
- Oberlies, Thomas. 2006. Prayer/Curse. In *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*. Edited by Kocku von Stuckrad. Translated by Robert R. Barr. Leiden: Brill, vol. 3, pp. 1486–89.
- Ostrander, Rick. 2000. *The Life of Prayer in a World of Science: Protestants, Prayer, and American Culture 1870–1930*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oviedo, Lluís. 2016. Religious attitudes and prosocial behavior: A systematic review of published research. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 6: 169–84.

- Prevot, Andrew. 2015. *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality Amid the Crises of Modernity*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Prouteau, Lionel, and Boguslaw Sardinha. 2015. Volunteering and Country-Level Religiosity: Evidence from the European Union. *Voluntas* 26: 242–66. [CrossRef]
- Sapiro, Gisèle. 2023. *The Sociology of Literature*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Sun, Anna. 2016. Sociological Consideration of Prayer and Agency. *The Drama Review* 60: 118–29. [CrossRef]
- Tatała, Małgorzata, and Marcin Wojtasiński. 2021. The Validity of Prayer Importance Scale (PIS). *Religions* 12: 1032. [CrossRef]
- Timmermans, Felix. 1924. *Pallieter*. Translated by Charlotte Beatrice Bodde. New York: Harper and Collins.
- Timmermans, Felix. 1936. *The Triptych of the Three Kings*. Translated by Helmut L. Ripperger. New York: McFarlane.
- Timmermans, Felix. 1937. *Paa Forhaand Tak*. Translated by Peter Hellum. Kobenhavn: Det Schonbergske Forlag.
- Timmermans, Felix. 1955. *The Perfect Joy of St Francis*. Translated by Raphael Brown. Garden City: Image Books.
- Timmermans, Felix. 2023. *A Peasant Farmer's Psalm*. Translated by Paul Vincent. Milton Keynes: Snuggly Books.
- Timmermans, Lia. 1951. *Mijn Vader*. Amsterdam and Brugge: Desclée De Brouwer & Cie.
- Van Cappellen, Patty, Vassilis Saroglou, and Maria Toth-Gauthier. 2016. Religiosity and Prosocial Behavior Among Churchgoers: Exploring Underlying Mechanisms. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26: 19–30. [CrossRef]
- Vanclooster, Stijn. 2006. "Felix Timmermans". In *Kritisch Lexicon van de Moderne Nederlandstalige Literatuur*. Edited by Sander Bax, Hugo Brems, Tom van Deel and Ad Zuiderent. Groningen: Nijhoff, pp. 1–21. Available online: https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/zuid004krit01_01/kl100556.php (accessed on 5 December 2024).
- Van Deinsen, Lieke, Anthe Sevenants, and Freek van de Velde. 2022. *Litteraire canon(s) anno 2022. Een enquête naar de literaire klassieken: Rapportage (voorpublicatie)*. Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal en Letteren. Available online: [https://ctb.kantl.be/assets/files/pages/files/De_Nederlandstalige_litteraire_canon\(s\)_anno_2022_-_Een_enqu%C3%AAtenaar_de_litteraire_klassieken_Rapportage_\(voorpublicatie\).pdf](https://ctb.kantl.be/assets/files/pages/files/De_Nederlandstalige_litteraire_canon(s)_anno_2022_-_Een_enqu%C3%AAtenaar_de_litteraire_klassieken_Rapportage_(voorpublicatie).pdf) (accessed on 29 April 2024).
- Van den Berghe, Gust. 2010. *Little Baby Jesus of Flanders* (film).
- Van de Perre, Harold. 2018. Over de diepgelovige Godzoeker Timmermans, de dichter van "Adagio". In *Het Huis van de Dichter*. Edited by Marc Somers. Lier: Felix Timmermans-Genootschap, pp. 27–44.
- Van de Voorde, Urbain. 1989. Timmermans' Boerenpsalm. In *Over Boerenpsalm*. Edited by José de Ceulaer and Herman-Emiel Mertens. Lier: Felix Timmermans-Genootschap, pp. 23–29.
- Van Remoortere, Julien, ed. 1972. *Felix Timmermans: Men, Schrijver, Schilder, Tekenaar*. Antwerpen: Mercatorfonds NV.
- Váňa, Jan. 2020. Theorizing the Social Through Literary Fiction: For a New Sociology of Literature. *Cultural Sociology* 14: 180–200. [CrossRef]
- Vercammen, Louis. 1971. *Felix Timmermans, de Mens, Het Werk*. Hasselt: HeideLand-Orbis.
- Verstraeten, Pieter. 2010. Representations of Mysticism in Flemish Interwar Literature: Between Poetry and Prose, Ecstasy and Realism. *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 88: 1255–76. Available online: https://www.persee.fr/doc/rbph_0035-0818_2010_num_88_4_7978 (accessed on 5 December 2024). [CrossRef]
- Zajączkowski, Ryszard. 2024. The Franciscan Undercurrent in Polish Literature as Exemplified by the Works of Józef Wittlin and Roman Brandstaetter. *Religions* 15: 1226. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.