INTRODUCTION
PRAYER—A SIMPLY COMPLICATED SCHOLARLY PROBLEM

What is prayer? What can academics learn by examining prayers of the ancients? How have scholars approached the complicated issues of the study of prayer in the past? What is the future of such study? This volume only begins to seek a solution to these questions. Nevertheless, in order to uncover answers, a general manageable focus is needed; therefore, the assembled academics in this work direct their scholarly research at 1. a particular place—the ancient Mediterranean and European regions; 2. a specific period in history—from the time of the first century down to the Reformation; and 3. an explicit theological tradition—Christianity, although one article and various references also deal with Judaism as well. These historical, geographic, and religious concerns are in turn examined by a diverse group of interdisciplinary scholars, who explore the concept of prayer in a wide variety of multi-faceted contexts, forms, practices, and content. Together they build on scholarship from the past, offer insights in the present, and suggest areas of research for the future. As a result, the articles individually, and the book as a whole, demonstrate that the academic study of prayer provides unique insights into the history of spirituality, despite the fact that such study has many difficulties inherent in the exercise, not least of which is a coherent and comprehensive definition of prayer. It must also be noted at this juncture that this volume because of its focus also has its limitations, as does every work of this nature; nevertheless, it

1 The editor of this volume from the outset would like to be clear about some of its constraints. Whereas this volume encompasses a wide range of topics, the original conception of the work was to be broader and to include scholarly articles on early Christian women, medieval women mystics, Franciscan and mendicant spirituality, Celtic Christianity, and Eastern Orthodoxy. Some of the projected authors intended to use feminist approaches in their scholarship as well. Unfortunately, at times scholars due to illness or other unforeseen occurrences are not able to contribute as originally intended; hence for our purposes the aforementioned areas are regrettable lacunae in this volume. Fortunately, some of these gaps are filled by other recent publications. For example, Tim Johnson has edited an excellent volume entitled, Franciscans at Prayer for Brill Publications (2007). Future works will no doubt address the other gaps as well, and hopefully this work and sessions sponsored at the International Medieval Conferences in Kalamazoo and Leeds have been a small catalyst for such scholarship. Nevertheless,
contributes to scholarship on the history of spirituality by focusing on prayer in an interdisciplinary way.

Benedicta Ward once wrote to me in a letter, “Prayer is spirituality.” Dr. Ward and other academics who have written in this area have keenly observed that anyone seeking an in-depth grasp of the nature of particular spiritual traditions must at some point look at how that tradition observes prayer, because prayer is at the heart of all religious practice and belief. Prayer indeed is where the most earnest expression of faith, religious practice, theological conviction, and even theologically sophisticated thought can be found. Some writers, especially monastic scholars like Benedicta Ward SLG and Columba Stewart OSB, have expertly written on prayer for years, but lately other academics from a variety of academic fields have begun to turn to the topic as well. The insightful medieval historian, Rachel Fulton, who has done noteworthy work on prayer, has correctly observed, “What is prayer? This is a question that historians have been asking themselves a lot lately, with, as yet, somewhat limited success.” Indeed, a definition or even a broad consensus concerning the nature of prayer has been difficult to come by in part because many scholars assume a definition of prayer without attempting to define it. Likewise, many have tended to pursue the study of spirituality by looking at a variety of valuable primary sources without attempting to look too closely at prayer itself. Yet the importance of examining prayer more closely has been known for some time. Over a century ago Auguste Sabatier (1839–1901), the French Protestant theologian and biblical scholar, noted that, “Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion… Religion is nothing if it be not the vital act by which the entire mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the principle from which it draws its life. This act is prayer, by which

as far as this volume is concerned, when some of the originally intended articles were unable to be included, other scholars contributed pieces which sadly were not in the areas lost, but which nevertheless add to the depth of this volume. Columba Stewart and Roy Hammerling added extra pieces, for example, and the editor in particular would have liked to have had the original articles instead of his own. What remains is a valuable contribution in its own right, even if its focus is narrower than originally intended. The current emphasis and contribution of this work has shifted more towards the analysis of monastic prayer and the central prayer of Christianity, the Lord’s Prayer.

2 Rachel Fulton, “Praying with Anselm at Admont: A Meditation on Practice,” Speculum 81.3 (July 2006), 700. Some other important recent works on prayer are Jean-François Cottier, La prière en latin de l’Antiquité au XVIe siècle (Turnhout, 2006) and Ermanno Ancilli, La Preghiera: bibbia, teologia, espeienze stoiche (Rome, 1988), in 2 volumes.