



THE
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It is Good to Give Thanks: Gratitude in the Abrahamic Religions

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Preface

Our purpose in putting these essays together is to share our respective understandings of gratitude with a view to their potential for the renewal of our society. Positive psychology has shown that the expression of gratitude reduces stress and encourages pro-social behaviour. Gratitude is a virtue which not only expresses appreciation for a gift or service: it illumines the relationships which actually make sense of our lives. Above all, its rootedness in God's relationship with his creation reveals our true nature as human persons. At a time when gratitude seems to be in short supply (or our appreciation of the range of what we should be grateful for is limited), we suffer an unfortunate diminution in our experience of our humanity. It is not so much that individually we fail to say 'thank you' when someone opens the door for us, it is rather that as a society we find it difficult to 'give thanks'.

There are many reasons for this; one is that we focus more on 'rights' than responsibilities, on compliance rather than ethical commitment to the well-being of others. Many regard this underlying assumption, rightly or not, as impacting on professional practice, leading to public mistrust and lack of confidence in the professions. Compliance is, of course, an essential ingredient of good practice, but without the personal empathy of professional persons for their clients, the essential relationship of professional and client will be frustrated.

We offer four bits of evidence. First, the media frequently claim that our society is experiencing a breakdown of trust. Some indeed refer to 'a broken society': we would not wish to go as far as that for most, if not all, personal experience of professional practice is reported to be satisfactory. However public respect for the professions has been undermined by recent events: M.P.'s expenses, cash for questions in the House of Commons, child abuse, police behaviour at Hillsborough, banker's bonuses etc.

Secondly, the expectation of an 'instant response' or 'off-the-cuff' remark threatens serious consideration of complex issues. There is for example no simple solution to the problem of closing the growing gap between rich and poor. The art of generous conversation is an important concomitant of sound judgement and societal coherence. It is a necessary feature of confidence-building.

Thirdly, education is increasingly performance-led: what counts is the capacity to earn a living and to contribute to the economic well-being of society. Results matter – of course they do - but without equal attention to character education and the encouragement of empathy, we lose touch with one another.

Fourthly, scientific and economic progress is often thought to be the be-all and end-all of a good society. Yet bringing them to fruition for the good of society requires a wider 'human' experience of

life than is provided for by such a limited perspective. For instance, religious enquiry is an inclusive exploration of the whole world of human experience. Without an awareness of metaphysical assumptions and the development of theological understanding, the world in which we live and move and have our being is far too restricted to make sense. Hence our reductionist attempts to control what is beyond us and confidently claim to know what is outside our understanding. Our sense of ourselves as human beings is at one and the same time, inadequate and overweening.

Our belief is that a mutual appreciation of what we each mean by gratitude within our religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam is something which we can invite society at large to share with us.

We develop our perspectives on gratitude in the four essays which follow.

1. **The Insights of Judaism**
2. **The Insights of Christianity**
3. **The Insights of Islam.**
4. **Conclusion.** We bring together our respective approaches and offer what we hope is a healing vision to our fellow human beings, and the world of God's creating. It is above all work in progress, but work which is of fundamental importance for human flourishing.

Gratitude: A Jewish Perspective

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The Roots of Thanksgiving

Thankfulness is a fundamental human emotion, an orientation of appreciation for the gift of being. Our earliest emotions of gratitude are probably our feelings of gratification at being nursed by our mothers, and are thus linked to feelings of need, hunger, warmth, satisfaction, and love.

Gratitude is important in Jewish theological tradition, which sees *being* itself as a supreme good, rooted in the absolute being of God. To be alive is to give thankful praise, even without words. 'Everything that has breath gives praise to Yah,' says the Psalmist at the very end of the Psalter (Ps. 150), and the key words of praise (*hallel*) are 'Give thanks to YHWH for He is good, for His loving kindness endures for ever.' (Pss. 107, 118, 136)

If our instinct for gratitude has its roots in primal attachment to our mothers, the Talmud sees the act of thanking God as rooted in a mother's joy at giving birth. Noting the very first Biblical occurrence of the verb *hodah*, to give thanks, Rabbi Yohanan (3rd century) comments, in the name of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai (2nd cent.): 'From the day the Holy One created His world, no-one had given thanks to Him until Leah did so, as it says, "This time I will give thanks to the LORD."' (*Berakhot* 7b, quoting Genesis 29:35)

The ancient, and long obsolete, Israelite sacrificial system had many facets and roots in the primitive religious psyche, but one of its rationales was thanksgiving, the act of offering back to God part of the gifts given to us, probably so that we could continue to enjoy further divine beneficence. This was expressed particularly in the *todah* (thanksgiving) offering, the first class of sacrifice in the voluntary category of *shelamim*, offerings of peace or wellbeing:

And this is the law of the sacrifice of peace offerings that one may offer to the LORD. If he offers it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the thanksgiving sacrifice unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and loaves of fine flour well mixed with oil. (Leviticus 7:11-12)

A beautiful rabbinic homily, cited in many classic midrashic texts asserts that

In the Time to Come all sacrifices will cease, but that of thanksgiving will not cease, and all prayers will cease, but [that of] Thanksgiving will not cease. This is [indicated by] what is written, 'The voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that say: Give thanks to the Lord of hosts' (Jer. 33:11) – This refers to [the prayer of] Thanksgiving; 'That bring offerings of thanksgiving into the house of the Lord' (ibid.) refers to the sacrifice of thanksgiving. (*Leviticus Rabbah* 9:7, *Pesikta deRav Kahana* 9:12, 79a, *Midrash Tehillim* 148a on Ps. 56, etc.)

Most of the sacrifices, explain the rabbinic commentaries, were occasioned by sin, and in the World to Come, when the evil inclination has lost its sway, they will no longer be necessary; but for giving thanks, in deed as well as in word, there will always be a need.

Many psalms sing of gratitude, but Psalm 100 alone has the epigraph *Mizmor letodah*, which could mean either 'A psalm of thanks' or 'A psalm to accompany the thank offering.' Its focus is on the gift of being: 'Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his,' or in another reading, 'It is he who made us, and not we ourselves.' The essence of gratitude, then, lies in acknowledgment of the centrality of relationship to our lives. We are not oriented solipsistically to ourselves but to others, and to An-Other, the One from whom our existence flows. This is a source of joy: 'Worship the LORD with rejoicing!' The short psalm ends with the recognition of God's *hesed*, the free gift of covenantal love: 'For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.' This linking of thanks with *hesed* is echoed again and again: 'Give thanks to YHWH for He is good, for His steadfast love endures for ever.'

Prayers of Thanksgiving

I.

Rabbinic Judaism knows of three distinct and fundamental modes of prayer: praise, petition and thanksgiving. In the ubiquitous parable of God as king enthroned, we approach as humble petitioners and begin by praising the sovereign, only then venturing to lay our pleas before God's mercy, and then, as we withdraw from the Presence, we give thanks. This thanksgiving is, in a sense, anticipatory: even before our petitions have been granted, we express confidence in God's grace and generosity.

When the Sages of the Mishnah, in the first and second centuries CE, gave liturgical form to the Jewish prayerful impulse, they created a thrice-daily prayer of 'Eighteen Benedictions' (later expanded to nineteen), the first three expressing praise, the middle twelve (later thirteen) petition, and the last three, thanksgiving. It is the second of this concluding triad which is the *Hoda'ah*, or Thanksgiving *par excellence*, commonly known as '*Modim*' – 'We give thanks.' Here is its text, according to the Ashkenazi (north European) rite, in full:

We give thanks to You, that You, Eternal One, are our God, and God of our ancestors, forever and ever. You are the Rock of our life, Shield of our salvation, from generation to generation. We thank You and declare Your praise for our lives, which are given into Your hand; for our souls, which are entrusted to Your keeping; for the signs of Your presence we encounter every day; and for Your wondrous deeds and good gifts at all times, evening, morning and noontide. You are Goodness itself, for Your mercy has no end. You are Mercy itself, for Your steadfast love has no limit. Forever have we put our hope in You. For all these things may Your name, our Sovereign, be blessed and exalted continually, forever and ever. Let every living being thank You (*Selah!*), and praise Your name in truth: God our salvation and our help (*Selah!*). Blessed are You, Eternal One, whose name is 'The Good' and whom it is pleasant to thank.

The origins of this blessing lie in the Second Temple in ancient Jerusalem, where, according to the Mishnah (*Tamid* 5:1), the priests would pray each day for the acceptance of their sacrifices, then give thanks, then bless the people with the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24-26. The grammatical root of the word for giving thanks, *y-d-h*, has an original meaning of throwing or casting down, and it may be that it acquired the meaning of thanksgiving via an act of prostration in acknowledgment for favours received. Rabbinic rules prescribe bowing low at the opening and close of this blessing.

It is worth spending a moment unpicking the themes of the blessing, which began with an ancient core and expanded over time into the longest of the nineteen benedictions. At least three sections are discernible. (1) The opening section looks back to Jewish history, our patriarchal ancestors and God's acts of deliverance; its theme is national. (2) This leads in turn to the personal section, the contemplation of our own lives, owed to God, and our souls, entrusted to God's care each night when we sleep. In the waking world we experience the wonders of life throughout the day. (3) Reflection on the limitless generosity of divine love leads then to the concluding, universal section of the blessing, when all creatures join together in acknowledging the truth of God's boundless goodness.

Commenting on the line 'for the signs of Your presence [lit. miracles] we encounter every day,' Jonathan Sacks notes that the sage Nahmanides (1194-1270, Catalonia)

Explained the difference between a 'revealed' and a 'hidden' miracle. Revealed miracles stand outside the laws of nature; hidden miracles take place within them. God is present not only in signs and wonders, but also in the very laws that govern the universe. To see the miraculous in the everyday is part of the Judaic vision, beautifully expressed in these lines.' (*Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, 2006 edition, pp. 90-91)

This theme of the wonder of creation, of existence itself, is brought out even more clearly in an alternative form of this blessing. In orthodox Jewish worship, the Prayer of Eighteen Benedictions is first said quietly by each individual, then repeated aloud by the cantor or prayer leader (originally, in the ages before prayer books, for the benefit of those who had not memorised their prayers). During the repetition, while the cantor recites the prayer above, the congregation murmur the following version, called the '*Modim* of the Rabbis', making this the only one of the benedictions that has two forms:

We give thanks to You, for You are the Eternal One our God and God of our ancestors, God of all flesh, who formed us and formed the universe. Blessings and thanks are due to Your great and holy name for giving us life and sustaining us. May You continue to give us life and sustain us; and may You gather our exiles to Your holy courts, to keep your decrees, do Your will, and serve You with a perfect heart, for it is for us to give You thanks. Blessed be the God of thanksgivings!

II.

Thanksgiving comes not only in the public, statutory prayers, but also in moments of private devotion. A custom that arose in early modern times fosters the habit of gratitude by placing it at the very beginning of every day, at the moment when we open our eyes. This one-line prayer, to be whispered before any other word is said, is called *Modeh ani*: 'I give thanks to You, living and enduring Sovereign, for restoring my soul to me in mercy; great is Your faithfulness!'

A typical story of one of the great Hasidic saints, Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt (1748-1825, Poland), tells of him meditating in the synagogue hours after everyone else had finished morning prayers, while he had not even begun. When asked why, he replied that he had got stuck on the first words 'I give thanks to You,' asking himself, 'Who am I to give thanks before the Lord?' (*Hasidic Anthology*, p. 330) Who and what is the 'I' that can begin to give thanks 'before You'? Yet the question invites its own answer – the I is the counterpart of the Thou, without which no Thou is

conceivable. Here, this little prayer, so childlike in tone, becomes a sort of Jewish *cogito*: not, 'I think, therefore I am,' but 'I give thanks, therefore I am; I live, and I am part of a greater life.'

Another expression of what I called above the 'habit of gratitude' is the statement of the great 2nd-century sage, Rabbi Meir, that a person should say a hundred benedictions every day (*Menahot* 43b). Later scholars would calculate exactly how the tally of 100 blessings could be achieved, in the course of three daily services, blessings before and after meals, after using the lavatory, etc., but Rabbi Meir's point was surely that our days should be filled with mindfulness of all the countless benefits we enjoy. This is well expressed by a passage in the Sabbath morning prayers:

Yet though our mouths should overflow with song as the sea, our tongues with exultation as the roaring waves, and our lips with praise as heaven's wide expanse; and though our eyes shine as the sun and moon, our arms spread forth like the wings of eagles, and our feet speed swiftly as hinds – still we could not fully thank You, or bless Your name, Eternal God, for one ten-thousandth of the countless myriad kindnesses You have shown to our ancestors and to us.

Gratitude to human beings

Thanksgiving to God is all well and pious, and we will consider below whether we do indeed always feel grateful for divine goodness. Now, though, let us turn to our fellow human beings, and examine what Jewish tradition has to say about gratitude to them.

Some of the finest reflections on this theme are attributed to the 1st-2nd-century sage Simeon ben Zoma, who would say, when he saw a great concourse of people in Jerusalem, 'Blessed be the One who created my fellow human beings to attend to my needs!' (*Tosefta Berakhot* 7:2) It has been observed that the sayings attributed to Ben Zoma show a certain similarity to Stoic teachings, and this may well be true of dicta like the following:

How hard must the first Adam have laboured to taste a morsel! He had to plough and plant, cut and bind sheaves, thresh and winnow, grind and sift, knead and bake, and only then could he eat, while I rise in the morning and find everything prepared for me! How hard must the first Adam have laboured to don a shirt! He had to shear, wash and shake out the wool, dye and spin and weave and sew, and only then get dressed, while I rise in the morning and find everything ready for me! How the craftsmen toil early and late, while I rise in the morning and find all laid out before me! (*Ibid.*, cf. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Berakhot* 9:2, 13c)

As well as reflecting on the relationship between individual and society, Ben Zoma goes on to discuss the specific relationship between guest and host, so central in a society where hospitality was a cardinal virtue:

So too Ben Zoma used to say: What does a good guest say? Remember the host for good! How many kinds of wine has he brought before us! How many kinds of portions of meat has he brought before us! How many kinds of fine bread has he brought before us! All that he did, he did only for my sake. But what does an evil guest say? Well, what have I eaten of his? One bit of bread have I eaten of his; one portion of meat have I eaten of his; one cup have I drunk of his; all that he did, he did only for the sake of his wife and children. And so it says: 'Remember then to magnify His work, of which men have sung.' (*Job* 36:24) (*Ibid.*; in the Talmud Yerushalmi version the bad guest is described first.)

In reality, of course, hosts can be niggardly, but Ben Zoma wants to inculcate a habit of gratitude, of judging others' motivation and performance favourably and appreciating with magnanimity. The closing quotation, from Elihu's speech to Job, presents God as the ultimate host, who has provided for all of us, who are, in the words of George Steiner, the 'guests of life'. Ben Zoma's host acts out God's *hesed*, and our response should be thankfulness.

The paradigm of hospitality, to the Rabbinic mind, was the patriarch Abraham whose tent was open to all four points of the compass, so that wayfarers would always find a welcoming door to greet them. The Talmud imagines how Abraham taught a godless world that human gratitude should be directed above all to the true Source of all goodness:

Abraham caused God's name to be mentioned by all the travellers whom he entertained. For after they had eaten and drunk, and when they arose to bless Abraham, he said to them, 'Is it of mine that you have eaten? Surely it is of what belongs to God that you have eaten. So praise and bless Him by whose word the world was created.' (*Sotah* 10b)

A more humorous account in the midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 49:4) depicts Abraham requiring his guests to thank God for their food. Those who did so were allowed to go in peace, but those who refused were instructed to pay handsomely for their meal. Confronted with the choice, pay or pray, most realised that an act of gratitude was the cheaper option!

Here, as in the story of Ben Zoma, we see the message that human beings and God are bound up in reciprocal relationships of generosity and gratitude. God is the ultimate, and we the mediate, source of goodness. In bestowing good, even in doing our work, we are the agents of God, or as Jewish tradition puts it, partners with God in the work of creation. When we show gratitude to our fellows we are thanking God as well.

This nexus between human and divine appears strongly in the special case of honouring one's parents. 'The Rabbis teach: There are three partners in [the making of] a human being: God and father and mother. When a person honours father and mother, the Holy One says, "I reckon it to them as if I dwelt among them, and they honoured Me."' (*Qiddushin* 30b) Further discussion in the Talmud emphasises that honour of parents is a duty without limit, as the gift of life is the greatest of gifts. Whether parents should demand such honour is less clear. In an acerbic diary entry from 1914, Franz Kafka remarks, 'Parents who expect gratitude from their children (there are even some who insist on it) are like usurers who gladly risk their capital if only they receive interest.' (*A Treasury of Jewish Quotations*, p. 344)

Even greater in some ways, though, than the debt to a parent, is the debt of gratitude to a teacher, for if a parent brings one in to this world, a teacher of Torah shows one the way to the World to Come. Thus, for example, if a person has a choice whether to relieve the burden of a parent or teacher first, the teacher takes precedence (*Mishnah, Bava Metzia* 2:11). Honour is due, indeed, to anyone from whom one learns a word of wisdom, and that person doesn't have to be one's teacher. A much loved saying of Rabbi Hanina (3rd century) recounts: 'Much have I learnt from my teachers, even more from my colleagues, and most of all from my students!' (*Ta'anit* 7a) Once again, we see that the relationship is reciprocal – in giving we receive, and in receiving gratefully we give. As Rabbi Akiva (2nd century) said to his forlorn disciple Simeon bar Yohai, when the harsh Roman decree had made it impossible for him to teach Torah, 'More than the calf wants to suckle, the cow wants to give

suck.' (*Pesahim* 112a) The need to give can be even greater than the need to receive, and to accept graciously is to confer great blessing.

In our crowded and bustling world of often fleeting relationships – commercial, social, educational, political and sometimes even sexual – what can give our interactions, however superficial and mechanical, true ethical meaning and quality? I believe that the complementary qualities of generosity and gratitude hold the key. In any social exchange, if we can give of ourselves genuinely and generously at that moment, as appropriate; and if we can accept what is given not carelessly, graspingly or cynically, but with suitable gratitude, then we confer a moral, even transcendent quality to that momentary contact. We are all needy, all wayfarers in the desert, and capable of sustaining one another with mutual recognition of our need and our ability to answer that need. The matching grace of generosity and gratitude can elevate our most mundane intercourse into a little glimpse of eternity.

Ingratitude

That is all wonderfully idealistic, but any discussion of gratitude has to reckon with the reality of ingratitude. Generosity should evoke thankfulness, but many of us can probably think of times when either our own benefaction was met afterwards with coldness and resentment, or perhaps when we resented, and avoided, someone who had been generous to us. As a Yemenite Jewish proverb puts it, 'Give someone of your nuts, and you'll have the shells thrown at you.'

Gratitude is usually called in Hebrew *hakarat tovah*, the recognition of a favour, while ingratitude is *kefiyat tovah*, the denial of a favour. The latter is a base, but very human, and very recognisable trait. When someone helps us in an hour of need, we may be grateful at the time, but later the recollection of the charity reawakens feelings of shame, vulnerability, dependency and indebtedness – a debt we might feel unable to repay, and resent the pressure, even if imaginary, to do so.

The philosopher and codifier Maimonides (c. 1138–1204) famously set out eight descending degrees of charity, in which the main consideration is the self-respect of the person in need, but a subsidiary concern might be to prevent gratitude turning sour and becoming resentment. The eight levels are as follows: 1) The highest degree is not to give a hand-out, but to enable a poor person to become self-supporting by entering into a partnership with him, getting him a job or extending an interest-free loan. 2) Next is giving money in such a way that the giver does not know the identity of the recipient, nor the recipient the identity of the giver. Thus the dignity of the poor person is safeguarded. 3) Next down is where the giver knows the identity of the recipient, but the recipient does not know that of the giver; 4) Next, the reverse: the recipient knows who has given, but the giver does not know the recipient's identity; 5) Next, giving directly to a poor person, but before being asked; 6) Next, giving after being asked, but in sufficient quantity; 7) Next, giving too little, but cheerfully; 8) and lowest of all, giving grudgingly and with reluctance. (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:7-14)

To a truly wise benefactor, the gratitude or ingratitude of the mob may be insignificant, as the passage from Ecclesiastes seems to imply:

I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no

one remembered that poor man. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. (Ecclesiastes 9:13-16)

So much for ingratitude to human beings. What if one doesn't feel grateful to God for the gift of life, but feels instead a sense of abandonment and alienation? There are many for whom, because of sickness, or poverty, or failure, life seems not a gift but a curse. When that is the case, it must be all too easy to make life a curse for others too. Can gratitude be taught? Surely it can, but to do so demands the utmost patience, sensitivity and humility, like nursing a seriously ill person back to health.

A Hasidic anecdote: When a Hasid complained of his small attainments in the service of the Lord, the Rabbi of Radshitz would say to him: 'Offer thanks to God for what you *have* attained. Others have accomplished less.' (*Hasidic Anthology*, p. 157)

One powerful rabbinic response to the 'problem of evil', the undeserved suffering that we experience in life, was to assert that 'this too is for the best.' Rabbi Akiva (1st-2nd century) who would die a martyr's death at the hands of the Romans, commented on Exodus 20:20:

You shall not behave towards Me as others behave towards their deities. When good comes to them they honour their gods [...] but when evil comes to them they curse their gods [...]. But you, if I bring good upon you, give thanks, and when I bring suffering upon you, give thanks! [...] So too Job says, 'The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away, blessed be name of the LORD,' (Job 1:21) – for the measure of goodness and also for the measure of trouble. (*Mekhilta, Bahodesh 20*)

A more humorous, and maybe more human response is summed up in a Yiddish proverb: 'If a Jew breaks a leg, he thanks God he did not break both legs; if he breaks both, he thanks God he did not break his neck.' (*A Treasury of Jewish Quotations*, p. 374)

Gratitude as a way of life

For many people nowadays, and especially for many modern Jews, the 'problem of evil' is an insurmountable obstacle to belief in a personal, benevolent and all-powerful God. Some reject any notion of the divine, but still find beauty and meaning in Jewish traditions of study, family life and the ethical commitment to 'mending the world.' Others (like Einstein) turn to Spinoza, the great heretical philosopher of 17th-century Amsterdam, who was excommunicated by the synagogue, but maintained the presence of the divine in all of nature, and taught the 'intellectual love of God' that comes from a recognition of the necessity, the eternal 'rightness', of all that is.

Even if there is no transcendent, willing agent to whom we can give thanks, that does not preclude the wisdom, even the necessity, of living with an orientation of gratitude for existence itself. We are bound up with nature in a cycle of being and becoming, which brings with it both joys and sorrows. Spinoza's wisdom echoes that of the Rabbis when he states:

The perfection of things is to be reckoned only from their own nature and power; things are not more or less perfect, according as they delight or offend human senses, or according as they are serviceable or repugnant to mankind. [...]

In so far as we understand the causes of pain, to that extent it ceases to be a passion, that is, it ceases to be pain; therefore, in so far as we understand God to be the cause of pain, to that extent we feel pleasure. (*Ethics* I. Appendix; VP18)

Gratitude to God is gratitude to, and for, Being itself – of which each of us is a thinking, feeling part – in all its glorious complexity and transcendent unity ‘under the aspect of eternity.’

Gratitude: A Christian Perspective

Kenneth Wilson

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Background

A grateful person is potentially a catalyst for courteous, compassionate and ethical relationships which should inform all professional and personal life. This is widely appreciated: when gratitude is unexpressed its absence is readily recognised with the result that society is immediately the poorer. Christianity is rooted in gratitude to God for his gift of creation which we share with all people, and to all people whose conversation illumines and inspires our faith, hope and charity.

There are many dimensions to God's relationship with the world, too many to deal with in a brief essay. I focus on four of them, each of which is in a sense, an exploration of the nature of God, of the world which God is creating and the consequent implications for our understanding of what it is to be human.

God's gracious freedom in creating

God, undetermined by anything beyond himself, is free to be himself and therefore free to give freedom to others. It is of his gracious will that he creates all things: moreover his manner of creating is redemptive. That is an assurance that whatever pertains in the world as we experience it, God's nature is such that the world can never move outside his gracious love or beyond courteous care. God calls humankind to share his lively concern for his creation in all its fulness. He therefore inspires human being with curiosity to enquire about the creation of which he is a part, reason to understand the world, and the moral ambition to pursue the ideal of justice. He is sensitive to beauty, seeks the truth and is inspired above all with the desire to know God as Father. Humankind is free to love God, the creation and all people.

God is beyond our understanding. What Christians claim to know of God is a combination of his revelation in the person of Jesus Christ whom Christians call the Son of God, the continuing activity of God in the world through the Holy Spirit, and what we are able to learn of him through attending to his continuous work in creating. These modes of knowing and being are interactive and informative of one another. The more we learn of creation, the more our sense of the divine presence grows.

Gratitude implies much more than remembering what we were told by our parents as a child when given a sweet by a neighbour, 'Say, thank you'. To be grateful to God, for who God is, for what God does and what he asks of us, impacts on what we want, what we want to know, how we decide to behave and who we are trying to become.

A grateful Christian person faces the future with God in Christ: he is free to contribute to the world's well-being by what he chooses to do. A grateful person does not walk backwards into the future with

reminders of God's presence remaining equidistant behind him. God is his present and future, not his past.

Made in the image of God

Secondly, Christians believe humankind is made in the image of God. It is a truly astonishing claim which can be made to look pretty stupid: there is clearly no physical likeness between uncreated Divine Being and the creature, humankind. But physical likeness is beside the point. We are concerned here with the character of God. God freely chose to create; he was not forced to do so by external influences. What is more, God does not oversee the creation from afar or operate some sort of remote control; he is involved, so involved in fact as Christians see it, that he commits himself to its well-being. He is incarnate in Jesus, the true image of the Father. Jesus freely accepts his role in God's creative purpose, and gives himself for human well-being. God in Christ expresses his loving commitment to the well-being of all that he is bringing into being.

Christians point to Jesus Christ as the one in whom they see God's self-giving to be present. They call him both human and divine: the world of God's creation can, it is declared, assume the wholeness of what it is to be God, without confusing the nature of either God or creation. By so doing they point to the fact that as a result of God's commitment of himself to the well-being of his creation, each person is called to work with God in his marvellous enterprise. He is free if he so chooses to follow Christ and live in God's image. Every human person is, like Christ, free to give himself to the well-being of the physical environment, and to all other persons with whom he shares the world. One cannot but be grateful for this vocation, and attempt to live out in faith the consequences in what, as we discern it in the life, teaching, and death of Christ, might be the sacrificial challenge that arises. However, in pointing to the birth, death, resurrection, and indeed the ascension of Christ, the eternal presence of God's commitment to the well-being of his creation is affirmed. It is emphasized in the Apostle's Creed in the claim that he descended into hell and now sits on the right hand of God. These formulas, confirm that absolutely nobody and nothing is excluded from God's loving care, nor anyone capable of escaping the courteous authority of God.

Humankind has, as Christians see it, the power and the authority to serve the well-being of God's creation, to recognize every other person as his neighbour, and thus to enhance the quality of his own life in conformity with the image of God in whose likeness he was created. This vocation will not be fulfilled by a philosophy of compliance which avoids evil: it involves the acceptance of a responsibility to do good.

The Failure of Humankind

Thirdly, it is clear that humankind does not live up to the standards which are implicit within the Christian tradition. Even when we know what we should do, we often lack the will to do it. We are, as St Paul says, subject to the sin that dwells within us: we fail to behave well, because we have lost the sense of God's presence without which we simply do not have the character to do God's will. Without God we may fall prey to the fear of consequences and the possibility of suffering for our vision. Safer, we may mistakenly think, to follow the crowd and comply with the rules and regulations.

More generally, we may lose any sense of the spiritual in our religious faith and transform it to something more akin to political power. After all, if one is seduced by the thought that one has the whole truth, one can be tempted to think it one's duty to require others to follow one's lead for their own salvation. Too frequently religious traditions have fallen to this temptation and become persecuting powers in their enthusiasm, as they see it, to 'obey God' and attempt to force others to do so too.

Properly understood, however, the Christian theological tradition has no room for such exclusivity; there are no utopias. God created humankind, not just Christians; all humankind is in the image of God, male and female, all races, all generations: the future belongs to all, not just to Christians. Hence Jesus asks all people to join with him in his prayer to the Father which begins, Our Father.

Moreover, the Christian in fact knows that human desire and capacity to grow in the knowledge of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ, never ends. One is never reduced to believing that what one thinks one knows at the moment is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Moreover, his curiosity about the world, about himself and other people, as well as God (in so far as knowledge of God is possible), is God-given and a delight to the mind and heart of man. Our gratitude for this vision is above all something to be shared with all.

Its actual growth depends not simply upon man's observational skills, intellectual insight and reasoning capability, but upon human emotions which themselves inform, excite and potentially satisfy the understanding. When we respond to the beauty of the world we do so with our whole selves, body, mind and spirit. Above all this means that the love of God, of the world, of other people is of paramount importance as we attempt to come to terms with what it is to be human. Gratitude is the emotion which is stimulated as we find that God, the world and other people respond to our concern, interest and curiosity.

Living Together

Fourthly, we know that we are unable to live life in isolation: we need one another. We pursue truth together, we build societies with one another, we share our perception of the world and of God in conversation with one another. Hence as Christians we gather together in the community of faith, the Church, to worship God, learn from one another, and work with others for the future well-being of creation. The Church may seem to be an exclusive society, but properly understood it is far from being so. In principle, the Church is inclusive in the sense that it now celebrates in anticipation what it will in future be. This means that the Church lives her life with regard for all humanity, past, present and future whose concerns it gathers up and offers with gratitude to God. We may fail, but that should not blind us to the marvellous possibilities that the hope promises. All people can with gratitude acknowledge the love of God and seek to serve him.

The key lies in the practice of conversation. Christians are called to be in conversation with God who as the Creator of all humankind is in conversation with all people. It is a denial of our calling if we confine ourselves to the conversation of Christians: after all it appears that God did not so confine his conversation with humankind. Moreover theology, the way in which we talk together of God, is not true of itself, but only as it is expressed in relation to all other human understanding. The

language of theology is not a private language only intelligible to its speaker; its meaning is rooted in the universal human search for self-understanding, meaning and truth.

Grounding our sense of Oneness

Competition between Churches has been destructive of faith and truth. A promising future will be grounded in a mutual appreciation of what partner church traditions have grasped of the truth in their conversation with God. Far from confident that all truth lies with one tradition, the underlying relationship assumed will be of deep gratitude for what each enjoys of the love of God. This approach, I suggest, offers real hope if we could take it into ecumenical conversations between religions. Could we begin from a shared sense of gratitude that we are one people in one world, and try to work out what that means for our understanding, our behaviour, our sense of justice and consequent mutual responsibility for one another's well-being? As a Christian I cannot believe that it is foreign to our traditions. Have we not a shared responsibility to seek God together and serve the well-being of the whole human race?

Embracing Gratitude together

The fundamental expression of the Christian tradition lies in the Eucharist which is the celebration of God's commitment of himself in Christ to the world's well-being and our offering of ourselves on behalf of creation and all people in gratitude for all that we enjoy of God's gifts in creation. It has been suggested recently that the existence of many religions, especially the Abrahamic Faiths must be God's will. How otherwise could they flourish? The implication for Christian theology is that we have to explore ways in which we can say of Christ that he is alive in other traditions of faith, not in order to 'convert' them but in order to realize that our own faith gives us the authority to attend to their experience and take it into account with serious concern. We must learn how to listen to one another, love one another, and work together with God to take care of the world which we share. There can be no more important way of doing this than learning how to thank God together for one another, and set about the business of commending God to his world.

This in essence is what Christians do when they celebrate the Eucharist (the Mass or Holy Communion). The form of the service says it all. It begins with the recognition of God's presence: only in his presence can we tolerate awareness of our sin because his presence already assures us of forgiveness. The tradition is then rehearsed in readings from the Bible, (the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels and the Epistles) with an exposition by the celebrant to engage the congregation (and through them all people) in God's conversation with his world. There follows the Creed which reminds us of the range and depth of God's giving of himself and the eternal hope which we enjoy. Prayers of intercession then allow us to bring before God the needs of the whole creation and all people.

We offer, on behalf of the whole world, tokens of his gifts in the bread and the wine which is offered in sacramental act by the priest. The one and only celebrant is in fact Christ, with whom and in whose presence we commit ourselves gratefully to God's service. The congregation joins in The Our Father, in which we recall God's presence and ask on behalf of all people for life-giving food which should remind us that we have a responsibility to serve and feed the world physically, intellectually

and morally. We are sent out to serve the world in Christ's name. And we are free and able to do so if we wish, for we are made in the image of God.

Conclusion

Division, conflict, fear and misunderstanding are not themselves sufficient reason for abandoning thankfulness. I offer two examples from within the Christian tradition. The 1662 Anglican Book of Common Prayer (BCP) includes in the liturgy for Morning and Evening Prayer and the Litany, a General Thanksgiving. It was written and then revised by two people who suffered grievously in the terrible seventeenth century religious conflicts. A focus on the fundamental grounds for gratitude offered, they believed, a profound insight into the Gospel on which all human experience of truth, beauty and love was grounded. Gratitude is not for the faint-hearted: it is the product of hard work, serious thought and an underpinning sense of the presence of God which overrides all divisions. The words of the General Thanksgiving are as follows.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
we thine unworthy servants
do give thee most humble and hearty thanks
for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men;
we bless thee for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessing 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.
and we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies,
that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful,
and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips,
but in our lives;
By giving up ourselves to thy service,
and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness
all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost
be all honour and glory, world without end,
Amen

Secondly, the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was a period in Europe of distrust, persecution and destruction. Terrible bloodshed, famine and plague, marauding ill-disciplined troops and general disorder were rampant. Yet in the midst of it Martin Rinckart wrote a triumphant hymn of thanksgiving.

Now thank we all our God,
With hearts and hands and voices,
Whom wondrous things hath done.
In whom his world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms
Has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us.
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in his grace,
And guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills
In this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God
The Father now be given,
The Son, and him who reigns
With them in highest heaven,
The one eternal God,
Whom heaven and earth adore,
For thus it was, is now,
And shall be evermore.

- *Martin Rinckart (1586-1649)*

Christians can learn that when they say 'we', what they mean proleptically is 'all people, of every race, religion, gender, generation and nation', and learn to work out with others what that means in theory, and in practice, and for doctrine. So could we all, I believe, if only we wanted to and were willing to try. We are not looking for what is rightly dismissed as a mish-mash of all religions, but the self-understanding, shared vision and renewed desire for God which will flow naturally from a public expression of gratitude for what each has received and continues to receive. Moreover, a shared public expression of our gratitude will also encourage a general awareness in society of what we owe to one another which in turn will enliven moral sensitivity and challenge the values of a society which is increasingly based on compliance.

A Muslim Perspective

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Gratitude is, in a sense, just a synonym for faith. The human spirit struggles to comprehend the sheer vastness and beauty of the cosmos. Why is there something, rather than nothing at all? And why is that something so masterful, stable, and governed by clear physical constants and laws? When we are able to see existence as best interpreted as the result of a supreme will and wisdom, which has its home both within and above the system of the cosmos, we naturally experience the world, and life, and beauty, as gifts. Religion is, in a way, a technique of expressing this natural human yearning to express gratitude for those gifts.

The Qur'an speaks ceaselessly of natural phenomena, which it invites us to perceive as 'signs'. 'Truly, in the creation of heaven and earth, and the succession of night and day, are signs for people of understanding', it assures us. And of all the orders of creation, most remarkable of all is the human being:

Such is the Knower of the invisible and the visible, the Mighty, the Merciful. Who made all things good which He created, and He began the creation of man from clay. Then He made his seed from a draught of despised fluid; then He fashioned him and breathed into him of His spirit, and appointed for you hearing and sight and hearts. Small thanks give ye! (32:6-9)

This frequent Qur'anic hymnody was originally directed at an initial audience, comprising pagan Arabs in the city of Mecca. Worshipping a pantheon of gods, who, like the gods of the ancient Greeks, were often at odds with each other, and whose powers were always limited, they had little idea of creation as a harmonious whole subject to the creative governance of One God. The Qur'an took the Arabs from a vision of a chaotic world of strife between jealous demigods, to a new perspective in which everything now had its place in an ordered and exquisite cosmos, and thus summoned them to respond to life in a fresh spirit of wonder and thankfulness.

In modern cities, many feel that the joy seems to have gone out of life. We are subject to a slick consumerism which promises satisfaction in the amassing of material goods. As Scripture says: 'Rivalry in worldly increase has distracted you!' The mechanisation of our lives places us at a far remove from the natural world, which speaks to us so directly of eternal beauty and invites us to offer thanks. It seems hard to intuit the intrinsic miraculousness of an animal when it has been killed mechanically, chopped and frozen, and delivered to us in a hamburger bun. By contrast we find ease and peace in the contemplation of nature, and this is hardly surprising, since for the overwhelming bulk of the history of Homo sapiens we have lived very simple hunter-gatherer lives, close to nature and integrated harmoniously within its processes. Today our technologies remove us from the direct experience of nature: we experience only dimly the rising and setting of the sun, the passage of the seasons, the growth of crops, the presence of animals and our interdependence with them. We are what the philosopher Hannah Arendt called Homo faber: Man the Maker, and what we make

reflects our own desires, not the wisdom of the Creator or the magnificent, sobering symmetries of nature.

And yet to give thanks is a basic instinct. Part of a modern spirituality must be to train ourselves to give thanks even when strolling down the aisles of a supermarket, where everything seems to have been denatured by the hands of corporate efficiency. I have a religiously-minded friend who likes to linger by the fish counter, where the astonishing beauty of the ocean's produce and the fruits de mer are openly displayed. A strange spiritual corner of the modern supermarket! Yet there is surely a wisdom in his behaviour, which offers a simple technique which can help us to remember God even in the apparently humdrum activity of filling a shopping cart.

The beauty of a rainbow trout can hardly compare, though, with the beauty of a human being. So sacred is the human form, made, as the Prophet of Islam taught, in God's image, that Muslims have loved to obey the commandment which forbids all graven images. How could a mere human artist do justice to the Creator's work? No portrait can convey the depth of contemplation or joy or mourning palpable in a living face. By making the human form sacred in this way, religion asks us to give thanks for the 'best of forms' in which, according to the Qur'an, God created Adam and Eve.

Here are grounds for gratitude higher than those inspired by anything else in nature. The beauty of the human form is evident. We are told that people would visit the Prophet of Islam just to enjoy the beauty of his face and his smile. And even the elderly, especially when lit up by the light of faith, can be movingly beautiful. And yet outward beauty is insignificant when compared to the inward beauty which God can place in human hearts. The Prophet teaches us to say whenever we look in a mirror: 'O God, you have made me beautiful in form; make beautiful, also, my inward nature!'

Gratitude, therefore, should be for relationships more than it is for the physical stuff of creation. Consider the following verses:

To Him is the praise in the heavens and the earth, and at the sun's decline and in the noonday.

He bringeth forth the living from the dead, and He bringeth forth the dead from the living, and He reviveth the earth after her death. And even so will ye be brought forth!

And of His signs is this: He created you of dust, and behold you are humans, ranging afar!

And of His signs is this: He created for you spouses from yourselves that you might find peace in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Verily herein are signs for people who reflect.

And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colours. Verily herein are signs for people who know.

And of His signs is your slumber by night and by day, and your seeking of His bounty. Verily herein are signs for people who heed. (Qur'an 30:18-23)

In these verses, so resonant and syncopated in the original Arabic that the listener is moved to a kind of ecstasy, we find God listing some of His 'signs' for which we need to give thanks. At the core of these are forms of human interaction. The man-wife relation brings 'peace', and so the Prophets and saints are exemplars in marital life as in other things, showing the essential sanctity of sexual

relations. As one Muslim theologian put it, 'All desires harden the heart, except sexual desire'. The Creator chose to appoint human trust and beauty and physical intimacy as the way our species would reproduce itself, and for this, the believer gives thanks.

Solitude usually hurts, and by God's compassion Eve and Adam completed one another. Marital life is to be an attempt to reclaim the 'peace' of the original Eden; we cannot quite do that, of course! This world will never be Paradise. But the family unit affirms our full belongingness to the natural order, and, when well-ordered, brings a strength and security which nothing else can match. The family, as the building block of society and the ultimate defence for the weak and vulnerable, is so often abused, neglected and exploited, but remains, even in our modern atomised style of living, irreplaceable. Perhaps, as so much else is changing around us, and relationships with friends, neighbours and colleagues seem to grow more fragile in today's mobile society, family is more elemental a human need than ever before.

The same sequence of verses goes on to celebrate human diversity: 'the difference of your languages and hues'. Or, as we might put it today, cultural and ethnic diversity. Just as the genders are very different, but exist to support and complement one another, so too humanity is a tapestry of very different races, languages, and ways of life. At the Great Sanctuary of Mecca, Muslims are united with pilgrims from every possible part of the world, all dressed in the same simple austere robes, all performing the same rituals; united as they could never be at any other time or place. In that utterly holy and peaceful place, they discover the essential unity of Adam's children, and learn to give thanks for the beauty of human diversity.

The pilgrims learn another lesson also. Ancient historians narrate that some of the pilgrimage rituals were enacted by Hagar, mother of Abraham's firstborn; and Muslims believe that her tomb lies within the Meccan sanctuary. Abandoned in the desert with her child Ishmael, she did not give up hope, but ran from hill to hill, seeking water for her dying son. The angel then showed her the miraculous well of Zamzam, which flows to this day.

Hagar, in a sense the true matriarch of Islam, tells believers something extraordinary about God's ways in the world. Her situation was apparently hopeless: a single parent, a foreigner (she was Egyptian), alone in a hostile desert. But her trust was in God, and she was not disappointed. Her descendant was Muhammad of Mecca, who proclaimed to his incredulous compatriots that God is with the poor, the slave, the foreigner, the asylum-seeker. And today, across the rich countries of the world, one finds the same liberative message consoling millions of Muslims and others, as they cope with difficulties as immigrants, asylum seekers or jobless and homeless people, sometimes despised by a widespread xenophobia: they remember that God is with the outcast, and is vibrantly present not with the new 'super-rich', but with the despised Hagarenes in their ghettos, as they remain true to Hagar's faith in difficult times. Faith, which is made of gratitude, itself inspires gratitude: 'Thanks be to God for the blessing of Islam; it outweighs all other blessings!' as the Founder said.

In these human interactions we intuit the Divine Other. Consciousness is the strangest thing the universe contains; and when two minds meet which have not been polluted by greed and envy and the love of status, they naturally remember their Lord, even if they do not have the words to express their sense of wondering recognition. Marriage, falling in love, prayerful fellowship, the solidarity of

and with one's poor neighbour – these are all opportunities to open the soul not only to other souls, but to the Source of those souls. Being grateful to God is therefore inseparable from expressing gratitude to other human beings, as the Holy Prophet said: 'Whoever does not thank people, has not given thanks to God.'

For Muslims, as for followers of other holy traditions, the essential emotion that emerges is love. Yunus Emre, most popular of all the Turkish poets, has this to say:

*What wondrous, wondrous thing – which hurt and separation bring to me,
Yet soul intoxicates – this Love? The Poison its own Remedy!*

*All they torn by distress, let them seek here the antidote most sure;
My pain is salved, my suffering itself is now become my cure.*

*If you hold out the fire of Love – for the repose of human hearts,
The darkness then is truly light – nor torch nor lantern bright for me.*

*A thousand times a day the Four Books read which came to earth from Heaven;
If you the brethren yet deny, the Face of Love you cannot see.*

Emre here places his finger on the living heart of religion. Muslim theologians refer to love as the summit of the religious experience. God loves humanity and the world because of His nature, not for anything we have done, and out of love He brought us into being. And seeing His generosity we recognise His perfection, and respond with the emotion of love. This is the reality of thankfulness: loving the Benefactor. Emre speaks of those who pore over the Four Books, by which he means the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel and the Qur'an, and affirms that unless we recognise other human beings in love, we have no inkling of the nature and the purpose of those scriptures.

In this spirit the Prophet prayed: 'O my God, grant me love of You and love of those who love You, and love of whatever brings me closer to You; make love of You dearer to me than cool water!'

This love, however, rooted so powerfully in our witnessing of God's wise work in creation, is not the kind of emotion that stands still. Instead, love longs to spill over into action. Gratitude should energise us, and uplift our spirits. The realisation of God's gifts and His protection makes us confident for the future: whatever may happen, is by His wisdom, and His wisdom is always full of gifts.

The modern Turkish theologian Muzaffer Ozak writes that gratitude does not stop when believers say, 'Praise God' after eating a meal, or upon entering their houses or putting on their clothes. For all these activities there is a Prophetic prayer, giving form to our inner state of neediness and humble sense of gratefulness. The words themselves, however, often trip from the lips of believers ritualistically. Even the five daily prayers which shape the believers' life, and whose words begin with

praise and gratitude, can be mechanical routines, unless inspired by true and sincere inward directedness and attention.

The prayer, for Ozak, is a way by which the body expresses its gratitude to God. The whole human being needs to participate in this humble and joyous act. But our senses, too, which so richly enjoy God's gifts in every moment, must also find their form of thankfulness:

We show gratitude for the eye we have been given by seeing nothing but the Truth, by looking at everything with a view to learning some lesson. In the case of the ear, gratitude means listening to the word of God and always attending to the cause of speech rather than the speaker, whoever he may be. Gratitude for beauty is shown by preserving one's decency and virtue. For every bounty we receive there is an appropriate expression of gratitude. If it is material, spending it wisely. If it is knowledge, giving teaching and instruction. If it is office and rank, acting with justice and getting restitution for the victim from his oppressor. Unless we demonstrate gratitude in these ways the bounties we receive will prove to be misfortunes.

In this vision, gratitude is not simply a passing emotional state, but a whole way of life. Believers, seeing the world not as a mere conglomeration of atoms and physical forces, but as a bouquet of Divine gifts, must live accordingly. Even where we cannot see beauty, we know that God has placed the beauty there somewhere! Even when we see hardship, we use our wisdom to intuit the beauty that will come, and the perfection of the whole. So the Persian poet Attar says:

*What is gratitude? To imagine the rose from the thorn,
and to imagine the nonvisible part to be the whole.*

Gratitude teaches us to look deeply into things, and intuit the blessings which exist even in affliction. Everything is part of His order, and has its due. True, so many are His gifts that we cannot do them justice! As the Prophet prayed: 'Glory to You: I cannot number Your praises! You are as You have praised Yourself!' As Imam Baqli writes: 'The Prophet in the highest bliss of being drowned in the ocean of the bounty of gratitude wanted to express his thanks in the tongue without tongues; finding himself incapable, he uttered these words.' The phrase is recurrent in our worship and our litanies.

Even the Prophets and Saints know that they fall short in giving praise; even though the name Muhammad literally means the 'man of praise'. But by giving voice in our words and our style of life to this wellspring of thankful witnessing of His power and grace, we comply with His command, and attune ourselves to our true natures; like the Prophet, we are created to give praise.

In our materialistic times, when humanity sees no light in matter but only 'natural resources', and when nature itself is under threat as never before thanks to a blind human voracity and our 'rivalry in worldly increase', the religious traditions know that God is not absent. We have veiled Him and turned from Him through our own avidity and ostentation, by ignorance and vainglory, and by our failure to recognise the beauty in each other. But the fabric of the world is still of His weaving. Despite our frantic search for pleasure and prestige, He protects us. As the Qur'an reminds us, 'His hands are open wide with gifts'.

The Abrahamic Tradition: A Shared Vision?

Mark Solomon, Kenneth Wilson, Tim Winter

We believe that there are positive themes running through our respective pieces which merit further reflection. Above all at the heart of each of our traditions lies the virtue of gratitude, something which we struggle to understand, but feel profoundly as we contemplate God and his purpose in creation. We each see God to be a God of loving-kindness, attentive to the world's well-being and compassionate. In particular we see human being as made in the image of God, by which we mean at least that human being is capable of living a grateful life of faith, in the service of God, of all persons and the world of God's creation. A grateful person is transformed when he is aware of God's presence and encouraged freely to give his service for the benefit of others and for the totality of the environment of which he is a dimension.

Gratitude is a natural human emotion: we feel comfortable with ourselves when we express genuine gratitude. Since it is natural, we know that gratitude is a God-given virtue, for all that is 'natural' is part of God's purpose for his creation. We feel at home when we understand that we are in God's good world; such a perspective means that we can be full of hope for a future courteous community, peace-giving, just and above all, loving.

God does not compel us to be grateful; on the other hand he gives signs of his care which remind us of his gracious presence and free us so that we want to express our gratitude for all that we receive of his goodness. It is much more than courtesy: we are not like some automaton, saying 'thank you' for the change when paying for a purchase. Courtesy, of course, is important, it furnishes a society with good will; without it we treat other people as if they were machines. But when one recognises a grateful person one is liberated. Most particularly what happens to us when we are grateful to God for all God's good gifts is that we are liberated to enjoy a relationship with him.

Relationships lie at the heart of our human experience; they make us who we are, they influence who we want to be, and stimulate our natural desire to be in good relationship with God, all people and the world in which we are set. It begins in the family, when our parents bring us into the world and nourish us towards maturity. It is supported by teachers whose instruction will be literally valueless if not offered in the context of personal relationship. The relationship is mutual; pupil and teacher are alike learners and in a profound sense both teachers. The experience of marriage and the community of friends sustains and provokes new initiatives, new ventures, new opportunities and a life of exciting experiment. Surrounded by friends and children, we mature and discover who we are. We can be absorbed in this and ignore the bedrock of all that we have. But on reflection we realise that it all begins with God, for without his presence, his commitment to the well-being of his world, his surrounding gracious love, there would be no us, no reality, no present, no future, no hope.

But there is. Gratitude is all-embracing. The experience of beauty reminds us through the particularity of the snowflake and the general explanatory sense of quantum mechanics, of the delight we can take in the whole matter of the universe and our place in it. Its revealing regularities,

trustworthiness, reliability, and coherence stimulate our curiosity and enable us to enquire intelligently: we can begin to take account of our experience and grow in responsibility for the use we make of our knowledge. Our curiosity is natural and, therefore, like our sense of gratitude, God-given. We can freely acknowledge our desire to understand and move on in the hope that we can improve the lot of our fellow human-beings, take care of our world and actually come to know what it means to love and be loved by God.

And what a marvel our life-in-the-world reveals a human being to be. We can 'hold' in our head the immensities of space and time, the astonishing smallness of the sub-atomic structure, the responses of artists to their experience of the world, the sublime experience of music, the openness of conversation and the expectation that what we 'know' may turn out to be transformed by what we uncover as we continue to enquire. Could anything be more exciting!

And yet we refuse, it seems, the challenge to be free and do our best to define our worlds and limit our experience. We want control, but realise that the only world we can even attempt to 'manage' is the material world: hence we want possessions, the tawdry things we can put in piles and try to protect, even though we know we cannot even do that. On the other hand, we can learn to control ourselves and offer what we have in generosity for the benefit of others, rescuing them from hunger, poverty and loneliness. The latter is crucial: the most significant offering we can make is of ourselves to our fellow human beings, and through the community, to the world and all that it is.

The fact is that what we essentially have to give is our whole selves; to do so demands intellectual insight, moral perception, emotional sensitivity and courage. These will be perfected by giving thanks to God, our Maker, Sustainer and inspiration. Every experience, good or bad, can be lived through with the faith which is founded on the gratitude we feel for life and for death. The point is that when we say that we are grateful to God the words do something, they express and confirm our commitment to live life to the full for God's sake. Even in the darkness, there is light if we have the eyes of faith to pick up the signs and cultivate the habit of grateful living.

In the preface we mention the tendency of professional life to succumb to the temptation of compliance as if that fulfilled a vocation. The professional person is called to serve the common good. She does so by establishing a relationship with her client and giving him her generous attention. The relationship is personal not merely professional, and is offered in grateful thanks for what one knows of the reality of God's presence in a world of his making characterised by his loving kindness and compassionate presence. In what the professional does he manifests the fundamental reality of God and his world. To live with grateful knowledge of this fact is to be a free person, able to serve the world responsibly.

Our shared vision is of a world and of a human community enjoying the peace and lively hope which we believe is offered us by God. We cannot take it for granted, because we cannot take God for granted, but we can achieve it, if we live our lives with the habit of gratitude to God for his good gifts.

It is good to give thanks.



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