



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

North American Philosophical Publications

---

Petitionary Prayer

Author(s): Eleonore Stump

Source: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Apr., 1979), pp. 81-91

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#) on behalf of the [North American Philosophical Publications](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009745>

Accessed: 16/01/2015 20:24

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



University of Illinois Press and North American Philosophical Publications are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## I. PETITIONARY PRAYER

ELEONORE STUMP

ORDINARY Christian believers of every period have in general taken prayer to be fundamentally a request made of God for something specific believed to be good by the one praying. The technical name for such prayer is "impetration"; I am going to refer to it by the more familiar designation "petitionary prayer." There are, of course, many important kinds of prayer which are not requests; for example, most of what is sometimes called "the higher sort of prayer"—praise, adoration, thanksgiving—does not consist in requests and is not included under petitionary prayer. But basic, common petitionary prayer poses problems that do not arise in connection with the more contemplative varieties of prayer, and it is petitionary prayer with its special problems that I want to examine in this paper.

Of those problems, the one that has perhaps been most discussed in the recent literature is the connection between petitionary prayer and miracles. For instance, if one believes in divine response to petitionary prayer, is one thereby committed to a belief in miracles? But as much as possible I want to avoid this issue (and several others involving petitionary prayer<sup>1</sup>) in order to concentrate on just one problem. It is, I think, the problem stemming from petitionary prayer which has most often occurred to ordinary Christian believers from the Patristic period to the present. Discussion of it can be found, for example, in Origen's third-century treatise on prayer,<sup>2</sup> in various writings of Aquinas,<sup>3</sup> and, very recently, in a book by Keith Ward.<sup>4</sup>

Put roughly and succinctly, the problem comes to this: is a belief in the efficacy and usefulness of petitionary prayer consistent with a belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God? It is, therefore, a problem only on certain assumptions drawn from an ordinary, orthodox, traditional view

of God and of petitionary prayer. If one thinks, for example, as D. Z. Philipps does,<sup>5</sup> that all "real" petitionary prayer is reducible to the petition "Thy will be done," then the problem I want to discuss evaporates. And if one thinks of God as the unknowable, non-denumerable, ultimate reality, which is not an entity at all, as Keith Ward does,<sup>6</sup> the problem I am interested in does not even arise. The cases which concern me in this paper are those in which someone praying a petitionary prayer makes a specific request freely (at least in his own view) of an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God, conceived of in the traditional orthodox way. I am specifying that the prayers are made freely because I want to discuss this problem on the assumption that man has free will and that not everything is predetermined. I am making this assumption, first because I want to examine the problem of petitionary prayer as it arises for ordinary Christian believers, and I think their understanding of the problem typically includes the assumption that man has free will, and secondly because adopting the opposite view enormously complicates the attempt to understand and justify petitionary prayer. If all things are predetermined—and worse, if they are all predetermined by the omnipotent and omniscient God to whom one is praying—it is much harder to conceive of a satisfactory justification for petitionary prayer. One consequence of my making this assumption is that I will not be drawing on important traditional Protestant accounts of prayer such as those given by Calvin and Luther, for instance, since while they may be thoughtful, interesting accounts, they assume God's complete determination of everything.

I think that I can most effectively and plausibly show the problem which interests me by presenting a sketchy analysis of the Lord's Prayer. It is a prayer attributed to Christ himself, who is supposed to have

<sup>1</sup> For a good recent account of the problem of petitionary prayer and miracles, see Robert Young, "Petitioning God," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 11 (1974), pp. 193–201. Other issues I intend to avoid include Peter Geach's worries about prayer for events in the past in *God and the Soul* (London, 1969), pp. 89 ff., and about "certain tensed propositions about the divine will . . . in connexion with prayer" (*op. cit.*, p. 97).

<sup>2</sup> Eric George Jay, *Origen's Treatise on Prayer* (London, 1954), vols. V–VI, pp. 92–103.

<sup>3</sup> Most notably, *Summa theologiae*, 2a–2ae, 83, 1–17; *Summa contra gentiles*, I.III. 95–96; *In IV. Sent.*, dist. XV, q. 4, a. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *The Concept of God* (New York, 1974), pp. 221–222. Ward introduces the problem only as an embarrassment for what he calls "Thomistic" theology. Cf my review in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 86 (1977), pp. 398–404.

<sup>5</sup> *The Concept of Prayer* (New York, 1966), pp. 112 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *The Concept of God* (*op. cit.*), pp. 62, 101, 111, and 185.

produced it just for the purpose of teaching his disciples how they ought to pray. So it is an example of prayer which orthodox Christians accept as a paradigm, and it is, furthermore, a clear instance of petitionary prayer. Consequently, it is a particularly good example for my purposes. In what follows, I want to make clear, I am not concerned either to take account of contemporary Biblical exegesis or to contribute to it. I want simply to have a look at the prayer—in fact, at only half the prayer—as it is heard and prayed by ordinary twentieth-century Christians.

As the prayer is given in Luke 11, it contains seven requests. The last four have to do with the personal needs of those praying, but the first three are requests of a broader sort.

The first, “Hallowed be thy name,” is commonly taken as a request that God’s name be regarded as holy.<sup>7</sup> I am not sure what it means to regard God’s name as holy, and I want to avoid worries about the notion of having attitudes towards God’s *name*. All the same, I think something of the following sort is a sensible interpretation of the request. The common Biblical notion of holiness has at its root a sense of strong separateness.<sup>8</sup> And it may be that to regard God’s name as holy is only to react to it very differently from the way in which one reacts to any other name—and that could happen because it seems specially precious or also (for example) because it seems specially feared. On this understanding of the request, it would be fulfilled if everyone (or almost everyone) took a strongly emotional and respectful attitude towards God’s name. But it may be that this is too complicated as an interpretation of the request, and that to regard God’s name as holy is simply to love and revere it. In that case, the request is fulfilled if everyone or almost everyone regards God’s name very reverentially. And there are New Testament passages which foretell states of affairs fulfilling both these interpretations of the request—prophesying a time at or near the end of the world when all men fear or love God’s name, and a time when the inhabitants of earth are all dedicated followers of God.<sup>9</sup>

The second request in the Lord’s Prayer is that God’s kingdom come. Now according to orthodox

Judaeo-Christian beliefs, God is and always has been ruler of the world. What then does it mean to ask for the advent of his kingdom? Plainly, there is at least some sense in which the kingdom of heaven has not yet been established on earth and can be waited and hoped for. And this request seems to be for those millennial times when everything on earth goes as it ought to go, when men beat their swords into plowshares (Is. 2:4) and the wolf dwells at peace with the lamb (Is. 11:6, 65:25). This too, then, is a request for a certain state of affairs involving all or most men, the state of affairs at the end of the world prophesied under one or another description in Old and New Testament passages (cf., e.g., Rev. 21:1–4).

And it seems closely related to the object of the third request, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” There is, of course, a sense in which, according to Christian doctrine, God’s will is always done on earth. But that is the sense in which God allows things to happen as they do (God’s so-called “permissive will”). God permits certain people to have evil intentions, he permits certain people to commit crimes, and so on, so that he wills to let happen what does happen; and in this sense his will is always done. But in heaven, according to Christian doctrine, it is not that God permits what occurs to occur, and so wills in accordance with what happens, but rather that what happens happens in accordance with his will. So only the perfect good willed unconditionally by God is ever done in heaven. For God’s will to be done on earth in such a way, everyone on earth would always have to do only good. This request, then, seems to be another way of asking for the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth; and it also seems linked with certain New Testament prophecies—there will be a “new earth,” and the righteous meek will inherit it (cf., e.g., Mt. 5:5 and Rev. 5:10 and 21:1–4).

What I think is most worth noticing in this context about all three of these first requests of the Lord’s Prayer is that it seems absolutely pointless, futile, and absurd to make them. All three seem to be requests for the millennium or for God’s full reign on earth. But it appears from New Testament prophecies that God has already determined to bring about such a state of

<sup>7</sup> Cf., for example, the similar understanding of this petition in two very different theologians: Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospels*, Sermon 6; and Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. xx. 41.

<sup>8</sup> The most common Old Testament word for “holy” and its correlates is some form of “*kādāsh*,” the basic, literal meaning of which is separation, withdrawal, or state of being set apart; cf. Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. In the New Testament, the most frequently used word is “*hagiazō*” and its correlates, the basic meaning of which also includes the notion of being separate and being set apart; cf. Thayer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament*, and Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., e.g., Is. 2: 2–21, 45: 23, and 65: 23; Matt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21; and Rev. 6: 15–17.

affairs in the future. And if God has predetermined that there will be such a time, then what is asked for in those three requests is already sure to come. But, then, what is the point of making the prayer? Why ask for something that is certain to come whether you beg for it or flee from it? It is no answer to these questions to say, as some theologians have done,<sup>10</sup> that one prays in this way just because Jesus prescribed such a prayer. That attempt at an answer simply transfers responsibility for the futile action from the one praying to the one being prayed to; it says nothing about what sense there is in the prayer itself. On the other hand, if, contrary to theological appearances, the things prayed for are not predetermined and their occurrence or nonoccurrence is still in doubt, *could* the issue possibly be resolved by someone's asking for one or another outcome? If Jimmy Carter, say, (or some other Christian) does not ask for God's kingdom to come, will God therefore fail to establish it? Or will he establish it *just because* Jimmy Carter asked for it, though he would not have done so otherwise? Even Carter's staunchest supporters might well find it frightening to think so; and yet if we do not answer these questions in the affirmative, the prayer seems futile and pointless. So either an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God has predetermined this state of affairs or he hasn't; and either way, asking for it seems to make no sense. This conclusion is applicable to other cases of petitionary prayer as well. To take just one example, suppose that Jimmy Carter prays the altruistic and Christian prayer that a particular atheistic friend of his be converted and so saved from everlasting damnation. If it is in God's power to save that man, won't he do so without Jimmy Carter's prayers? Won't a perfectly good God do all the good he can no matter what anyone prays for or does not pray for? Consequently, either God of his goodness will save the man in any case, so that the prayer is pointless, or there is some point in the prayer but God's goodness appears impugned.

We can, I think, generalize these arguments to all petitionary prayer by means of a variation on the argument from evil against God's existence.<sup>11</sup> (The argument that follows does not seem to me to be an acceptable one, but it is the sort of argument that underlies the objections to petitionary prayer which I have been presenting. I will say something about

what I think are the flaws in this argument later in the paper.)

- (1) A perfectly good being never makes the world worse than it would otherwise be if he can avoid doing so.

The phrase "than it would otherwise be" here should be construed as "than the world would have been had he not brought about or omitted to bring about some state of affairs." In other words, a perfectly good being never makes the world, in virtue of what he himself does or omits to do, worse than it would have been had he not done or omitted to do something or other. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same remarks apply to "than it would otherwise be" in (4) and (7) below.

- (2) An omniscient and omnipotent being can avoid doing anything which it is not logically necessary for him to do.

- ∴ (3) An omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being never makes the world worse than it would otherwise be unless it is logically necessary for him to do so. (1, 2)

- (4) A perfectly good being always makes the world better than it would otherwise be if he can do so.

- (5) An omniscient and omnipotent being can do anything which it is not logically impossible for him to do.

- ∴ (6) An omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being always makes the world better than it would otherwise be unless it is logically impossible for him to do so. (4, 5)

- (7) It is never logically necessary for an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being to make the world worse than it would otherwise be; it is never logically impossible for an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being to make the world better than it would otherwise be.

- ∴ (8) An omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being never makes the world worse than it would otherwise be and always makes the world better than it would otherwise be. (3, 6, 7)

This subconclusion implies that unless the world is infinitely improvable, either the world is or will be absolutely perfect or there is no omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being. In other words, (8) with the addition of a pair of premisses—

- (i) The world is not infinitely improvable

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* pt. III. 169. Luther's argument for prayer has more force in the context of the catechism than it does in the context of a philosophical discussion, because Luther's purpose there is the practical one of blocking what he understands as believers' *excuses* for not praying.

<sup>11</sup> My approach to the argument from evil, which underlies the following argument, owes a good deal to Carl Ginet and Norman Kretzmann.

and

- (ii) It is not the case that the world is or will be absolutely perfect (i.e., there is and always will be evil in the world)—

implies the conclusion of the argument from evil. That is not a surprising result since this argument is dependent on the argument from evil.<sup>12</sup>

- (9) What is requested in every petitionary prayer is or results in a state of affairs the realization of which would make the world either worse or better than it would otherwise be (that is, than it would have been had that state of affairs not been realized).

It is not always clear whether a petitionary prayer is requesting just an earthly state of affairs, or God's bringing about that earthly state of affairs. So, for example, when a mother prays for the health of her sick son, it is not always clear whether she is requesting simply the health of her son or God's restoration of the health of her son. If we can determine the nature of the request on the basis of what the one praying desires and hopes to get by means of prayer, then at least in most cases the request will be just for some earthly state of affairs. What is important to the mother is simply her son's getting well. For a case in which the request is for God's bringing about some earthly state of affairs, we might consider Gideon's prayer concerning the fleece, discussed below. In any event, I intend "state of affairs" in this argument to range broadly enough to cover both sorts of cases.

- ∴ (10) If what is requested in a petitionary prayer is or results in a state of affairs the realization of which would make the world worse than it would otherwise be, an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being will not fulfill that request. (8)
- ∴ (11) If what is requested in a petitionary prayer is or results in a state of affairs the realization of which would make the world better than it would otherwise be, an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being will bring about that state of affairs even if no prayer for its realization has been made. (8)

It might occur to someone here that what is requested in at least some petitionary prayers is that God bring about a certain state of affairs *in response to the particular petitionary prayer being made*. In such cases, of course, it is logically impossible that God bring about what is requested in the petitionary prayer in the absence of that petitionary prayer. It is not clear to me that there

are such cases. The familiar entreaties such as "Hear the voice of my supplications" (Ps. 28:2) in the Psalms seem to me not to be cases of the relevant sort, because they seem to be an elaborate "Please" rather than anything influencing the nature of what is requested in the prayer. Perhaps one of the best candidates for such a case is Gideon's prayer about the fleece: "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, I will put a fleece of wool on the floor and if the dew is on the fleece only and it is dry on all the earth, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said" (Judges 6:36–37; cf. also 6:39). Gideon here is requesting that God give him a sign by means of the fleece of wool. Does his prayer amount to a request that God produce dew only on the fleece and not on the surrounding ground, or does it come to a request that God do so in response to Gideon's prayer? If there are cases in which the request implicitly or explicitly includes reference to the prayer itself, then in those cases the inference from (8) to (11) is not valid; and such cases ought simply to be excluded from consideration in this argument.

∴ (12) Petitionary prayer effects no change. (9, 10, 11)

There is, of course, a sense in which the offering of a prayer is itself a new state of affairs and accompanies or results in natural, psychological changes in the one praying, but step (12) ought to be understood as saying that no prayer is itself efficacious in causing a change of the sort it was designed to cause. An argument which might be thought to apply here, invalidating the inference to the conclusion (13), is that prayer need not effect any change in order to be considered efficacious, provided the offering of the prayer itself is a sufficient reason in God's view for God's fulfilment of the prayer.<sup>13</sup> In other words, if, for certain reasons apart from consideration of a prayer for a state of affairs *S*, God has determined to bring about *S*, a prayer for *S* may still be considered to be efficacious if and only if God would have brought about *S* just in response to the prayer for *S*. But I think that even if this view is correct, it does not in fact invalidate the inference to (13). There is a difference between being efficacious and having a point. This argument about the efficacy of prayer seems to assume that not all answers to prayer will be of the overdetermined type. And as long as a believer is not in a position to know which states of affairs are divinely determined to occur regardless of prayers,

<sup>12</sup> There is a noteworthy difference between (ii) and the premiss ordinarily supplied in its stead in arguments from evil, namely, (ii') "There is evil in the world". The difference suggests a way to develop an alternative or at least an addition to the standard free will defense against the argument from evil.

<sup>13</sup> See Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality* (New York, 1971), pp. 287–292.



there is some point in petitionary prayer—any given case may be one in which God would not have brought about the desired state of affairs without prayer for it. But if it is the case for every fulfilled prayer that God would have brought about the desired state of affairs without the prayer, it does seem that there is no point in petitionary prayer, except for those cases (which I think must at best form a very small minority) in which the real object of the one praying a petitionary prayer is not so much to see the realization of the state of affairs he is requesting as to have some influence on or contact with the Deity by means of petitionary prayer; and such cases may then simply be excepted from the conclusion of the argument.

∴ (13) Petitionary prayer is pointless. (12)

The basic strategy of this argument is an attempt to show that there is an inconsistency between God's goodness and the efficacy of petitionary prayer; but it is possible to begin with other divine attributes and make a case for a similar inconsistency, so that we can have other, very different arguments to the same conclusion, namely, that petitionary prayer is pointless. Perhaps the most formidable of such alternative arguments is the one based on God's immutability, an argument the strategy of which can be roughly summarized in this way. Before a certain petitionary prayer is made, it is the case either that God will bring about the state of affairs requested in the prayer or that he will not bring it about. He cannot have left the matter open since doing so would imply a subsequent change in him and he is immutable. Either way, since he is immutable, the prayer itself can effect no change in the state of affairs and hence is pointless. Even leaving aside problems of foreknowledge and free will to which this argument (or attempted objections to it) may give rise, I think that orthodox theology will find no real threat in the argument because of the doctrine of God's eternity. However problematic that doctrine may be in itself, it undercuts arguments such as this one because it maintains God's atemporality.<sup>14</sup> My thirteen-step argument against petitionary prayer is, then, not the only argument rejecting petitionary prayer on theistic principles, but it (or some argument along the same lines) does, I think, make the strongest case against petitionary prayer, given Christian doctrine.

The premiss that is most likely to appear false in the

argument, at first reading, is (9) because one is inclined to think that there are many petitionary prayers which, if they are granted, would not make the world either better or worse than it would otherwise be. Such a view might be accommodated without damaging the argument simply by weakening (9) and the conclusion: many petitionary prayers, and surely the most important ones, are such that if fulfilled they make the world either a better or a worse place. But I think it is possible to argue plausibly for (9) in the strong form I have given it. Take, for instance, the case of a little boy who prays for a jack-knife. Here, we might think, we have an example of a petitionary prayer the fulfilment of which makes the world neither better nor worse. But, on the one hand, if the little boy has prayed for a jack-knife, surely he will be happier if he gets it, either because he very much wants a jack-knife or because God has honored his request. Consequently, one could argue that fulfilling the request makes the world better in virtue of making the one praying happier. Or, on the other hand, if we think of the little boy's prayer for a jack-knife from God's point of view, then we see that fulfilment of the prayer involves not just the little boy's acquiring a jack-knife but also God's bringing it about in answer to prayer that the little boy acquire a jack-knife. Fulfilling the prayer, then, will have an influence on at least the little boy's religious beliefs and perhaps also on those of his parents and even on those of the people in his parents' community. One might argue that the influence in this case would be deleterious (since it is conducive to wrong views of the purpose of prayer and of relationship with God), and consequently that fulfilling this prayer would make the world a worse place than it would otherwise be. So I think it is possible to argue plausibly that the fulfilment of even such a prayer would make the world either a worse or a better place.

Christian literature contains a number of discussions of the problem with petitionary prayer and various attempts to solve it. For the sake of brevity, I want to look just at the proposed solution Aquinas gives. It is the most philosophically sophisticated of the solutions I know; and in the wake of the twentieth-century revival of Thomism, it is the solution adopted by many theologians and theistic philosophers today.<sup>15</sup> Thomas discusses problems of petitionary prayer in his *Sentences* commentary and in the *Summa contra gentiles*,<sup>16</sup> but the clearest exposition of his views

<sup>14</sup> Norman Kretzmann and I examine the concept of eternity in ancient and medieval metaphysics and theology in our forthcoming book on that subject, attending particularly to the usefulness of the concept in resolving certain problems in rational theology.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the articles on prayer in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* and *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

<sup>16</sup> See *In IV. Sent.*, dist. XV, q.4, a.1, and *Summa contra gentiles*, I. III. 95–96.

is in the question on prayer in the *Summa theologiae*, where he devotes an entire article to showing that there is sense and usefulness in petitionary prayer.<sup>17</sup> The basic argument he relies on to rebut various objections against the usefulness of prayer is this. Divine Providence determines not only what effects there will be in the world, but also what causes will give rise to those effects and in what order they will do so. Now human actions, too, are causes. “For,” Thomas says, “we pray not in order to change the divine disposition but for the sake of acquiring by petitionary prayer what God has disposed to be achieved by prayer.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the first worry which this argument occasions stems from the appearance of theological determinism in it: God determines not only what effects there will be but also what the causes of those effects will be and in what order the effects will be produced. It is hard to see how such a belief is compatible with freedom of the will. In the preamble to this argument, however, Thomas says he is concerned *not* to deny free will but, on the contrary, to give an account of prayer which preserves free will. So I want simply to assume that he has in mind some distinction or some theory which shows that, despite appearances, his argument is not committed to a thorough-going determinism, and I am going to ignore any troubles in the argument having to do with the compatibility of predestination or foreknowledge and free will.

For present purposes, what is more troublesome about this argument is that it does not provide any real help with the problem it means to solve. According to Thomas, there is nothing absurd or futile about praying to God, given God’s nature, because God has by his providence arranged things so that free human actions and human prayers will form part of the chain of cause and effect leading to the state of the world ordained in God’s plan. And so, on Thomas’s view, prayer should not be thought of as an attempt to get God to do something which he would not otherwise do but rather as an effort to produce an appropriate and preordained cause which will result in certain effects since God in his providence has determined things to be so. Now surely there can be no doubt that, according to Christian doctrine, God

wants men to pray and answers prayers; and consequently it is plain that God’s plan for the world includes human prayers as causes of certain effects. The difficulty lies in explaining how such a doctrine makes sense. Why should prayers be included in God’s plan as causes of certain effects? And what sense is there in the notion that a perfect and unchangeable God, who disposes and plans everything, fulfills men’s prayers asking him to do one thing or another? Thomas’s argument, I think, gives no help with these questions and so gives no help with this problem of petitionary prayer.

This argument of Thomas’s is roughly similar in basic strategy to other traditional arguments for prayer<sup>19</sup> and is furthermore among the most fully developed and sophisticated arguments for prayer, but it seems to me inadequate to make sense of petitionary prayer. I think, then, that it is worthwhile exploring a sort of argument different from those that stress the connection between God’s omniscience or providence and men’s prayers. In what follows I want to offer a tentative and preliminary sketch of the way in which such an argument might go.

Judaeo-Christian concepts of God commonly represent God as loving mankind and wanting to be loved by men in return. Such anthropomorphic talk is in sharp contrast to the more sophisticated-sounding language of the Hellenized and scholastic arguments considered so far. But a certain sort of anthropomorphism is as much a part of Christianity as is Thomas’s “perfect being theology,”<sup>20</sup> and it, too, builds on intricate philosophical analysis, beginning perhaps with Boethius’s attempt in *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium* to explain what it means to say of something that it is a person. So to say that God loves men and wants to be loved in return is to say something that has a place in philosophical theology and is indispensable to Christian doctrine. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the type of loving relationship wanted between man and God is represented by various images, for example, sometimes as the relationship between husband and wife, sometimes as that between father and child. And sometimes (in the Gospel of John, for instance) it is also represented as the relationship between true friends.<sup>21</sup> But if the relationship between God and human beings is to be

<sup>17</sup> See 2a–2ae, q. 83, a.2.

<sup>18</sup> See reply, a.2. “*Non enim propter hoc oramus ut divinam dispositionem immutemus: sed ut id impetremus quod Deus disposuit per orationes sanctorum implendum . . .*”

<sup>19</sup> Cf., e.g., Origen, *op. cit.*, and Augustine, *City of God*, Bk.V, ix.

<sup>20</sup> Plainly, a good deal of skilful work is needed to weave such anthropomorphism and scholastic theology into one harmonious whole. The problem is, of course, given lengthy, detailed treatment in various scholastic writings, including Thomas’s *Summa theologiae*.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Jn. 15: 12–15.

one which at least sometimes can be accurately represented as the love of true friendship, then there is a problem for both parties to the relationship, because plainly it will not be easy for there to be friendship between an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good person and a fallible, finite, imperfect person. The troubles of generating and maintaining friendship in such a case are surely the perfect paradigms of which the troubles of friendship between a Rockefeller child and a slum child are just pale copies. Whatever other troubles there are for friendship in these cases, there are at least two dangers for the disadvantaged or inferior member of the pair. First, he can be so overcome by the advantages or superiority of his "friend" that he becomes simply a shadowy reflection of the other's personality, a slavish follower who slowly loses all sense of his own tastes and desires and will. Some people, of course, believe that just this sort of attitude towards God is what Christianity wants and gets from the best of its adherents; but I think that such a belief goes counter to the spirit of the Gospels, for example, and I don't think that it can be found even in such intense mystics as St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross. Secondly, in addition to the danger of becoming completely dominated, there is the danger of becoming spoiled in the way that members of a royal family in a ruling house are subject to. Because of the power at their disposal in virtue of their connections, they often become tyrannical, willful, indolent, self-indulgent, and the like. The greater the discrepancy in status and condition between the two friends, the greater the danger of even inadvertently overwhelming and oppressing or overwhelming and spoiling the lesser member of the pair; and if he is overwhelmed in either of these ways, the result will be replacement of whatever kind of friendship there might have been with one or another sort of using. Either the superior member of the pair will use the lesser as his lackey, or the lesser will use the superior as his personal power source. To put it succinctly, then, if God wants some kind of true friendship with men, he will have to find a way of guarding against both kinds of overwhelming.

It might occur to someone to think that even if we assume the view that God wants friendship between himself and human beings, it does not follow that he will have any of the problems just sketched, because

he is omnipotent.<sup>22</sup> If he wants friendship of this sort with men, one might suppose, let him just will it and it will be his. I do not want to stop here to argue against this view in detail, but I do want just to suggest that there is reason for thinking it to be incoherent, at least on the assumption of free will adopted at the beginning of this paper, because it is hard to see how God could bring about such a friendship magically, by means of his omnipotence, and yet permit the people involved to have free will. If he could do so, he could make a person freely love him in the right sort of way, and it does not seem reasonable to think he could do so.<sup>23</sup> On the face of it, then, omnipotence alone does not do away with the two dangers for friendship that I sketched above. But the institution of petitionary prayer, I think, can be understood as a safeguard against these dangers.

It is easiest to argue that petitionary prayer serves such a function in the case of a man who prays for himself. In praying for himself, he makes an explicit request for help, and he thereby acknowledges a need or a desire and his dependence on God for satisfying that need or desire. If he gets what he prayed for, he will be in a position to attribute his good fortune to God's doing and to be grateful to God for what God has given him. If we add the undeniable uncertainty of his getting what he prays for, then we will have safeguards against what I will call (for lack of a better phrase) overwhelming spoiling. These conditions make the act of asking a safeguard against tyrannical and self-indulgent pride, even if the one praying thinks of himself grandly as having God on his side.

We can see how the asking guards against the second danger, of oppressive overwhelming, if we look for a moment at the function of roughly similar asking for help when both the one asking and the one asked are human beings. Suppose a teacher sees that one of his students is avoiding writing a paper and is thereby storing up trouble for himself at the end of the term. And suppose that the student *asks* the teacher for extra help in organizing working time and scheduling the various parts of the work. In that case I think the teacher can without any problem give the student what he needs, provided, of course, that the teacher is willing to do as much for any other student, and so on. But suppose, on the other hand, that the student does not ask the teacher for help and that the

<sup>22</sup> I want to avoid detailed discussion of the various controversies over omnipotence. For present purposes, I will take this as a rough definition of omnipotence: a being is omnipotent if and only if he can do anything which it is not logically impossible for him to do and if he can avoid doing anything which it is not logically necessary for him to do.

<sup>23</sup> Controversy over this point is related to the more general controversy over whether or not it is possible for an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God to create men who would on every occasion freely do what is right. For a discussion of that general controversy and arguments that it is not possible for God to do so, see Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, 1967), pp. 132-148; I am in agreement with the general tenor of Plantinga's remarks in that section of his book.



teacher instead calls the student at home and simply presents him with the help he needs in scheduling and discipline. The teacher's proposals in that case are more than likely to strike the student as meddling interference, and he is likely to respond with more or less polite variations on "Who asked you?" and "Mind your own business." Those responses, I think, are healthy and just. If the student were having ordinary difficulties getting his work done and yet docilely and submissively accepted the teacher's unrequested scheduling of his time, he would have taken the first step in the direction of unhealthy passivity towards his teacher. And if he and his teacher developed that sort of relationship, he could end by becoming a lackey-like reflection of his teacher. Bestowing at least some benefits only in response to requests for them is a safeguard against such an outcome when the members of the relationship are not equally balanced.

It becomes much harder to argue for this defense of prayer as soon as the complexity of the case is increased even just a little. Take, for example, Monica's praying for her son Augustine. There is nothing in Monica's praying for Augustine which shows that *Augustine* recognizes that he has a need for God's help or that *he* will be grateful if God gives him what *Monica* prays for. Nor is it plain that *Monica's* asking shields Augustine from oppressive overwhelming by God. So it seems as if the previous arguments fail in this case. But consider again the case in which a teacher sees that a student of his could use help but does not feel that he can legitimately volunteer his help unasked. Suppose that John, a friend of that student, comes to see the teacher and says, "I don't know if you've noticed, but Jim is having trouble getting to his term paper. And unless he gets help, I think he won't do it at all and will be in danger of flunking the course." If the teacher now goes to help Jim and is rudely or politely asked "What right have you got to interfere?," he'll say, "Well, in fact, your friend came to me and *asked* me to help." And if John is asked the same question, he will probably reply, "But I'm your friend; I had to do *something*." I think, then, that because John asks the teacher, the teacher is in a position to help with less risk of oppressive meddling than before. Obviously, he cannot go very far without incurring that risk as fully as before; and perhaps the most he can do if he wants to avoid oppressive meddling is to try to elicit from *Jim* in genuinely uncoercive ways a request for help. And, of course, I chose Monica and Augustine to introduce this case because, as Augustine tells it in the *Confessions*, God responded to Monica's fervent and

continued prayers for Augustine's salvation by arranging the circumstances of Augustine's life in such a way that finally Augustine himself freely asked God for salvation.

One might perhaps think that there is something superfluous and absurd in God's working through the intermediary of prayer in this way. If Jim's friend can justify his interference on the grounds that he is Jim's friend and has to do *something*, God can dispense with this sort of petitionary prayer, too. He can give aid unasked on the grounds that he is the *creator* and has to do something. But suppose that Jim and John are only acquaintances who have discussed nothing more than their schoolwork; and suppose that John, by overhearing Jim's phone conversations, has come to believe that all Jim's academic troubles are just symptoms of problems he is having with his parents. If John asks the teacher to help Jim with his personal problems, and if the teacher begins even a delicate attempt to do so by saying that John asked him to do so, he and John could both properly be told to mind their own business. It is not the *status* of his relationship or even the depth of his care and compassion for Jim which puts John in a position to defend himself by saying "But I'm your friend." What protects John against the charge of oppressive meddling is rather the degree to which Jim has freely, willingly, shared his life and thoughts and feelings with John. So John's line of defense against the charge of oppressive meddling can be attributed to God only if the person God is to aid has willingly shared his thoughts and feelings and the like with God. But it is hard to imagine anyone putting himself in such a relation to a person he believes to be omnipotent and good without his also *asking* for whatever help he needs.

Even if the argument can be made out so far, one might be inclined to think that it will not be sufficient to show the compatibility of God's goodness with the practice of petitionary prayer. If one supposes that God brought Augustine to Christianity in response to Monica's prayers, what is one to say about Augustine's fate if Monica had not prayed for him? And what does this view commit one to maintain about people who neither pray for themselves nor are prayed for? It looks as if an orthodox Christian who accepts the argument about petitionary prayer so far will be committed to a picture of this sort. God is analogous to a human father with two very different children. Both Old and New Testaments depict God as doing many good things for men without being asked to do so, and this human father, too, does unrequested good things for both his children. But

one child, who is healthy and normal, with healthy, normal relations to his father, makes frequent requests of the father which the father responds to and in virtue of which he bestows benefits on the child. The other child is selectively blind, deaf, dumb, and suffering from whatever other maladies are necessary to make it plausible that he does not even know he has a father. Now either there are some benefits that the father will never bestow unless and until he is asked; and in that case he will do less for his defective child, who surely has more need of his help than does the healthy child. Or, on the other hand, he will bestow all his benefits unasked on the defective child, and then he seems to make a mockery of his practice with the normal child of bestowing some benefits only in response to requests—he is, after all, willing to bestow the same benefits without being asked. So it seems that we are still left with the problem we started with: either God is not perfectly good or the practice of petitionary prayer is pointless. But suppose the father always meets the defective child's needs and desires even though the child never comes to know of the existence of his father. The child knows only that he is always taken care of, and when he needs something, he gets what he needs. It seems to me intuitively clear that such a practice runs a great risk, at least, of making the defective child willful and tyrannical. But even if the defective child is not in danger of being made worse in some respects in this situation, still it seems plain that he would be better off if the father could manage to put the child in a position to know his father and to frame a request for what he wants. So I think a good father will fulfill the child's needs unasked; but I think that he can do so without making a mockery of his practice of bestowing benefits in response to requests only if putting the child in a position to make requests is among his first concerns.

And as for the question whether God would have saved Augustine without Monica's prayers, I think that there is intermediate ground between the assertion that Monica's prayers are necessary to Augustine's salvation, which seems to impugn God's goodness, and the claim that they are altogether

without effect, which undercuts petitionary prayer. It is possible, for example, to argue that God would have saved Augustine without Monica's prayers but not in the same amount of time or not by the same process or not with the same effect. Augustine, for instance, might have been converted to Christianity but not in such a way as to become one of its most powerful authorities for centuries.<sup>24</sup>

With all this, I have still looked only at cases that are easy for my position; when we turn to something like a prayer for Guatemala after the earthquake—which begins to come closer to the sort of petitions in the first half of the Lord's Prayer—it is much harder to know what to say. And perhaps it is simply too hard to come up with a reasonable solution here because we need more work on the problem of evil. Why would a good God permit the occurrence of earthquakes in the first place? Do the reasons for his permitting the earthquake affect his afterwards helping the country involved? Our inclination is surely to say that a good God must *in any case* help the earthquake victims, so that in this instance at any rate it is pointless to pray. But plainly we also have strong inclinations to say that a good God must in any case prevent earthquakes in populated areas. And since orthodox Christianity is committed to distrusting these latter inclinations, it is at least at sea about the former ones. Without more work on the problem of evil, it is hard to know what to say about the difference prayer might make in this sort of case.

I think it is worth noticing, though, that the first three requests of the Lord's prayer do not run into the same difficulties. Those requests seem generally equivalent to a request for the kingdom of God on earth, that state of affairs in which, of their own free will, all men on earth are dedicated, righteous lovers of God. Now suppose it is true that God would bring about his kingdom on earth even if an individual Christian such as Jimmy Carter did not pray for it. It does not follow in this case, however, that the prayer in question is pointless and makes no difference. Suppose no one prayed for the advent of God's kingdom on earth or felt a need or desire for those millennial times strongly enough to pray for them. It

<sup>24</sup> I have presented the case of Monica and Augustine in a simplified form in order to have an uncomplicated hard case for the view I am arguing. As far as the historical figures themselves are concerned, it is plain that Monica's overt, explicit, passionate concern for her son's conversion greatly influenced the course of his life and shaped his character from boyhood on. It is not clear whether Augustine would have been anything like the man he was if his mother had not been as zealous on behalf of his soul as she was, if she had not prayed continually and fervently for his salvation and let him know she was doing so. Augustine's character and personality were what they were in large part as a result of her fierce desire for his espousal of Christianity; and just his knowledge that his beloved mother prayed so earnestly for his conversion must have been a powerful natural force helping to effect that conversion. In this context the question whether God could have saved Augustine without Monica's prayers takes on different meaning, and an affirmative answer is much harder to give with reasoned confidence.

seems unreasonable to think that God could bring about his earthly kingdom under those conditions, or if he could, that it would be the state of affairs just described, in which earth is populated by people who *freely* love God.<sup>23</sup> And if so, then making the requests in the first half of the Lord's Prayer resembles other, more ordinary activities in which only the effort of a whole group is sufficient to achieve the desired result. One man can't put out a forest fire, but if everyone in the vicinity of a forest fire realized that fact and on that basis decided not to try, the fire would rage out of control. So in the case of the opening petitions of the Lord's Prayer, too, it seems possible to justify petitionary prayer without impugning God's goodness.

Obviously, the account I have given is just a preliminary sketch for the full development of this solution, and a good deal more work needs to be done on the problem. Nonetheless, I think that this account is on the right track and that there is a workable solution to the problem of petitionary prayer which can be summarized in this way. God must work through the intermediary of prayer, rather than doing everything on his own initiative, for man's sake. Prayer acts as a kind of buffer between man and God. By safeguarding the weaker member of the relation from the dangers of overwhelming domination and overwhelming spoiling, it helps to promote and preserve a close relationship between an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good person and a fallible, finite, imperfect person. There is, of course, something counter-intuitive in this notion that prayer acts as a buffer; prayer of all sorts is commonly and I think correctly said to have as one of its main functions the production of closeness between man and God. But not just any sort of closeness will result in friendship, and promoting the appropriate sort of closeness will require inhibiting or preventing inappropriate sorts of closeness, so that a relationship of friendship depends on the maintenance of both closeness and distance between the two friends. And while I do not mean to denigrate the importance of prayer in producing and preserving the appropriate sort of closeness, I think the problem of petitionary prayer at issue here is best solved by focusing on the distance necessary for friendship and the function of petitionary prayer in maintaining that distance.

As for the argument against prayer which I laid out at the start of the paper, it seems to me that the flaw lies in step (7), that it is never logically necessary for God to make the world worse than it would otherwise be and never logically impossible for him to make the world better than it would otherwise be. To take a specific example from among those discussed so far,

orthodox Christianity is committed to claiming that the advent of God's kingdom on earth, in which all people freely love God, would make the world better than it would otherwise be. But I think that it is not possible for God to *make* the world better in this way, because I think it is not possible for him to *make* men *freely* do anything.<sup>23</sup> And in general, if it is arguable that God's doing good things just in virtue of men's requests protects men from the dangers described and preserves them in the right relationship to God, then it is not the case that it is always logically possible for God to make the world better and never logically necessary for him to make the world worse than it would otherwise be. If men do not always pray for all the good things they might and ought to pray for, then in some cases either God will not bring about some good thing or he will do so but at the expense of the good wrought and preserved by petitionary prayer.

It should be plain that there is nothing in this analysis of prayer which *requires* that God fulfil every prayer; asking God for something is not in itself a sufficient condition for God's doing what he is asked. Christian writings are full of examples of prayers which are not answered, and there are painful cases of unanswered prayer in which the one praying must be tempted more to the belief that God is his implacable enemy than to the sentimental-seeming belief that God is his friend. This paper proposes no answer for these difficulties. They require a long, hard, careful look at the problem of evil, and that falls just outside the scope of this paper.

And, finally, it may occur to someone to wonder whether the picture of God presented in this analysis is at all faithful to the God of the Old or New Testaments. Is this understanding of God and prayer anything that Christianity ought to accept or even find congenial? It seems to me that one could point to many stories in either the Old or New Testament in support of an affirmative answer—for example, Elijah's performance on Mt. Carmel (I Kings 18), or the apostles' prayer for a successor to Judas (Acts 1:24–26). But for a small and particularly nice piece of evidence, we can turn to the story in the Gospel of Luke which describes Jesus making the Lord's Prayer and giving a lecture on how one is to pray. According to the Gospel, Jesus is praying and in such a way that his disciples see him and know that he is praying. One of them makes a request of him which has just a touch of rebuke in it: teach us to pray, as *John* taught *his* disciples to pray (Lk. 11:1). If there is a note of rebuke there, it seems just. A religious master should teach his disciples to pray, and a good teacher

does not wait until he is asked to teach his students important lessons. But Jesus is portrayed as a good teacher of just this sort in the Gospel of Luke.<sup>25</sup> Does the Gospel, then, mean its readers to understand that Jesus would not have taught his disciples how to pray if they had not requested it? And if it does not, why is

Jesus portrayed as waiting until he is asked? Perhaps the Gospel means us to understand<sup>26</sup> that Jesus does so just in order to teach by experience as well as by sermon what is implicit throughout the Lord's Prayer: that asking makes a difference.<sup>27</sup>

*Cornell University*

*Received March 30, 1978*

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the lessons taught in the two incidents described in Lk. 21: 1-6.

<sup>26</sup> I have used awkward circumlocutions in this paragraph in order to make plain that it is not my intention here to make any claims about the historical Jesus or the intentions of the Gospel writer. I am not concerned in this paper to do or to take account of contemporary theories of Biblical exegesis. My point is only that the story in the Gospel, as it has been part of ordinary Christian tradition, lends itself to the interpretation I suggest.

<sup>27</sup> In writing this paper, I have benefited from the comments and criticisms of John Boler, Norman Care, and Bill Rowe. I am particularly indebted to my friend Norman Kretzmann for his thorough reading and very helpful criticism of the paper. And I am grateful to John Crossett, from whom I have learned a great deal and whose understanding of philosophical problems in Christian theology is much better than my own.