

# For all the Blessings of this Life: On Worship as Thanksgiving

Leigh Vicens  
Augustana University

ABSTRACT: I argue, first, against the idea that Christian thanksgiving is about counting one's blessings, or finding something specific in every circumstance which is intended by God for one's own good. For we cannot know how God specifically intended to benefit us in most circumstances, and such knowledge is required for blessings-counting; and the New Testament models a different kind of thanksgiving which makes more sense in light of Christian theology. I also argue against the conception of Christian gratitude as a positive (pleasant-feeling) emotion, given the fallen nature of the world; instead, it must be a mixed emotion, combining a pleasant-feeling anticipatory joy over God's action of world-salvation with unpleasant feelings such as dissatisfaction, restlessness, or yearning.

Thanksgiving is a vital part of western monotheistic worship. The Jewish Shabbat, for instance, is a day devoted to rest and remembrance of God's good work of creation and deliverance of Israel; and it is peppered with blessings and thanksgiving prayers for some of the "countless millions of favors" which the Lord has conferred upon his people—as the Nishmat, or morning service, says (Schimmel 2004, 41). Likewise, the Eucharist—a central Christian rite—literally means *thanksgiving*, and is a remembrance, enactment, and celebration of the communion which Jesus instituted before his death. Finally, the Quranic view of worship has been characterized as "synonymous with the expression of gratitude"; the Islamic scholar Mawlana Amin Ahsan Islahi writes, "In terms of its essence true worship is characterized by genuine and overflowing gratitude to Allah" (2004, 151).<sup>1</sup> And yet, while there is much philosophical work devoted to other issues related to worship, such as the purpose of petitionary prayer (why we ask for things from an all-knowing God) or the metaphysics of the Eucharist (what Jesus meant by saying "this is my body"), relatively little attention has been paid to thanksgiving in the philosophical literature. This lack of attention might be due to the supposedly uncontroversial nature and purpose of giving thanks to God, the giver of all good gifts. However, the religious practice of thanksgiving raises interesting questions about our conception of God's providence as well as our own happiness or wellbeing; and a proper understanding of religious gratitude complicates the assumption made in contemporary philosophy and psychology that gratitude is a "positive" emotion.

Because the different religious traditions' practices of thanksgiving may have different philosophical implications regarding these questions, I focus here on *Christian* practices. I begin by laying out my understanding of Christian thanksgiving before going on to discuss some puzzling issues raised by this conception. Ultimately I argue against the idea that Christian thanksgiving is about counting one's blessings and against the conception of Christian gratitude as a positive emotion.

---

<sup>1</sup> Emmons and McCullough note that "gratitude is a highly prized human disposition" in Hindu and Buddhist thought as well (2003, 377).

On the Christian view, thanksgiving is both a religious obligation and central to our wellbeing. In the preface to the Episcopal Church's Eucharistic Prayer, the celebrant says, "It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God."<sup>2</sup> But this is not a duty at odds with our own self-interest or fulfillment. A life devoted to thanksgiving is the life we were created to live—a life in communion with God, in which we "respond to God's blessing with [our] blessing" (Schmemmann 1973, 15). The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann describes thanksgiving as the "natural" function of humans, or "homo adorans":

The first, the basic definition of man is that he is *the priest*. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him. (1973, 15)

Schmemmann identifies the "original sin," or source of fallenness and corruption in humanity, with our failure to fulfill this natural function; that is, our original sin is a failure of gratitude. And Terence Cuneo reasons that if Schmemmann's diagnosis of humanity's fall is correct, then "it holds the key to understanding why it is that enacting the central pattern of the liturgy enjoys such prominence in the Christian way of life: it is how we repair the rupture" (2016, 165). In other words, it is in returning to the eucharistic life that we return to communion with God, which is our greatest good. Robert Roberts, likewise, in commenting on the "General Thanksgiving" which concludes the Episcopal Church's office of Morning Prayer—in which the congregation gives thanks for "all the blessings of this life" and petitions God that "our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful"—writes, "this prayer is a device for maintaining and deepening our love for God" (2014, 68). So, like Cuneo, Roberts takes thanksgiving to be not simply an expression or manifestation of our love of and relationship with God, but a practice whereby we further deepen and strengthen that love and relationship. And so again, since a loving relationship with God is our *telos*, thanksgiving practices are for our own good.

The idea that giving thanks is for our own good would seem to be supported by recent research in experimental psychology. Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough document a number of studies which characterize gratitude as a "pleasant state" and also link it with other so-called "positive" emotions such as contentment and joy (2003, 378). And in their own controlled experiments, Emmons and McCullough found that those who were randomly assigned to undertake gratitude-cultivating practices experienced "higher levels of positive affect," "reductions in negative affect," more and better sleep, and "fewer reported physical symptoms" (2003, 386). Such studies bolster the widespread opinion that an attitude of gratitude contributes to both health and happiness, and support the popular view of religious practices of thanksgiving as "wellbeing" practices.

What do Christian practices of thanksgiving involve, and how are they meant to have such effects? In discussing our God-given function as thanks-givers, Schmemmann interprets Adam's naming of the animals as "reveal[ing] the very essence of a thing, or rather its essence as God's gift. To name a thing is to manifest the meaning and value God gave it, to know it as coming from God and to know its place and function within the cosmos created by God" (1973, 15). Thus on his view, practices of thanksgiving presuppose the possession (and expression) of

---

<sup>2</sup> Taken from "The (Online) Book of Common Prayer," pg. 333, <https://www.bcponline.org/>

certain knowledge—of the God-given “meaning and value” of the thing for which we give thanks, or its “function” in creation. I take this to mean, with respect to an event or process for which we give thanks, at least that *we presume to know the good that God intended to come out of it*. Nicholas Wolterstorff, who defines worship as “Godward acknowledgment of God’s unsurpassable excellence” characterized by awe, reverence, and gratitude, has the least to say about this third worshipful attitude. But what he does say is this: “Gratitude, quite obviously, is our response to God’s love for us, the form of love in question being love as care, that is, love that seeks to promote the flourishing of the other and to pay due respect to her for her worth” (2015, 37). So on this view, too, it would seem that in expressing gratitude to God, we give thanks for the ways in which God has lovingly promoted our flourishing—and so we must presume to know *that God has intended to promote our flourishing*, in giving us some gift. Such assumptions about the intentions of the giver are in line with standard philosophical accounts of gratitude outside of a religious context. Gratitude is distinguished from mere appreciation in that the latter is simply a certain positive attitude regarding some circumstances (e.g., I appreciate *that the weather is so lovely today*), whereas the former is a so-called “triadic,” or three-place, relation directed at both some circumstances *and* another agent. And as Tony Manela reports, most philosophers think that gratitude is only appropriately directed at an agent who *intended to benefit* the grateful party (2016).

Conceiving of gratitude as involving a person’s perception of another’s benevolent intentions toward oneself helps to make sense of the supposed empirical link between gratitude and happiness. Roberts suggests that this link is due to the features of the world one attends to and those one disregards:

The constitutionally grateful person has a shield against... debilitating regrets because he or she is inclined to dwell on the favorable, rather than the regrettable. As noted earlier, as an emotion, gratitude is a perception of benefits and benevolence; a person with gratitude-readiness will tend to see what is good in situations and to notice less what is bad. The kind of unfortunate actions and events that make the constitutionally regretful person miserable may have occurred in the grateful one’s life as well, but the grateful person can move on from them, because his or her mind is tuned to happier things. (2004, 70)

And while mere appreciation will focus one’s attention on “happier things” (the rainbow rather than the rain), gratitude will further highlight the beneficent intention of the giver of the gift (He created this rainbow for my own benefit!). Thus, one might suppose that gratitude would make us doubly happy.

With this conception of gratitude and its effects on happiness before us, we may ask the first, epistemological question regarding religious practices of thanksgiving: what sort of assumptions are we actually warranted in making about God’s intentions? It is a common religious practice to “count one’s blessings,” meaning that rather than giving a kind of general thanks for any and all good in one’s life, one identifies the particular things one takes to be blessings and gives thanks for them. (And indeed, the gratitude-cultivating practices Emmons and McCullough studied were all blessings-countings.) Often this is done in the context of negative events and even tragedies in the midst of which one finds signs of God’s benevolent intentions. Here is an example of what might be called a “silver-lining thanksgiving”:

Car Crash Case: a family is in a car crash hours from their home, on their way to their relatives’ church on Christmas day, and sustain serious injuries requiring weeks of

hospitalization and months of therapy, some of which might be permanent. They repeatedly praise God as good through their hospitalization, and give thanks that they not only survived but ended up at a hospital near their relatives, who are able to look after them and their young children.

In this case, the thanks-givers suggest that God arranged things thus-and-so in order to bring good out of bad circumstances (e.g., God arranged the location of the crash so that they could receive care from family). I will not get into the general and controversial question of whether we should think that God intends and controls each event that occurs in the world, or whether some—perhaps many—things occur which God does not intend or control. These are questions about competing “models” of divine providence about which I have written some already (Vicens 2014; Vicens and Kittle 2019). I would simply note here what such thanksgivings imply. If God arranged things so that the car crash would take place in a particular location, this means that *God arranged the car crash*, thus committing the thanks-giver to quite a meticulous view of providence according to which God does not simply bring good out of evil which He does not intend or control, but rather actively arranges harmful events for certain (benevolent) purposes. While I am not definitely opposed to such a view of providence, I doubt that in most cases we can know what God’s specific purposes or intentions are, and so appropriately give thanks that God intended to bring this or that good out of evil.<sup>3</sup> If God *did* intend and control every event that occurred in the world so that they all fitted into some grand cosmic plan, then God’s reasons for causing or allowing any particular feature, such as the location of a car crash, would likely be opaque to us mere mortals, since those features would potentially relate to an immensely complex web of causes.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Austin Farrer, who does seem opposed to such a view of providence, offers an example of what he calls “a simple old-fashioned piety, moving in a world of special providences confidently asserted and then comically reassessed”: “Mr Jones’s rheumatism was a judgment, until his daughter swore to you on the bible that his secret drinking was a baseless slander. Her father was a saint. His rheumatism, therefore, was a trial. But then the bowling-club went on a day’s outing and drove their charabanc into the sea; and Mr. Jones’s rheumatism, since it kept him at home on the occasion, proved a blessing in disguise, and a providence indeed” (1967, 68).

<sup>4</sup> Skeptical theists, in response to the problem of evil, offer similar reasoning for thinking we are unlikely to know why God has allowed various events in the world. See McBrayer (2010, 613-614) for a summary. One might wonder if the above point *assumes* skeptical theism, and if those who take there to be a plausible explanation for why God allows evil in the world (a theodicy) would reject it. While I myself lean toward skeptical theism, I think that the most commonly accepted theodicies offer only *general* reasons why God allows evil in the world and do not offer explanations for most particular instances of evil. To take one example, free will theodicies assert that God allows for the possibility of moral evil to allow for the possibility of certain goods that require free will, such as moral responsibility and moral goodness; if we have no free will, we cannot commit murder, but then again we also cannot make the choice to lovingly sacrifice ourselves for the sake others, which is a great good. And the soul-making theodicy adds that both moral and natural evil are necessary for the sake of character development: without physical danger, we cannot be brave; and, indeed, if we are created perfectly brave, we cannot *become* brave—and there is thought to be significant value in our *development* in virtue. But both types of theodicy allow for the existence of evil that is, in a sense, gratuitous. The free will theodicy does not suggest that any good must come out of murder, for instance. And while physical danger allows for the possibility of bravery, and starting out cowardly allows for the possibility of progress, the soul-making theodicy does not assume that every instance of danger is met with a brave response, or that individuals make constant or guaranteed progress in virtue development. Thus, the most we could give thanks for would be, on the free will theodicy, the *general* good of free will (or moral goodness, etc.) that makes moral evil possible, or, on the soul-making theodicy, the *possibility* of some good coming out of a particular evil. I return to this latter point below.

One might respond that if some feature of a situation (even a rather bad situation) is good, then it is fair to assume that its goodness is one reason why God chose that situation.<sup>5</sup> Thus, whenever we can identify something as good, we can give thanks to God for it. For instance, I might give thanks for my health, for my children and family, for having enough food and other resources, or for success in my work—say, in teaching a class in which students have learned something. Of course, these are all good things—in fact I take health, children, family relationships, and learning to be *intrinsic* goods. But I also take it that God’s benevolence or good will toward us is chiefly expressed in His seeking out a relationship with us, since our ultimate good lies in communion with God. And the trouble is, it’s not always the case that such intrinsically good things bring us closer to God—just as intrinsically bad things do not always lead to more distance in our relationship with God. Indeed, many Christians thank God for bad things that happen to them, since they take such things to be God’s way of drawing them closer to Him. St. Paul, for instance, gave thanks for some kind of hardship or ailment he suffered—what he referred to as “a thorn... given to me in the flesh”—which he took to be God’s way of “keep[ing him] from being too elated,” or taking himself, rather than God, to be the source of his strength (2 Cor. 12:7, *NRSV*). A similar, if more extreme, story is recorded in the Talmud about Rabbi Akiva. As Solomon Schimmel retells it,

Rabbi Akiva... laughed joyously as he was being tortured to death by Romans who had caught him studying Torah in violation of their decree forbidding it. His disciples asked him how he could rejoice while in such excruciating pain. Rabbi Akiva said to them that all of his life he had been troubled that he might not be able to fulfill the commandment to love God with all of his soul. Now that the opportunity presented itself to him, he rejoiced in it. Rabbi Akiva did not seek opportunities to die as a martyr, but when he found himself in such a situation, he was grateful for it. (2004, 42)

Similarly, one might think that the death of a loved one, a broken relationship, an illness, a job loss, or failure at work have led one to lean more on God and so develop deeper faith. Inversely, certain supposed “benefits” such as health or resources or relationships or success in one’s endeavors sometimes *impede* one’s relationship with God. Thus, if one’s ultimate good lies in a relationship with God, and if one should aim to give thanks when God intends one’s ultimate good, then the practice of giving thanks to God is going to be a lot more complicated than it might initially appear. For it is not simply a matter of naming good things, but rather of attempting to understand God’s intentions and ways in the world with respect to one’s developing faith or love of God.

Roberts makes a similar point in discussing the views of Kierkegaard. After noting the general rule (with exceptions) that in *human* relationships, “the more wonderful the benefit, the more wonderful do we judge the benevolence,” Roberts writes, “With God, the connection between what appears to us to be a benefit or a calamity and the intention of its agent is less naturally transparent, to put the point mildly” (2014, 76-77). According to Roberts, Kierkegaard emphasized the “ambiguity” or “incertitude” of apparent blessings—that is, the uncertain “value of every benefit and detriment” (2014, 82) in light of “the supreme value of [one’s] relationship with God” (2014, 78). And Roberts takes Kierkegaard’s resolution to the practical problem of how to give thanks to God to be this: one should subject all of one’s thanks for “mundane blessings” to the proviso, “*were these blessings taken from me, my gratitude to*

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Philip Swenson (personal communication) for raising this point.

*you, O God, would continue unabated....* That is, thanks for the God-relationship is *always* proper, takes precedence over thanks for the blessings of this life, and persists through the thick and the thin of the latter blessings” (2014, 78).

Kierkegaard (as interpreted by Roberts) thus suggests that while it is difficult to discern God’s intentions with respect to the “mundane” events of our lives, we can have confidence of God’s good will toward us in seeking out a relationship with us—and for this we can give thanks. How do we know of this good will? Roberts quotes the prayer of thanksgiving from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer mentioned earlier: “We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but *above all, for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory*” (2014, 78). In other words, it is in God’s gift of world-salvation that He manifests his good will toward us. But while it is clearly “meet and right” to give thanks to God for the gift of salvation, this would seem to take us very far from the practice, under consideration here, of counting one’s blessings. In other words, while it is uncontroversial that a Christian ought to give thanks first and foremost for the cosmic gift of redemption in Christ, this tells us little about whether or how we should give thanks for the so-called “mundane” events of our own lives—which would seem to be *all* the events of our earthly lives.

I have suggested so far that since our chief and ultimate good lies in communion with God, thanksgiving in the form of counting our blessings requires significant discernment and is provisional and subject to revision; for it is not readily apparent what events or features of our daily lives are manifestations of God’s intention to draw us into communion with Him. One might respond, however, that such tentativeness is unnecessary. Above I considered the idea that it is safe to assume that any good feature of the world is intended by God; and I noted in response that some intrinsically good features of the world (e.g., health or learning) may not be conducive to our ultimate good of relationship with God, and in fact sometimes impede this relationship. But one might respond further that if something leads us farther from God—for instance, our learning making us arrogant or distrustful (as some imagine the study of philosophy to do!)—this does not mean that God did not intend it for our good. It may instead mean that human sin got in the way of the good God intended. But since every good thing is a *potential* avenue to greater knowledge and love of God, every good thing is an appropriate object of thanksgiving. And since it is always possible to find something good, even in the worst situations, it is possible to follow the Pauline injunction to “Rejoice always... [and] give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:17-18, *NRSV*).<sup>6</sup>

In response, I do not wish to argue with Paul! Instead, I would point out how different Pauline thanksgiving is from the conventional blessings-counting under consideration here. Paul insisted that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28, *NRSV*); but while he echoed the biblical theme of God’s using evil for good (e.g., Romans 9:22-25), he did not generally require an understanding of how some circumstances contributed to anyone’s benefit in order to give thanks for them. And the thanks he did give, and exhort others to give, was not for things typically recognized as intrinsic goods, such as good health, ample resources, children, or family relationships. Consider the following

---

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the response to this point I outline below, regarding the character of thanksgiving in Paul’s writings, one might also note that this point depends on further assumptions about the nature of divine providence that may be questioned. While a theological determinist will affirm that *every intrinsically good thing is intended by God*—since according to theological determinism, *everything* is intended by God—it is unclear whether indeterminists such as open theists would affirm this. Perhaps some good things are not intended by God, because they are the result of free human actions that God neither controls nor foresees.

passage, in his letter to the church at Colossae, which seems quite typical of Paul's language surrounding thanksgiving:

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from [God's] glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, *while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.* He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:11-14, *NRSV*)

Paul seems to be counseling his readers to give thanks for their “share in the inheritance of the saints in the light”—and in the knowledge of this inheritance, they are to endure the “darkness” of the present age. This way of giving thanks has a different character from that envisioned by Roberts, whose grateful person “will tend to see what is good in situations and to notice less what is bad”—who can “move on from” unfortunate events because “his or her mind is tuned to happier things.” Paul endured many “unfortunate” events—according to his account, “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, [and] hunger” (2 Cor. 6:4-5, *NRSV*). His letters don't give the impression that he was trying to “move on” from such dark episodes by looking on “the bright side of life,” or focusing on the good aspects. Rather, he squarely faced the evil of the present age in the confident hope that *even if he could not see how*, God's good will was being done, Paul and his correspondents' place in God's kingdom was secured, and all of this would be made clear in the age to come.

In a famous passage in his letter to the church at Rome, Paul wrote,

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5, *NRSV*)

While it is true that Paul identifies a specific, presumably God-intended, benefit (indirectly) produced by suffering for which we may give thanks—hope<sup>7</sup>—this benefit is again of a very different kind than the goods commonly taken as blessings to be counted. For the object of hope is the blessing of eternal life and friendship with God, and without hope, this blessing cannot occur. Thus, thanksgiving for this theological virtue points beyond the hope itself to that which hope makes possible, and which is our greatest good.

Does this, after all, bring us back to Kierkegaard's assertion (as interpreted by Roberts) that, in light of our uncertainty about God's intentions with respect to the “mundane” events of our lives, we should focus on giving thanks for the “God-relationship”? It does indeed, but it also suggests how we might relate such thanksgiving to such mundane events. To take up the car crash case once more: rather than trying to discern God's benevolent intentions with respect to such a negative event (e.g., the location of the car crash was better for us than it

---

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

could have been, so God must have arranged it) *or* trying to “move on” from or forget about such a negative event altogether (since God’s intentions with respect to it are inscrutable), one might call to mind, *in the midst of* one’s pain and suffering, fear and loss, the gift of the “God-relationship.” As one lies in the hospital, worrying about the health and safety of one’s family, one might echo Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (who were worried about those who had died): “Death has been swallowed up in victory.... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”—or the burial service of the Episcopal Church, “All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”<sup>8</sup>

I have argued against the conception of Christian thanksgiving as blessings-counting, the idea that giving thanks *in* all circumstances means giving thanks *for* all circumstances, in the sense of finding something specific in every circumstance which is intended by God for our own good. My reasons have been epistemic and biblical: we cannot know how God specifically intended to benefit us in most circumstances, and such knowledge is required for blessings-counting; and Paul modeled a different kind of thanksgiving in his epistles which makes more sense in light of Christian theology. I now want to take issue with the idea found in both the philosophical and psychological literature that gratitude is a “positive” emotion, (i.e. one that feels good, with similarities or connections to contentment and satisfaction.) Tony Manela notes, for instance, that “philosophers largely agree that feelings of gratitude—the feelings that partly constitute a beneficiary’s being grateful—are positive and agreeable feelings” (2019). And at the end of the discussion of their research, Emmons and McCullough write, “A prevailing sentiment in both classical and popular writings on happiness is that an effective approach for maximizing one’s contentment is to be consciously grateful for one’s blessings. It would seem that, on the basis of the results of these three experimental studies, there is some truth to this wisdom” (2003, 386).

In what follows, I assume a certain connection between gratitude and thanksgiving that has been implicit so far in this essay. Since thanksgiving is a *speech act* and gratitude is an *attitude*, the two are in principle separable: I can give thanks without actually being grateful, and I can be grateful without giving thanks. Nonetheless, thanksgiving is a natural expression of gratitude. Gratitude normally has, in addition to a cognitive component (the judgment that someone has intentionally benefited me) and an affective component (which will be discussed below), a conative component: when I am grateful, I am normally motivated to express my gratitude through thanksgiving (and to act with good will toward my beneficiary). And the relationship between gratitude and thanksgiving is not simply one-directional—it is not only that gratitude naturally gives rise to thanksgiving. Thanksgiving also naturally generates gratitude, as the practice of identifying our benefactors and the ways they have benefitted us draws our attention to these facts of which we may have been only dimly (or not at all) aware. Thus while (I think) worshipping God ultimately requires an *attitude* of gratitude, it may be appropriate to engage in religious practices of thanksgiving even if one is not yet or at the time grateful to God, with the expectation that these practices will help one develop gratitude.

So the question I now seek to answer is this: if one regularly engages in giving thanks to God, what can one expect to *feel*? Although in individual instances it is possible that the feelings that are generated by giving thanks to God are completely unrelated to gratitude, I assume, for the sake of verbal simplicity, that any feelings that are quite commonly associated with giving thanks are a normal part of gratitude. If I am wrong about this, my conclusions may be rephrased in terms of what feelings the religious practice of thanksgiving tends to generate—but the implications of either possibility will be the same with respect to the empirical claims

---

<sup>8</sup> Taken from “The (Online) Book of Common Prayer,” pg. 482-483, <https://www.bcponline.org/>



at issue here, (e.g., that adopting thanksgiving practices is an “effective approach for maximizing one’s contentment.”)

How does, or should, religious gratitude feel (meaning, what feelings are, or ought to be, associated with giving thanks to God)? I think that while there is a kind of “contentment” that comes with a life of faith—not being worried about the vicissitudes of one’s own life (Matthew 6:25-26), and not wanting more than one needs (1 Timothy 6:6-9)—gratitude to God cannot be entirely feel-good in nature. For there are many who lack, but desperately want or need, virtually any supposed blessing that we might give thanks for—ample food and resources, the birth of a healthy child, success at work, or even faith in God. And if (1) these things are actually good for us, and would be for those who lack them as well, and (2) God has benevolent intentions toward all people, not just us or those who are similarly “blessed,” this means that God’s good will is not fully realized “on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>9</sup> The not-fully-realized nature of God’s kingdom on earth is, of course, a major theme in Christian theology: not just humanity but all of creation is in a fallen state, or as Paul says, in “bondage to decay”; and all creation “groans inwardly” as it waits for redemption (Romans 8:20-22, *NRSV*). Thus even as we give thanks to God for the gifts we have been given, we should be aware of the suffering of the world, of basic needs going unfulfilled, of people not reconciled with their Lord.<sup>10</sup> And so while giving thanks for what God has given us, it is morally appropriate to feel a kind of *yearning*—a recognition that things are not yet as they should be; a dissatisfaction or even grief over how they are; perhaps a restlessness until they are put right.

If the definition of a positive emotion is that it is pleasant or feels good, then Christian gratitude in a fallen world should not be completely positive.<sup>11</sup> Instead, it should be a kind of mixed emotion, combining a (good-feeling) hopeful or anticipatory joy over God’s action of world-salvation with rather unpleasant feelings such as those mentioned above: dissatisfaction, restlessness, yearning.<sup>12</sup> Then again, if a positive emotion is whatever contributes to our wellbeing, then on the Christian view, gratitude—even bad-feeling gratitude—is a positive emotion, since in blessing God we are brought into closer relationship with Him, and in yearning for God’s kingdom to come, our wills are united with His—and this union is our greatest good.<sup>13</sup> Whether such a mixed emotion as I have conceived Christian gratitude to be,

---

<sup>9</sup> In addition to painful feelings associated with a recognition of the deprivation or suffering experienced by others, there will also be painful feelings associated with evil in our own lives—even evil, like Paul’s thorn, that we take to be given by God for our own good. We may give thanks to the surgeon who saves our life, but that does not mean it feels good to undergo or recover from surgery!

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, my gratitude for what I have would seem to depend on an awareness that not everyone has the same. For instance, I would not give thanks for being kept safe from COVID-19 if I were not aware that others were being made so ill and dying from the disease.

<sup>11</sup> Tony Manela also argues that gratitude is not always positive, but on different grounds: because a benefactor might suffer greatly in benefiting a beneficiary. This is the only exception Manela seems to allow to the general rule that gratitude is positive; he writes, “the grateful beneficiary will have certain positive feelings, like those of joy or pleasure, *so long as his benefactor fares well*” (2016, 136). My point here is that even setting aside the welfare of the benefactor, a beneficiary of some gift may have negative feelings about the fact that what he or she has received others lack and desperately need.

<sup>12</sup> It might be countered that gratitude *itself* is an entirely positive emotion, but simply *accompanied by* other, negative emotions such as those listed above. (Thanks to both Taylor Cyr and Robert Hartman, personal communication, for raising this possibility.) I am not sure exactly how to differentiate emotions—if the act of giving thanks to God regularly generates certain unpleasant feelings, would it be better to say gratitude *itself* feels bad, or that its intrinsically good feeling is overwhelmed by the bad feeling of a distinct emotion?—but, as noted above, the implications with respect to the effecting of adopting thanksgiving practices are the same.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, gratitude can be “positive” if one thinks of a positive emotion as Martha Nussbaum has argued the ancient Greeks construed it: she writes, “a necessary and sufficient condition of an emotion’s being truly

with elements of joy and grief, contentment and yearning, has the physical health benefits like decreased stress and improved sleep that others have claimed—I leave this question for other researchers.

In close, I wish to bring my conclusions to bear on the subject with which I began: worship, conceived as thanksgiving to God. If my primary conclusion is correct and gratitude toward God ought to be focused chiefly on God’s gift of world-creation and -salvation rather than particular blessings with respect to which we may not know God’s intentions, then we should expect liturgy to be centered around this cosmic divine gift. And this is exactly what we find: as mentioned already, the centerpiece of the Christian liturgy is the Eucharist—a weekly remembrance, enactment, and celebration of the communion which Jesus instituted before his death. Giving thanks for individual blessings plays a much smaller and more peripheral role in Christian liturgy. (My suspicion is that it plays a much larger role in individual worship of God—for instance, in people’s daily prayers and “spiritual devotions”—and perhaps this outsized role should be questioned.) With respect to my secondary conclusion, we should expect to find, in a liturgy that is itself a form of thanksgiving to God, expression of the mixed (positive/negative) nature of our gratitude: elements of contentment and yearning, grief and joy, juxtaposed and combined. When I look at the liturgies I know best—those of the Episcopal Church—I do not always recognize these contrasting elements blended in thanksgiving. But I do recognize them in the burial office, which is perhaps why I’ve always found the funeral liturgy to embody the purest expression of the Christian faith and worship of God. The Orthodox funeral liturgy even more strikingly seems intended to deepen the congregation’s sense of loss and grief in order to deepen their appreciation of God’s gift of salvation.<sup>14</sup> The speaker beckons his hearers to “look” at the grave and “see that man is food for the worms, bare bones, and stench”—to which the choir responds, “*Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven*”; likewise the reader says, “As a flower withers and a dream fades, so is each man’s flesh dissolved by death. *But at the sound of the trumpet like a mighty earthquake, all the dead shall rise again to meet you, O Christ, our God.*” As disturbing as the reader’s words are—“The beauty of the face has turned to dust and death has withered up the flower of youth”; “The illusions and the things of glory of this life are truly folly and corruption”; “all human accomplishments are vanity”<sup>15</sup>—they seem to be appropriate expressions of the fallenness of creation, especially in the face of the death of a dearly loved one. And it is in fully facing the reality of this fallenness that we can most deeply and powerfully give thanks to our God, who redeems us and the world He loves.

---

positive—in the sense of making a positive contribution toward a flourishing life—is that it be based on true beliefs, both about value and about what events have occurred” (2012, 230). Since religious gratitude involves a perception of God’s benevolent intentions, gratitude will be positive to the extent that this perception is accurate.

<sup>14</sup> I first came upon this liturgy in Terence Cuneo’s account of his conversion to the Orthodox faith (2016, 204-218), in which he quotes parts of it.

<sup>15</sup> These quotations are taken from “The Orthodox Funeral Service,” retrieved on September 30, 2021, <<http://www.stlukeorthodox.com/html/orthodoxy/liturgicaltexts/funeralservice.cfm>>

## References

- Amin Ahsan Islahi, Mawlana. 2004. "Self-Development in the Context of Man's Relationship with Allah." in *Tazkiyah: The Islamic Path of Self-Development* edited by Abdur Rashid Siddiqui. Islamic Foundation.
- Cuneo, Terence. 2016. *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy*. Oxford University Press.
- Emmons, Robert and Michael McCullough. 2003. "Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84:2, 377-389.
- Farrer, Austin. 1967. *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*. T. & T. Clark.
- Manela, Tony. 2016. "Negative Feelings of Gratitude." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 50, 129-140.
- Manela, Tony. 2019. "Gratitude." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/gratitude/>>.
- McBrayer, Justin. 2010. "Skeptical Theism." *Philosophy Compass* 5:7, 611-623.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2015. "Who is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy, Happiness Research, and Public Policy." in *Theories of Happiness: An Anthology* edited by Jennifer Wilson Mulnix and M. J. Mulnix. Broadview Press.
- Roberts, Robert. 2004. "The Blessings of Gratitude: A Conceptual Analysis." in *The Psychology of Gratitude* edited by Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough. Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, Robert. 2014. "Cosmic Gratitude." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6:3, 65-83.
- Schimmel, Solomon. 2004. "Gratitude in Judaism." in *The Psychology of Gratitude* edited by Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough. Oxford University Press.
- Schmemmann, Alexander. (1973. *For the Life of the World*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Vicens, Leigh. 2014. "Theological Determinism." In *Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/theological-determinism>.
- Vicens, Leigh C. and Simon Kittle. 2019. *God and Human Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 2015. *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.