

Thanksgiving theologies

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The Thanksgiving holiday is a terrific time to talk theology. But some theologies make more sense when offering thanks to our loving Lord.

Whether the setting is private or public, secular or sacred, hundreds of millions express gratitude. Often, even the day's newscasts are laden with words of Holy appreciation.

For what, however, are we to thank God? What credit is due the divine? And which theologies best account for our desire to express gratitude?

Atheists

One group giving thanks consists of those who consider theology a mere form of language without a Referent. There is no Holy Reality, they say, to which their rituals relate. Theology is nothing more than anthropology. Giving thanks to God is merely an expression of a shared cognizance that life is not entirely within our control.

These folks can utter the words, "Thank you, God." But their disbelief in a Being exists to whom they should be grateful makes their theological sleight of hand far from satisfying.

A Controlling God

Many eager to express their indebtedness at Thanksgiving have ties to a second option in Christian theology. This view says God either directly or indirectly controls everything. When someone from this tradition says, "Thank you God for _____," he or she can fill the blank with any event.

Such events in that blank may be joyous and hopeful. But others are utterly evil and horrific. The God of this theology is responsible for respect and rape, peace and pain, havens and holocausts. God directly or indirectly controls everything.

Most in this theological tradition express gratitude at Thanksgiving only for events they deem good. Reminding them their view implies God is also responsible for evil dampens their holiday spirit.

Classical Free-will Theology

A third theological alternative at Thanksgiving takes the form of classical free-will theology. Those in this tradition believe they sidestep theological potholes in which other believers fall. They thank God for good and benevolent acts, while blaming free agents or natural forces for evil.

A closer look at classical free-will theology, however, reveals that the God of this theology is culpable for failing to prevent genuine evil. Classical free-will theology says God voluntarily gives freedom to others, but God essentially retains the ability to prevent genuine evils by taking that freedom away or failing to provide it in the first place.

The God with the capacity to control others entirely by either failing to provide, withdrawing, or overriding their freedom is ultimately culpable for failing to prevent dastardly deeds. Although free creatures initiate evil in classical free-will theology, the view implies that God is ultimately culpable for whatever occurs. After all, this God has the capacity to control others entirely should God so decide.

Those affirming classical free-will theologies could insert any event into the “Thank you God for _____” phrase. The God they espouse voluntarily permits free creatures to use their freedom to cause genuine evil.

Essential Kenosis Theology at Thanksgiving

A fourth option may be more adequate as the theological framework for this year's Thanksgiving prayer. I call this framework "essential kenosis," because it says God necessarily loves in each moment without ever trumping creaturely agency and/or freedom.

Essential kenosis says God's eternal nature of love includes giving freedom and/or agency to creation. Because God's nature is this kind of love, God cannot fail to provide, cannot withdraw, and cannot override the freedom and agency God necessarily gives.

Essential kenosis theology says God's loving actions in each moment present a spectrum of possibilities to each creature for response. This is not deistic theology, in which God sits uninvolved on the sidelines. God actively creates, provides, and interacts with creation.

Not only does the God of essential kenosis offer possibilities, God also calls creatures to respond to the best possibilities. Our loving Creator inspires and empowers creatures to love. Genuine evil results from the responses these creatures make contrary to God's call.

Essential kenosis theology affirms at Thanksgiving that every good and perfect gift originates in God. God alone is the source of good. But the good things we enjoy also require creatures to respond well to God's loving activity. In other words, we should thank God for being the source of goodness, but we should also thank the chef for making a great Thanksgiving meal!

Without scruples, the Christian adopting essential kenosis theology can offer thanks to God for being the source of all this good and not the one responsible for causing or allowing evil. She can also thank God for inspiring, empowering, and creating others to act in love, peace, and beauty.

A Short Thanksgiving Prayer

"Our loving God, in deepest gratitude, we thank You for the good you have done and are doing. We thank you for empowering and inspiring us to respond well to your perfect goodness. We are grateful now and forever. Amen!"

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