

THE THANKFUL ONE
ABOUT THE 35TH NAME OF ALLAH “AL-SHAKUR” -
A CONTRIBUTION TO UNDERSTAND ONE’S OWN RELIGION
BETTER AND TO AN INTERRELIGIOUS *DIALOGUE OF*
APPROCHEMENT
THROUGH A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THANKSGIVING

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One of the 99 names of God according to the Koran, Al-Shakur, at least when it is translated as 'the grateful one', is at first surprising. For gratitude appears essentially and solely to be a *creaturely virtue*. It presupposes two persons - one who is grateful and another one who is the addressee of gratitude. And the condition of being meaningfully grateful is that the grateful person has received from the giver a gift which he does not possess of himself. Moreover, the grateful person does not merely have to receive some real or apparent good from another person but has to perceive or believe to discover in the addressee of gratitude some benevolence through which the giver of the gift was motivated, *intending these gifts as objective goods for the recipient of the gift*.

For example, if the other person returns to me a gold chain that I have lost on the street but that he obviously intended to keep, returning it only out of fear of being caught by the police, because I saw him picking it up and putting in the pocket of his coat, we cannot be grateful, because the moment of benevolence is entirely absent. Even less can we be rightly grateful to a person who gives a mere seeming good that is intended to be harmful or deadly for us, like a beautiful vase with a snake inside whose bite is intended to be deadly for us, or a bottle of superb but poisoned wine.

Thus, gratitude is essentially directed both at a gift *for which* we are grateful, and to a giver, *to whom* we are grateful because of his at least minimally benevolent, and absence of any malevolent, intention. For this reason, we will thank a vendor who sells us goods with a vague wish that we may enjoy it and without malevolent intention.

Moreover, thanksgiving seems to presuppose on the part of the grateful person that he is not in possession of all the goods for which he is grateful by himself nor can buy or acquire all of them on his own, but receives goods as gifts from others, which he precisely does not possess yet.

His basic situation is that of a recipient of gifts which he does not yet possess nor could provide for himself by his own power. Such is the gift of life which we could never have given us and for which we ought to be forever grateful to our parents and

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to God, the giver of life. Without such a dependence of the grateful person on the giver, and without the latter's benevolent intention, gratitude seems to be impossible.

This is particularly true of the metaphysical gratitude for our very being, that responds to our receiving of a gift that we never could provide for ourselves and to the benevolence of the giver: a gratitude that Matthias Claudius captured in the first Stanza of the beautiful but simple poem in which every child could express his or her gratitude for existing:

Matthias Claudius, *Daily to be sung*:
 I thank God and I am as thrilled
 As a child receiving his Christmas presents,
 That I am, am! and that I have you,
 Beautiful human countenance.¹

¹ Ich danke Gott und freue mich
 Wie's Kind zur Weihnachtgabe,
 Daß ich bin, bin! Und daß ich dich,
 Schön Menschlich Antlitz! habe;

Daß ich die Sonne, Berg und Meer,
 Und Laub und Gras kann sehen,
 Und Abends unterm Sternenheer
 Und lieben Monde gehen;

Und daß mir denn zu Muthe ist,
 Als wenn wir Kinder kamen,
 Und sahen, was der heil'ge Christ
 Bescheeret hatte, Amen!

Ich danke Gott mit Saitenspiel,
 Daß ich kein König worden;
 Ich wär geschmeichelt worden viel,
 Und wär vielleicht verdorben.

Auch bet' ich ihn von Herzen an,
 Daß ich auf dieser Erde
 Nicht bin ein grosser reicher Mann,
 Und auch wohl keiner werde.

Denn Ehr' und Reichthum treibt und bläht,
 Hat mancherley Gefahren,
 Und vielen hat's das Herz verdreht,
 Die weiland wacker waren.

Und all das Geld und all das Gut
 Gewährt zwar viele Sachen;
 Gesundheit, Schlaf und guten Muth
 Kann's aber doch nicht machen.

These insights into gratitude, however, take us to the heart of the difficulty of understanding how God can be called *Al Shakur*, the THANKFUL or THE GRATEFUL ONE:

How can He who possesses all goods of and through Himself, and to whom no one has to give goods that he does not yet possess, be grateful? The absolute divine perfection seems to be *beyond* gratitude and even to exclude it. Hence, a high human virtue appears to be wholly absent from God and even not to make any sense for God because its conditions are not given in Him. Therefore, there does not seem to exist any conceivable ground for *divine gratitude*. For finitude and dependence of the grateful person on goods provided for him by others, seem to be inseparable from gratitude and to preclude that He who is infinite and possesses all goods eternally through Himself could be grateful.

This conclusion and the rejection of the name of God AL-SHAKUR, THE GRATEFUL ONE, however, is premature and will turn out to be wrong.

A Philosophical Defense of the Name of God "The Grateful One"

I wish to defend, by means of the following seven considerations, this 43rd name of God, *Al Shakur*, the Grateful One, as being a true divine perfection; moreover, I wish to show that the Christian vision of God and Man provides not only every reason to accept this name of God from the Islam, even though it appears only indirectly in the Bible, but to recognize it additionally as a divine perfection for reasons that are specific to the Christian Faith and the Revelation of the New Testament:

1. Firstly, there is a purely divine response to the good, similar to gratitude, which is expressed in an alternative translation of 'Al-Shakur' as 'the retributor', or as the "rewarder of the good". Jews, Muslims and Christians alike recognize this as a fundamental divine perfection: to be the just judge of the living and the dead, the most beautiful part of which is rewarding the good.

The name Al-Shakur, in its double meaning of the "grateful One" and the "Just retributor and awarder of the Good" draws our attention to the fact that there is a moment akin to gratitude in God's *recognition of all that is good*, which is the basis of rewarding the good. This common moment of both, namely recognition, corresponds

Und die sind doch, bey Ja und Nein!
 Ein rechter Lohn und Segen!
 Drum will ich mich nicht groß kastej'n
 Des vielen Geldes wegen.
 Gott gebe mir nur jeden Tag,
 So viel ich darf zum Leben.
 Er giebt's dem Sperling auf dem Dach;
 Wie sollt' ers mir nicht geben!

to the French word for gratitude, '*reconnaissance*'. In other words, calling God Al-Shakur makes us aware that God recognizes all that is good as good. He does not forget any single one of all good actions of a person, in the way the ungrateful person does. He knows and recognizes all good deeds a person committed, and cannot even forget but recognizes all the good thoughts and movements of the will and heart that occur in an angel's, a man's, a woman's, or a child's heart. Recognition of the good, however, is certainly both a fundamental element of gratefulness, as well as of being a retributor and awardee of the good. And this recognition God no doubt possesses in an infinitely larger measure than any human person

2. Gratitude as a Response to a Free Giver

One further step can be taken in translating and interpreting Al-Shakur as THE GRATEFUL ONE. Gratitude, after all, necessarily presupposes, in order to be meaningful, the freedom of the person to whom we give thanks: we cannot give thanks to a machine or a puppet.

Now, the same holds true for retributing for an evil deed or rewarding the good. One can neither punish nor reward a marionette. Although gratitude and thankfulness, in which we recognize and respond adequately to every gift we receive, and rewarding good persons for their good deeds, are two quite different acts and perfections, they have a deep inner relationship to which the name 'Al-Shakur' points, namely this:

In perfect gratitude, no gift, no good or benefit received by the grateful person, remains unrecognized. The same holds true for justly rewarding the good, for rewarding virtue and good deeds by bestowing happiness and high goods to good persons.

Furthermore, at the foundation of the divine recognition and giving the due reward for all good deeds and thoughts lies a perfect recognition of the free will of the person whose good deeds are recognized and awarded; in this, it resembles gratitude but exceeds it infinitely. For God alone knows and recognizes any good and free act perfectly, whereas no created grateful person is able to know the extent of freedom and goodness of a human will perfectly. Therefore, the proper ground of meaningful gratitude towards other persons is not fully and adequately known by any human being.

Perfect recognition and rewarding thus belongs only to the One, from whom alone nothing is hidden or by Whom nothing is forgotten, and hence to God alone. In the light of this limit of human knowledge of another person's inner life, we also recognize the essential imperfection of all human gratitude.

3. A third interpretation of Al-Shakur makes it understandable why God can be called by one and the same name at the same time THE GRATEFUL ONE and the RETRIBUTOR or REWARDER of all good.

In all pure human gratitude lives, as Aquinas says, an intention to requite the gifts received and an attempt to repay the one who does us some good for all that he has done, or to hope that he may receive a gift and adequate reward for his goodness from another person. In many cases we can do this ourselves: when a visitor brings us a

box of the finest handmade Mozartkugeln, we can do the same on our next visit to his family.

In the deepest forms of human gratitude, however, for example in the gratitude to our parents for the gift of life, the human recipient of this gift is powerless to requite this gift with a similar gift or to bestow on the giver an adequate reward. Therefore, if we contemplate this intention of the grateful person of which Aquinas speaks, we come to see a cause of pain and of a transcendent desire: The intention of the grateful person to requite a gift perfectly remains frustrated in the deepest forms of human gratitude. Therefore, the ray of gratitude always aims at a reality of persons beyond my impotent self and beyond the intersubjective human world as a whole, namely at God as Al-Shakur who alone can give and exceed what I desire to give to my parents and benefactors.

The limits of our power to requite gifts adequately is often expressed in the very words used in thanksgiving, for instance in the common German expression of thanksgiving: "vergelts Gott" (*may God reward you*). The glorious aria of Florestan in Beethoven's *Fidelio* to his wife Leonore, who, in the robe of a man, visits him in prison and offers him a drink, expresses in text and tone this transcendent direction of a gratitude of the person incapable of adequately requiting the gift received: *Euch werde Lohn in bessern Welten* (*May you be rewarded in better worlds*).

Also, when not any longer in prison, but freed by his wife's courage and a constellation of favorable circumstances, Florestan's gratitude desires an adequate retribution that he cannot ever give and that cannot be given on earth in its fullness. Therefore, he desires that his wife, who risked her life to save his, be rewarded "in a better world."

Thus, God is precisely the one who, as it were, perfectly fulfils the intention of the grateful human person, when He, through a reward in the next life, acts as the eternal rewarder of the good, retributes *all the good* which our benefactors to whom we are grateful have bestowed on us, and which they deserve. Thus, God as the rewarder of all good, provides the fulfilment of human gratitude: He alone is and can be that rewarder of all merits and benefits which the grateful person desires and intends in the innermost intentional direction of gratitude, when he expresses his gratitude precisely with the word "vergelts (vergelte es) Gott!" (*may God reward you for it*).

4. A fourth interpretation of Al-Shakur both in an Islamic and Christian Perspective: God is grateful "in the name of persons who receive gifts from others"

God is so full of mercy and love that, as it were, in the name of all those to whom others have done good, He thanks their benefactors. In this sense, GOD is the arch-grateful one: Even when the human recipient of another person's love and gifts is ungrateful, God gives thanks to the giver of goods in the name of all recipients of his kindness. This dimension of divine gratitude is present whenever he rewards a person for having been kind to another one.

This can only be fully understood from the deep transcendence of the benevolence of love, of the *intentio benevolentiae*, which desires all goods for the beloved person. This benevolence of love participates so deeply in the *innermost being of other* persons that it affirms everything that is *good for the other person from*

the point of view that it is an objective good *for the other person*. From the same source flows thanking those who have acted kindly toward others. We encounter here the purest gratitude of the purest love.

And this gratitude can very logically be also a divine virtue. In a wonderful way, Ezard Schaper has described, in his narrative *The Fourth King*, this supreme gift of self of the fourth, Russian, king who accompanied Caspar, Melchior, and Baltazar from the orient on their trip to Bethlehem, but got impoverished and delayed on his way to Bethlehem by the many good works he did during his voyage. Therefore, he arrived in Jerusalem only on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, 33 years after the three other kings and had given away to them needy all his possessions that he had taken with himself and that had been intended as gifts to the newborn king. And yet the gift of the fourth king's love for the many poor people he encountered on his way to where the star led him, was no less, possibly even more, appreciated by Jesus when he received him already hanging on the cross and he thanked him more than he thanked the other three kings.

The 35th name of God seems to imply just this kindness in God: God thanks us in solidarity with all those people to whom we have done something good.

5. A fifth interpretation of Al-Shakur is only possible in the light of Christian faith in the God-Man, in the incarnation of the Son of God, who remaining fully God, assumed fully the human nature into his same identical divine person:

Though God's thanking the good persons for the good they have done to others is also acknowledged in Jewish and Islamic mysticism, from the perspective of the Christian faith it gains a completely new concreteness and this gratitude becomes even more real and tangible if God has made Himself man; if, by the superabundant love which made God, the Second Divine Person, the eternal Son of God-Father, become flesh, i.e., assume the human nature in his divine person, God receives gifts in his humanity, for which He is grateful, as any other man: By the mystery of His incarnation, God not only exposed Himself to the evil of cruelty and death, thus expiating the sins of all humanity, but also opened himself to receive relief, love and consolation from men. Therefore, God can also give thanks in the humanity of Jesus Christ, of the God-Man, for all the good that He was given when dwelling on earth; he can thank Veronica for giving Him her veil to wipe off his blood; he can thank Simon of Cyrene for helping Him carry the cross.

6. Love and Gratitude for the indirect objective good for God, because it is a Good for man: "*And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*"

This gratitude of the purest love leads to a sixth interpretation of what can be meant by divine gratitude: namely, a still further solidarity born of love's ardent interest in what is good for the beloved person to such a degree that everything that is good or bad for the beloved person is experienced as something that, because it is good or bad for the beloved person, is also indirectly good or bad for one's own

person.² We find this profound phenomenon in human love, and it involves a unique transcendence of warm benevolent interest in the other person. We thank a physician, for example, for all the good he did to restore the health or save the life of our wife or husband, of our child or grandchild, and we experience these gifts, *because they are gifts for the beloved person, as gifts for ourselves.*³

This ultimate solidarity of God with all who give and receive benefits could be expressed by saying that God thanks all who bestow benefits on other persons as if these benefits had been bestowed on Himself.

The profound philosophical insights of Hildebrand⁴ into the “indirect objective good for the person” can help us to understand those mysterious words that express these same truths and that, according to the Gospel, God himself will speak to the good.

Besides the direct gratitude for gifts he received when dwelling on earth, in the overflowing love in which He loves His human brothers and sisters, Christ can thank their benefactors as if these goods had been given to Him Himself. For the love of them and loving solidarity with them, He reckons all love and gifts given them by others as love and gifts for Himself, as this is expressed in the words of Jesus:

31 When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

33 And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

² Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*; Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Gesammelte Werke* III (Regensburg: J. Habel, 1971), *The Nature of Love* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2009), ch. 7, and my paper “Dietrich von Hildebrand on Benevolence in Love and Friendship: A Masterful Contribution to Perennial Philosophy,” in *Journal of Philosophical Inquiry and Discussion: Selected Papers on the Philosophy of Dietrich von Hildebrand, Quaestiones Disputatae* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 85–106. Also audio/video registration <http://www.hildebrandlegacy.org/main.cfm?r1=7.50&r2=1.00&r3=1.00&r4=0.00&id=109&level=3>.

³ See on this feature of love the marvelous chapter 7 of Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, trans. John F. Crosby with John Henry Crosby (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2009). See also Josef Seifert, “From a Phenomenology of Gratitude to a Personalistic Metaphysics,” in: Stephen Schwarz and Fritz Wenisch (Ed.), *Values and Human Experience. Essays in Honor of the Memory of Balduin Schwarz* (New York/Washington D.C., etc.: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 29-50; the same author, “Dietrich von Hildebrand on Benevolence in Love and Friendship: A Masterful Contribution to Perennial Philosophy,” in *Journal of Philosophical Inquiry and Discussion: Selected Papers on the Philosophy of Dietrich von Hildebrand, Quaestiones Disputatae* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 85–106. Also audio/video registration: <http://www.hildebrandlegacy.org/main.cfm?r1=7.50&r2=1.00&r3=1.00&r4=0.00&id=109&level=3>

⁴ See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, cit., and my book, *True Love*. (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 2015).

34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:
 35 For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:
 36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.
 37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?
 38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?
 39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?
 40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matthew 25:31-40).

The profound philosophical insights of Hildebrand⁵ into the “indirect objective good for the person” can help us to understand those mysterious words that express the same truths and that, according to the Gospel, God himself will speak to the good.

7. A final and the deepest interpretation of God as the Al-Shakur in the Perspective of Christian Faith

In the perspective of Christian faith, one could ask whether this attribute attributed to God by the Qur’an belongs to God exclusively in relation ad extra, that is, to creatures, or whether it is intrinsic to Him, as an innermost pure perfection of His own being. This seems to be essentially impossible if God is only a single person. Then he cannot thank himself. For it is impossible for a person to thank himself. Gratitude is always an other-person directed act, in which we acknowledge and respond to the good that has been bestowed on us by another person. Within the framework of a unipersonal monotheism, then, this meaning of Al-Shakur cannot be perceived. The Christian faith, on the other hand, allows us to recognize gratitude also as a purely *inner-divine perfection*, in which the Son gives thanks to the Father for his eternal love and begetting Him both freely and necessarily, the Father gives Thanks to the Son for his free and infinite requiting of the Father’s Love, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, is eternally grateful to both them; and these again to him in the infinite loving community of three persons who are ONE SINGLE GOD. The eternal circle of giving and receiving grateful love is then complete in God Himself and the divine mutual love, gratitude, remembrance, and requital of all good live eternally in the Trinitarian God Himself as the One who deserves the name THE GREATEFUL ONE - AL-SHAKUR - as no one else does.

⁵ See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, cit., and my book, *True Love*. (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 2015).