

The meaning of 'Thy will be done': An investigation into prayer

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This article investigates how we should understand the prayer 'But thy will not mine be done', using Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach. The later Wittgenstein argued that philosophy's task is to assemble reminders of how language is used in daily life for a particular purpose. This approach offers a way to understand how, despite what theologians have argued, 'Thy will be done' is neither making prayer useless, nor is it fundamental to all petitionary prayers. Firstly, the framework and method of Wittgenstein's ordinary language will be explained. Secondly, reminders will be assembled for the purpose of showing that the prayer 'Thy will be done' does not need to make praying useless. Thirdly, the appropriate reminders to refute the statement that 'Thy will be done' is fundamental to all petitionary prayers will be presented. And, finally, these two sets of reminders will be connected to one another to provide a more truthful understanding of the prayer 'Thy will be done'.

Introduction

How should we understand the prayer 'But thy will not mine be done'? In this article, this question will be investigated from the perspective of Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach. The article will focus on two ways in which this ordinary phrase from Christian prayers may be puzzling. It might be seen as to render prayer useless. If people only pray that God should do what God would do anyway, why would they pray at all? At the same time, this phrase may be seen as fundamental to all prayers, at least to all petitionary prayers. However, if this phrase is fundamental to Christian prayer generally, one would expect it to be used a lot more. Why is it not always used explicitly?

Is 'Thy will be done' making prayer useless, or is it fundamental to all Christian prayer? In this article these two questions will be addressed using Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach. The later Wittgenstein argued that philosophy's task is to assemble reminders of how language is used in daily life for a particular purpose. This approach offers a way to understand how, despite what theologians have argued, 'Thy will be done' is neither useless, nor fundamental.

Firstly, the framework and method of Wittgenstein's ordinary language will be explained. Secondly, reminders will be assembled for the purpose of showing that the prayer 'Thy will be done' does not need to make praying useless. Thirdly, the appropriate reminders to refute the statement that 'Thy will be done' is fundamental to all petitionary prayers will be presented. And, finally, these two sets of reminders will be connected to one another to provide a more truthful understanding of the prayer 'Thy will be done'.

Let us begin by looking at what Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach is, and why it may help us to better understand the prayer 'Thy will be done'.

Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach

Ludwig Wittgenstein went through a major change in his approach to philosophy. As a young man he published the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ([1922] 2009), in which he presents a singular model of how language is related to the world, but later retracted most of its statements. In the 1945 introduction to his mature work, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (1958:viii) states as follows: 'I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book.' Wittgenstein no longer presupposes that there is one way in which language relates to the world: language has meaning in many different ways, and one sees the meaning that language has by investigating the different ways in which it is used. In the *Philosophical investigations*, Wittgenstein (1958:127) writes: 'The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.' This describes the ordinary language approach that will be used in this article. For



the purpose of understanding the phrase 'Thy will be done', and especially the question whether this phrase makes prayer useless or fundamental to prayer, reminders will be assembled that show how the words 'Thy will be done' are used.

In line with Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach, the reminders will not be limited to Christian prayers in which the phrase 'Thy will be done' is actually used, but include other instances in which these words are or could be used as well. One of the first examples of Wittgenstein using the ordinary language approach is in his *Lecture on ethics* ([1929] 1993). In contrast to starting his lecture with a definition of ethics, Wittgenstein ([1929] 1993) explains as follows:

I will put before you a number of more or less synonymous expressions [...] and by enumerating them I want to produce the same sort of effect which Galton produced when he took a number of photos of different faces on the same photographic plate [...] so if you look through the row of synonyms which I will put before you, you will, I hope, be able to see the characteristic features. (p. 38)

The British scientist Francis Galton was looking for the essence of, for example, the Chinese face. For this purpose he projected the photographs of many different Chinese faces over each other to clarify this essence. In the *Lecture on ethics* it is not entirely clear whether Wittgenstein is looking for the essence of ethics as well.

In his later *Philosophical investigations*, in which Wittgenstein elaborated and used the ordinary language approach, he is definitely not looking for essences. Writing about Wittgenstein, Nana Last (2008:128) brings out this contrast: 'Galton's method differed from Wittgenstein's employment of it in a crucial way. Whereas Galton began with multiple samples and concluded with a single essential one, Wittgenstein reversed that process.' In his ordinary language approach Wittgenstein is not looking for the essence when he makes up many ways in which a phrase can be used. On the contrary, as his student and friend, Rush Rhees (1970), argued, Wittgenstein

would constantly describe 'different ways of doing it,' but he did not call them different ways of doing the same thing [...] He did not see them as so many fumbling attempts to say what none of them ever does say perfectly. The variety is important – not in order to fix your gaze on the unadulterated form, but to keep you from looking for it. (p. 102)

The different uses of language show how diverse the ways are in which particular phrases in language have meaning.

The ordinary language approach brings out the meaning of phrases by presenting many more or less synonymous uses. Philosopher of religion, Charles Creegan (1989:44), calls these 'intermediate links': '[T]he links proposed often take the form of stories or invented situations. Two cases are shown to be similar in that they share features with a third case.' Creegan connects this to Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance: we may be able to recognise that some

people are members of the same family, although there is not a list of characteristics that all members of this family share. In a similar way the different ways in which a phrase is used show resemblances, but we do not need to presuppose that they share one essence. Creegan (1989) continues as follows:

It is not as though these links have any real life of their own. It is the formal connection between existing cases that is interesting; the link calls attention to the similarity, and at the same time (like 'family resemblance') emphasizes the differences. The links and parables are attempts to call attention to the way of seeing being put forward. (p. 44)

Presenting many related instances in which a similar phrase is used, is intended to demonstrate how a particular phrase is to be understood by showing the similarities and differences amongst these different cases.

This ordinary language approach is necessary because philosophers tend to forget how phrases are used in the context in which they have their sense, that is, ordinary life. Wittgenstein (1975:68) used to urge his students: 'Don't treat your common sense like an umbrella. When you come into a room to philosophize, don't leave it outside but bring it in with you.' Without common sense, philosophers – and theologians – tend to ascribe meanings to particular phrases which they do not have in real life. The ordinary language approach is intended to remind philosophers (and in our case, theologians) of the actual meaning of the phrases used. In the *Philosophical investigations* Wittgenstein (1958) describes this method as follows:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. [...] Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For what is perhaps hidden is of no interest to us. One might also give the name 'philosophy' to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions. The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose. (pp. 126–127)

The ordinary language approach reminds philosophers or theologians of how the phrases used in their discussions are used in daily life.

Considering that these reminders ought to just remind philosophers and theologians, they ought not to be debatable. Therefore, Wittgenstein (1958) continues:

If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them. The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.) (pp. 128–129)

In philosophy and theology people tend to discuss concepts and phrases, forgetting how they are used in the flow of life. The ordinary language approach brings the concepts and phrases back to the context from which their meaning is derived: ordinary life. In philosophical and theological debates often questions, issues and problems arise which disappear once people are reminded of the actual meaning of

the concepts and phrases involved. The questions, issues and problems are not related to the actual concepts and phrases, but only arise in the artificial context of philosophical or theological debate. The problems surrounding 'Thy will be done' are of a similar nature. The questions whether this phrase makes praying useless, or whether it is fundamental, it will be argued, disappear once we are reminded of the actual use of 'Thy will be done'. Therefore in this article the ordinary language approach will be used.

In the remainder of this article, reminders will be assembled for the purpose of clarifying the meaning of 'Thy will be done', and thereby showing how the two problems under discussion, concerning the meaning of this phrase, are not real problems at all.

Does the phrase 'Thy will be done' make prayer useless?

The British theologian, Philip Clements-Jewery ([2005] 2013), stated that:

Academic books on the subject of biblical prayer seem to be descriptive and exegetical rather than enquire into the theological and philosophical basis of the matter. And most popular books about prayer are of the 'how to' kind, or are exhortations to pray more. (p. 7)

This still holds true: there is a gap between academic and popular literature on prayer, and this article positions itself within that gap by applying Ludwig Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach, necessarily responding to slightly older literature, like philosopher of religion Vincent Brümmer's ([1984] 2008) classic study *What are we doing when we pray?* Brümmer ([1984] 2008:67) identifies a misleading dichotomy regarding petitionary prayer: 'Petitionary prayer is taken to be aimed at *either* asking God to act *or* changing the petitioner.' Historical scholar, Rick Ostrander (2000:83), explains how liberal theologians from the 19th century opted for the latter: they 'confined petitionary prayer to internal, subjective objects'; according to them, 'prayer did not change the external world, but it offered the individual important subjective benefits'. Many will regard this as a very reductionist account of petitionary prayer (cf. Clements-Jewery [2005] 2013; Crump 2006). As a way out, Brümmer ([1984] 2008) proposes to

suppose that petitionary prayer is aimed at affecting the *relation* between God and the petitioner, and also take this relation to be a *personal* one, then petitionary prayer must be aimed at affecting both God and the petitioner. (p. 68)

But if we end our petitionary prayer by saying 'But thy will not mine be done', are we aiming at any change at all? I will challenge this presupposition later on in this article.

In his recent article entitled *The speaking that silence is*, Derek R. Nelson (2013:339) concludes that in prayer 'all speech is rendered moot by the overwhelming presence of God'. This is particularly evident in the clause that is under discussion here – 'Thy will be done': first something is asked for, the

believer tells God what she wants, then she asks God not to give what she wants, not her will, but God's own will should be done. Adding this clause 'Thy will be done' after a prayer seems to render the entire prayer before that phrase to be questionable. A believer immediately retracts what she had just asked for, so, why did she not remain silent in the first place?

Rabbinic scholar, J. Heinemann (1977), definitely thinks that if we add 'But thy will not mine be done' to our prayers, we could better have stayed silent. He criticises Strack and Billerbeck (1922:419) who describe the prayer 'Thy will be done' by Jesus as the 'highest moment in the history of prayer'. According to Heinemann (1977), this, on the contrary, rather

constitutes a serious blow to the value of prayer; for if from the very outset the petitioner has already abandoned all hope of this request being granted if it does not conform to the will of God, then why is he praying at all? (p. 168)

Does praying 'But thy will not mine be done' show that someone does not believe and therefore she retracts her requests herself? Why did she bother to tell God her will in the first place, if she wants to ask him something else, that is: not her will, but God's own will to be done? Heinemann (1977:187) concludes: '[T]he outlook which is expressed in the prayers of Jesus reduces the very possibility of prayer to absurdity and is not shared by Rabbinic Judaism'. To pray 'Thy will be done' is absurd, and renders petitionary prayer useless. John White (1976), in a book on prayer, reaches a similar conclusion:

The phrase 'if it be thy will' is more often than not a cop-out. It means I don't have to come to grips with God. [...] 'If it be thy will' is lazy pseudo-reverence, which when translated into Spanish comes out 'lo que sera, sera'. (p. 26)

Theologians like Heinemann and White regard 'Thy will be done' as absurd, as a cop-out, rendering prayer useless. Can 'Thy will be done' be anything else than a lazy, aimless absurdity which renders petitionary prayer useless? The petitioner asks for something and then retracts it, so why did he or she ask something in the first place? This line of reasoning would apply to any use of the phrase 'But thy will not mine be done', not just in prayer. However, there are quite a lot of occasions in human intercourse in which something similar seems to be expressed.

The words 'But thy will not mine be done' are maybe too archaic to be actually used, but they would fit some other ordinary situations. Applying Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach, I will present a number of these occasions as reminders with the purpose to refute the claim that 'Thy will be done' makes what was asked beforehand useless. I will first introduce the examples, and later on we will see what they do and do not show us about the meaning of 'But thy will not mine be done'. The first example is about going to the zoo.



Going to the zoo

If someone wants to go to the zoo and invites a friend to join him, he may want to stress that she should only come along if she wants to herself. In such a situation one could imagine this person saying something like: 'I would like you to come to the zoo with me, but don't come because I ask you to; only come if you want to', or, in other words, to show the similarity with the prayer ending: 'I want you to come along to the zoo, but thy will not mine be done'. I will leave aside cases in which in reality there is no freedom on the side of the one to whom is said 'But thy will not mine be done', such as where it becomes a kind of manipulation, or false modesty, or a joke. By saying 'But thy will not mine be done' the person in our example stresses that it is really up to her whether she wants to come or not. 'But thy will not mine be done' is said to secure the other person's freedom. Something similar is the case in the next example.

Wanting someone's favourite painting

Imagine a person who has helped someone to redecorate her house. He has put quite a lot of time and effort into it and therefore she wants to give him something in return. She asks him what he wants as he may name anything. He really likes a painting that she owns, but he knows it is her favourite painting as well. He is aware that he really cannot ask her to give him that painting, but seeing that she told him to name whatever he wants, he tells her he would like that painting, anyway. He knows that he could only accept that painting if it was really her free will to give it to him. He does not want her to feel obliged by her earlier suggestion that he would get whatever he asked for, and therefore he says something like: 'I would really like to have that painting, but you should do what you want: thy will not mine be done.'

Both of these examples show that the expression 'But thy will not mine be done' could be used in an attempt to secure someone else's freedom. The phrase can be used in a different way as well.

Prompting the Grandmaster

Imagine someone watching a game of chess that cannot help it and shouts: 'Move your bishop!' Once he realises what he has done, he becomes afraid that the player, who happens to be a Grandmaster, will play the move he suggested, just to please him or to not let him down. He does not want that to happen, as he wants the Grandmaster to play the best possible move. Therefore he adds: 'But thy will not mine be done.' He respects the Grandmaster's knowledge and insight, and he does not want to get in the way of it.

Letter of application

When someone writes a letter of application, she tries to convince the reader that she is the right person for the job. She wants this job and she thinks it would be wise for the organisation to give the job to her. This kind of approach is quite common. But we could think of another approach

as well. If someone cares more for the well-being of the organisation than for her herself in terms of getting this job, she could end her letter of application saying something like: 'You have far more insight into what is good for the organisation, therefore: I want the job, but thy will not mine be done.' This may be rather odd, but someone who values the organisation more than her own needs, could be just the person they are looking for.

In the cases of going to the zoo and wanting the favourite painting, someone wants to secure the personal freedom of the other; in the cases of prompting the Grandmaster and the letter of application the person wants to keep the responsibility in the place in which it belongs. He feels that moving the bishop would be the best move, but the Grandmaster has more insight in the game; therefore, the Grandmaster should play on his own responsibility. In the case of the application letter someone wants the job but it is the responsibility of the readers of her application letter to decide what is best for the organisation. By saying 'But thy will not mine be done', she keeps the responsibility where it belongs. In cases in which there is a higher good at stake, such as winning the chess game or the well-being of the organisation, and in cases in which someone else has more insight into this greater good, such as the Grandmaster or the selection committee, the responsibility does not belong with the person prompting or applying, therefore: 'But thy will not mine be done.' But something else could be at stake in saying 'Thy will be done' as well.

The king and the poor girl

This next example is a parable I take from Søren Kierkegaard (see [1844] 1985:23–36). To explain why God needed the incarnation – becoming human, the humblest of humans even, et cetera – Kierkegaard tells a story about a king that loves a poor girl. The king realises that under the circumstances the relationship will never take off. The difference in wealth and power will always keep them apart. The king considers his options. He could arrange it that the poor girl would win a fortune or estate in a lottery. The difference in class would become bridgeable and an equal relationship would become possible. At least, seen from her side. For the king himself things would be different: he would know that she owes her wealth to him. He knows that she, as far as her money and status are concerned, is dependent on him and that would still make a really equal relationship impossible. For the king there is only one option left: he has to renounce his wealth and power and become as poor as the girl he loves. A human king would probably always keep something of his royal dignity despite his poor clothing, but God as the king in his or her omnipotent love for us became truly a poor human being. This is the parable as Kierkegaard tells it.

The king wants the love of the poor girl. Being the rich and wealthy man he is he could do all kinds of things to get her attention. But he realises that that would never be true love. He has to renounce his wealth and power to make true

love possible. In his actions of renouncement he acts out the phrase 'But thy will not mine be done'.

The aspects we have seen in the previous examples play a role in this case as well. The king wants to respect the personal freedom of the poor girl rather than overwhelm her with his wealth and power. And the king attempts to keep the responsibility where it belongs: it is up to this girl and not to him, whether she conceives love for him or not. But an important new aspect plays a role in this case as well: the love of the poor girl would not be true love, if the king would not act out 'But thy will not mine be done' in his dealings with her. Without the king acting out 'But thy will not mine be done' the love of the poor girl would be part of an exchange, whereas true love is outside of the economy of exchanges. The acting out of 'But thy will not mine be done' makes true love possible.

In Kierkegaard's parable the king represents God. In the way the parable is used here the king is the one who acts out 'But thy will not mine be done'. In our comparison the king would therefore be us, whereas the poor girl would represent God to whom the prayer 'But thy will not mine be done' is addressed. This is a strange way to use a parable about a king and someone poor; therefore, in the last example we will consider, it is the poor person who would say 'But thy will not mine be done'.

An outing to a funfair

Imagine a poor single mother: one day she sighs that she would really like to take her children on an outing to a funfair, but that unfortunately she cannot afford that. Someone hears about her dream and offers to give her the money she needs. The woman is in two minds: on the one hand, she would love to accept the offer and take her children out; on the other hand, she does not want to be indebted to her well-doer.

Simone Weil (1959) writes on the difficulty that is involved in almsgiving:

It is not surprising that a man who has bread should give a piece to someone who is starving. What is surprising is that he should be capable of doing so with so different a gesture from that with which we buy an object. Almsgiving when it is not supernatural is like a sort of purchase. It buys the sufferer. (p. 104)

If the well-doer does not give the money for the outing in a supernatural way, he would be buying the sufferer. It is extremely difficult to give alms in a different way. Weil (1959) calls the other way 'supernatural'. It is beyond the natural ways of things; to refer to the phrase we used in the previous example: true love is only possible beyond the economy of exchanges, and so too is true almsgiving. This makes almsgiving extremely difficult, but it makes asking for alms extremely difficult as well.

A way in which the mother in our example could try to ask for alms – for true alms – would be, for example:

I want to be able to take my children on an outing to a funfair, but I do not want to be in debt. Your gift should not depend upon a request on my behalf, it should be purely your own free will and should not commit me to anything. I would love to take my children out, but it should be thy will not mine that is done.

By saying 'But thy will not mine be done' the mother respects the personal freedom of her well-doer; she keeps the almsgiving his responsibility. Only by her saying something like 'But thy will not mine be done' that true (or supernatural) almsgiving becomes possible: she shows she is not obliged to give the giver anything in exchange. The gift happens outside of the economy of exchanges and is purely his free responsibility.

In the reminders that we have assembled here someone is helping the other by saying 'But thy will not mine be done'. It is a way to secure someone's freedom, his responsibility and his ability to act supernaturally. The argument presented by theologians like Heinemann and White, that 'Thy will be done' makes prayer useless because it retracts what was asked for, is refuted by these reminders from ordinary language. The phrase 'But thy will not mine be done' can be useful. However, in what way 'Thy will be done' is used in prayers, remains to be seen. What are the similarities and differences that appear when we put the prayer 'Thy will be done' next to the examples discussed above? Before we can answer that question, we first need to remind ourselves when we end our prayers saying 'But thy will not mine be done'. We will do so in response to our second query: 'Thy will be done' does not need to be useless, but is it as fundamental as some other theologians have suggested?

Is the phrase 'Thy will be done' fundamental to all petitionary prayers?

Not all theologians have argued that 'Thy will be done' makes prayer useless. Vincent Brümmer, with whom we started, for example, regards it as the fundamental principle of all petitionary prayer. Brümmer ([1984] 2008) writes:

Petitionary prayer must be offered in faith, but it may not presume upon God. For this reason it is usually expressed in conditional form: God is asked to grant something – but only on condition that he wants to grant what is asked. The obvious example is Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane: 'Father, if it be thy will, take this cup away from me. Yet not my will but thine be done' (Luke 22:42). Even when this condition is not explicitly expressed, it is still implicitly presupposed. (p. 6)

'Thy will be done' is here seen as explicitly or implicitly central to all petitionary prayers. In all petitionary prayers, Brümmer ([1984] 2008:68) states elsewhere: 'God is asked to act, and the petitioner makes himself available as secondary cause through whom God can act.' Brümmer's colleague D.Z. Phillips ([1965] 2014) in *The concept of prayer* before made a similar bold statement regarding the importance of 'Thy will be done', stating: 'It ought to be recognized that all Christian petitions do end with the words, "But thy will not mine".'



And recently David Crump (2006:277) in his comprehensive study of the New Testament theology of petitionary prayer describes how in the New Testament letters prayers are always such that, in one way or another, their 'request concludes in exactly the same way: "Nevertheless, Father, not my will but yours be done".'

Many other theologians support the suggestion that the prayer 'Thy will be done' is a way to offer oneself as a secondary cause for God to use; for example, Kevin J. Vanhoozer (2010:380f.) emphasises that 'Jesus' "not my will but yours be done" depicts two wills not on a collision course but, on the contrary, coming into perfect alignment', as he holds that 'God works in the world largely by working through human beings'. Patrick D. Miller (1994:331; italics in original) states that in consistency with both the Old and the New Testament: 'The starting point of Christian prayer [...] is the prayer for effecting *God's* purpose, not the prayer for our needs.' And Terrance L. Tiessen (2000) who investigates the relationship between prayer and providence writes about petitionary prayer:

We attempt to discern God's will in particular situations, we align our own desires with his, and then we ask God to do what we believe he wants us to do. [...] We seek to discern his will and to pray accordingly. (p. 337)

In accordance with the above, David Crump (2006) argues that:

To conclude 'if it be your will' is not an endorsement of *laissez-faire* spirituality; it is not a free pass excusing us from the rigors of conformity to the mind of God (rather, our conformity is not a passive process; we must be engaged). (p. 208)

As the evangelical author Philip Yancey (2011) explains:

Some people worry that prayer may lead to passivity, that we will retreat to prayer as a substitute for action. Jesus saw no contradiction between the two [...] The accounts in Acts [*on Paul*] present a double agency that makes it impossible to distinguish God's work from the Christians' work – the point, exactly. [...] prayer as partnership, a subtle interplay of human and divine that accomplishes God's work on earth. (p. 113)

Is 'Thy will be done' so important because it is a way to show that we avail ourselves for God to act through us? Is it a way to offer oneself as a secondary cause for God to use? And, is it true that 'But thy will not mine be done' is used to end all Christian petitions? In this paragraph I would like to dispute that. Of course, in practice not every Christian petitionary prayer ends with these words. Obviously that is not what these authors wanted to maintain either. They claim that every Christian petition is made with this phrase in mind: every Christian petition could have ended with these words. But not even that is true.

Let us look at three examples of petitionary prayers. Firstly, the phrase 'But thy will not mine be done', is taken from a prayer by Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew (26:42) we hear Jesus pray 'O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done'. Jesus expresses his

desire that things would be different, but he avails himself for his Father to act through him. In this case 'Thy will be done' is expressed explicitly.

Secondly, there are prayers asking for benefits from God. In the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (1789), for example, we find the prayer for rain:

Send us, we beseech thee, in this our necessity, such moderate rain and showers, that we may receive the fruits of the earth to our comfort, and to thy honour; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (p. 29)

In prayer people may ask for different gifts from God, physical or otherwise. Although we do not find the addition of 'Thy will be done' in this case, it may very well be present implicitly. The petitioners ask God to grant them something, and it is perfectly natural to presuppose that they do so on condition that God wants to grant them what is asked. Although 'Thy will be done' is not found in the text, this kind of prayer fits the suggestion by Brümmer, Phillips and Crump mentioned above, that petitionary prayers imply a 'Thy will be done'.

Thirdly, in the same *Book of Common Prayer* (1789) we find a prayer of confession which ends with the following petition:

But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults: restore thou those who are penitent; according to thy promises, declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy name. Amen. (pp. 3–4)

Here we find a very particular kind of gift that the petitioners ask for: they want God to have mercy, to restore them, and that they may live godly from now on. This is different from the previous two cases. People who pray for rain or other benefits, do sometimes add 'Thy will be done', but people who ask God to have mercy upon them, or to help them to sin no more, do not add 'Thy will be done'. Of course, people *could* end such a prayer by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' – who would stop them? – but they do not do so.

This is intended as a reminder in the sense of Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach as expounded in the first paragraph. This implies that it should not be read as a debatable claim. It is a thesis which would fulfil its function only if everyone would agree to it: petitionary prayers like the one in the third example do not end with 'But thy will not mine be done', neither explicitly nor implicitly. People do not ask God to have mercy upon them, and then say 'Thy will be done'. When people ask God to help them to sin no more, they do not say that they ask this on condition that God wants to grant them what is asked. If one accepts this as a reminder of how language is used in ordinary life, then this reminder in itself already refutes the claim that 'Thy will be done' is fundamental to all petitionary prayers. Not all petitionary prayers do end with an explicit or implicit 'Thy will be done': the third example of a petitionary prayer above does not end with this phrase.

But what is different about the category of petitionary prayers that does not end with a 'Thy will be done'? I suggest that the difference is in the relationship between our will and God's will. Someone does not end her prayers by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' when God's will and her will are not (or do not appear to be) different. On the other hand, someone does or may end her prayers by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' when it is possible that God's will and her will differ.

God's will can mean many different things. When someone prays 'God, deliver me from this illness, but thy will not mine be done' and he is not cured, one could conclude that apparently God wanted him to be ill. In specific cases someone may come to this conclusion for himself. This would suggest that everything that happens apparently is God's will. At the same time, it is said that God does not will illness and evil, for example, in Ezekiel 18:32 it is said that God has no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. In a comment on the statement Martin Luther introduced a distinction between the revealed God willing only the good for everyone, and the hidden will of God, saying about the latter that this will is not to be inquired into. Luther ([1525] 1823:158; italics in original) says about God: 'Thus, he does not "will the death of a sinner," that is, *in his word*; but he *will* it by that *will inscrutable*.' Everything that happens, happens according to God's inscrutable will. The revealed God, however, wants what is good for everyone, by definition, and therefore: God's will in this sense, is what is good.

Now, we need to make one further distinction within this latter conception of God's will as what is good. God's good will is revealed, on the one hand, in general commandments and statements, and, on the other hand, in particular revelations about specific events. In his general commandments God states that one should not kill, but Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac (see Gn 22:2). God's good will for Abraham at that time was that he would set out to kill his son. In general God would have no pleasure in people selling their brother into slavery, but looking back at his life, Joseph tells his brothers who did so, that it was God who sent Joseph to Egypt to save the world from famine (see Gn 45:5). It was God's good will for Joseph at that time to be sent to Egypt.

The distinction between the general good will of God and the specific good will of God is also used by Ignatius of Loyola. In the annotations to his *Spiritual exercises*, he ([1524] 2007:15) says: 'He who is giving the Exercises ought not to influence him who is receiving them more to poverty or to a promise, than to their opposites, nor more to one state or way of life than to another.' The one who leads someone in going through these exercises should refrain from telling the one doing the exercises God's general good will, such as, for example, to strive after poverty. Ignatius ([1524] 2007:15) explains:

When seeking the Divine Will, it is more fitting and much better, that the Creator and Lord Himself should communicate Himself to His devout soul, inflaming it with His love and praise, and disposing it for the way in which it will be better able to serve Him in future. (p. 15)

Here Ignatius talks about the specific good will of God for a particular individual at a particular time.

It is this latter specific good will of God that I am referring to in my interpretation of the difference between the first two examples of petitionary prayer and the third case, the one in which 'Thy will be done' does not fit. One does say or imply 'Thy will be done' when someone does not know God's will. One does not say 'Thy will be done', when someone knows this will of God. It would make no sense to say 'But thy will not mine be done' in that case, as the distinction between God's will and your own will has no application here. If you know God's good will, not just in general, but also as it applies to you, then you will want to will it yourself as well.

This can be supported by the reminder that when one finds the specific will of God for him or her, he or she does not continue to ask what to do with it. If someone discovers what his or her father, or teacher, or spouse wants him or her to do, then he or she may ask himself or herself whether he or she agrees. However, if someone discovers what God wants him or her to do – through Ignatius's *Spiritual exercises* or other forms of prayer; for example, one does not ask oneself whether one agrees. In the case of finding out one's teacher's will, there is a second step of determining your own will; in the case of finding out God's specific good will for you, this second step does not exist. God's discovered will *is* your will. This is again intended as a reminder in the sense of Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach as expounded in the first paragraph. This implies that it should not be read as a debatable claim.

If someone thinks that God wants charity, he has to act in favour of charity, or at least he has to want to act in favour of charity. If someone thinks that God calls her to serve this community, she has to want to serve this community. If someone thinks that God wants him to say x to y , he has to want to say x to y . This is not due to some programmed instruction in human nature, but these remarks are just reminders of the way in which believers talk about God's will. If someone thinks of something as God's will, she has to want or at least want to want to do it, otherwise we would not understand what she meant by calling it God's will.

So, the only possible situation in which God's will and a believer's own will possibly differ, is the situation in which it is not entirely clear to her what God's will is. These are the situations in which the prayer 'But thy will not mine be done' is possible: when a believer is not sure what God's will is exactly. By saying 'But thy will not mine be done', a person shows that she does not know what God wants concerning the things she is praying for. She does not know what is God's will, which is the same as: she does not know what she would really want in these matters. By ending her prayer with 'But thy will not mine be done', a believer admits that she does not know what her ideal will; that is, God's will is in the situation she is praying about.

As we saw above, a number of theologians suggested that 'Thy will be done' is so important in *all* petitionary prayers, *because* it is a way to show that we avail ourselves for God to act through us. However, here we have discovered that first of all, not all petitionary prayers end with or presuppose 'Thy will be done', and, second, that in fact precisely those prayers in which we offer ourselves as secondary cause for God to act in the world are the ones that are *not* based on 'Thy will be done'. Theologians like Brümmer, Vanhoozer, Crump, Tiessen and Yancey are correct in dispelling the worry expressed by other theologians that concluding by 'But thy will not mine be done' renders petitionary prayer as an absurdity. However, they are wrong in connecting the importance of the prayer 'Thy will be done' to availing oneself as a secondary cause. 'Thy will be done' is not fundamental for all petitionary prayers, especially not for those that ask God to act through us, considering that saying 'Thy will be done' is a way to confess that we do *not* know how God would want to act, through us or otherwise. Therefore, in these cases we do not know how to be a secondary cause for God to act in the world either.

Final points

We have seen that by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' to another human being, one is helping the other. Saying it is a way to secure her freedom, her responsibility and her ability to act supernaturally. Whereas human beings may need help in these respects, God does not: God is not a fellow human being. However, the difference between God and human beings could be expressed as well by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' to God in prayer. God does not need help to be free, but by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' a believer expresses that God is free and she says to God in praise that God is free. God does not need help to be responsible, but by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' believers express that God is responsible and they say to God in praise that God is responsible. God does not need help to act supernaturally, but by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' they express that God is supernatural and they say to God in praise that God is supernatural. When someone ends her prayers to God by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' she thereby acknowledges and praises God's freedom, God's responsibility and God's supernatural being.

The prayer 'Thy will be done' is neither rendering petitionary prayer useless as some theologians suggest, nor is it fundamental of all petitionary prayer, as other theologians argue. This theoretical theological investigation has brought out both the practical usefulness and the limits to usefulness of the prayer 'Thy will be done'. A lot more can be said about it, especially about how this all relates to the broader doctrine of God: God's will, providence, omnipotence, omniscience etcetera. In this connection there are two final points I would like to make. First of all, following the analysis believers do get what they are praying for: if someone prays to God in a way that shows that she thinks that her acts and prayers are part of an economy of exchanges with God, she gets this

natural God – who, from a Christian perspective, is no God; if someone prays to God in a way that acknowledges that God is free, that God alone is responsible and that God is beyond our natural system of exchanges, then she receives the true God who is supernatural.

Secondly, in a way we are still left with the question why a believer should bother to tell God all the things he thinks that he wants? What is the aim? Brümmer ([1984] 2008:68) suggested that in order to avoid the dilemma whether petitionary prayer aims at changing God or the petitioner, we should say that 'petitionary prayer must be aimed at affecting both God and the petitioner'. But if believers end their petitionary prayer by saying 'But thy will not mine be done', are they aiming at any change at all? Without concluding that 'Thy will be done' renders petitionary prayer useless, we may still hold that it does not aim at anything. A believer does not do it *for* anything and it does not *aim* at anything. Wittgenstein ([1967] 1993; italics in original) gave an example of something similar in his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*:

Kissing the picture. That is *obviously not* based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it *aims* at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then feel satisfied. (p. 123)

Ending one's prayers by saying 'But thy will not mine be done' is in a similar way aimless.

Praying 'Thy will be done' the believer acknowledges God's freedom, God's responsibility and God's supernatural being, like people kiss the picture of a loved one. Believers just behave this way and then feel satisfied – that is the way in which they practically live out what they theoretically believe. Using Wittgenstein's ordinary language approach by assembling appropriate reminders, we have found despite what theologians have argued, 'Thy will be done' is neither making prayer useless, nor is it fundamental to all petitionary prayers.

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