

# Giving Thanks: Spiritual and Religious Correlates of Gratitude

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Gratitude is a Christian virtue and an emotional disposition that has recently become the focus of systematic scientific research. We explore first the theological origins of gratitude as a virtue that is emphasized in Judeo-Christian traditions, and we then examine spiritual and religious predictors of dispositional gratitude and grateful emotions measured on a daily basis in a sample of persons with neuromuscular disease (NMDs). In this primarily Christian sample, grateful emotions and tendencies were related to both conventional religious practices (e.g., church attendance and reading the Bible) as well as to spiritual self-transcendence. Sanctification through personal goals (the perceived degree to which strivings enable one to feel closer to God) was also predictive of gratitude. Some implications of the research for psychospiritual assessment, religion and health, and the integration of psychology and theology are discussed.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3: 15-17).

Gratitude, the affirmation of a bond between giver and receiver, is central to the human-divine relationship. As long as people have believed in God, believers have sought ways to express gratitude and thanksgiving to this God, their ultimate giver. Gratitude is thus a universal religious sentiment, evident in the thank offerings described in ancient scriptures to contemporary praise and worship music. The idea that one should reflect upon the abundance of God's gifts, and express that in thanksgiving and praise is a theme that permeates texts, prayers, and teachings of Biblical faith. In both Jewish and Christian worldviews, gratitude is the appropriate response to the benevolence of a creator whose purposes are the well-being of the world and its inhabitants (Plantinga, 2000). Because of its centrality in Christian theology, it would not be an exaggeration to say that grati-

tude is *the heart of the gospel*. Not surprisingly, then, Reformationist Martin Luther referred to it as "the basic Christian attitude" and theologian Karl Barth remarked that "grace and gratitude go together like heaven and Earth; grace evokes gratitude like the voice and echo" (cited in Boulton, 2001).

## ***Gratitude in Christian Theology and Scripture***

"A true Christian is one who never for a moment forgets what God has done for him in Christ, and whose whole comportment and whole activity have their root in the sentiment of gratitude" writes John Baillie in his 1961 Gifford Lectures (Baillie, 1962). The idea that gratitude is not only central among Christian virtues but is in fact at the heart of the faith has a long history in classical writings (Edwards, 1746/1959; Kempis, 1441/1989) and is a theme in modern devotional writings (Browning, 1992; Foster, 1992; Roberts, 1991) as well. Understanding God to be the giver of all gifts and the ultimate foundation for thankfulness, Christians gratefully acknowledge their dependence on Him and rejoice in the gifts that only He provides. Christian gratitude is not merely a sentimental feeling in response to a gift, but is a virtue that entails an obligation or sense of indebtedness. An indebtedness to others enables followers of Christ to share a common bond, which shapes not only emotions and thoughts, but actions and deeds.

Gratitude and thanksgiving are central motifs in Pauline theology (Pao, 2002). Pauline thanksgiving focuses on who God is and what God has done for his people. There is also a strong imperative component to gratitude in Paul's letters

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where the phrases "be thankful" or "give thanks" occur multiple times in multiple contexts. Christians are called on to live lives of thanksgiving as a glad acknowledgment of God's generosity which then provides a model for how Christians are to deal with each other. Christians are urged to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18)<sup>1</sup>, "give thanks to God the Father for everything" (Eph. 5: 19-20), present prayers and petitions "with thanksgiving to God" (Phil. 4: 6-7) and separate themselves from those who have been ungrateful (Rom. 1: 21-22). Ingratitude, the failure to acknowledge God as Lord of all and to worship him, is a profound spiritual failure and seen as the root of all sin (Luther, 1959). In Paul's writings there is a strong link between the awareness of grace and the resulting experience of gratitude, in that a theology of grace that emphasizes God's unmerited favor cannot fail to lead to an ethic whose basic motive is gratitude. At least since the Augustinian era, this bond between grace and gratitude has been the foundation of entire systems of theological ethics, as in Calvin's Eucharistic theology (c.f. Gerrish, 1993; Wainwright, 1980). Within these perspectives it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to envision gratitude without first presuming the need for divine grace. Gratitude as the human response to divine grace permeates understandings of what it means to be a human in a right relationship with God.

### ***Psychological Perspectives on Gratitude***

In contrast to the theocentric and Christocentric emphases on gratitude in Biblical theology, social science perspectives generally emphasize the interpersonal context of gratitude as the basis of human reciprocal exchanges. The principle of reciprocity, upon which human societies are based, states that one has an obligation to help others who have helped us, and to not harm others who have not harmed us. Virtually ignored in psychology's past, the importance of gratitude for personality and social behavior has recently been rediscovered. In their analysis of gratitude, McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) conceptualize gratitude as having three morally relevant functions, that of a moral barometer, a moral motivator and a moral reinforcer. They hypothesized that by experiencing gratitude, a person is motivated to carry out prosocial behavior, energized to sustain moral behaviors, and is inhibited from committing destructive interpersonal behaviors. As a moral

barometer, gratitude provides individuals with an affective readout that accompanies the perception that another person has treated them prosocially. As a moral motive, gratitude stimulates people to behave prosocially after they have been the beneficiaries of other people's prosocial behavior. As a moral reinforcer, gratitude encourages prosocial behavior by reinforcing people for their previous prosocial behavior.

### ***Previous Research on Gratitude and Christian Spirituality***

Despite the centrality of gratitude within Christian theology and practice, very little research has explored the relationship between gratitude and religiosity. Samuels and Lester (1985) found that, in a small sample of Catholic nuns and priests, out of 50 emotions, love and gratitude were the most frequently experienced emotions toward God. A qualitative study by Griffith (1998) documented the ecstatic experiences of "pious emotion" in American Pentecostal women in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Common in the narratives analyzed were heartfelt and lively expressions of joy, gratitude for every aspect of life in this one and in the next, and a blissful sense of peace. In a study of prayer in the lives of college students (McKinney & McKinney, 1999) prayers of thanksgiving were the second most common type of prayer, following petitionary appeals. Another study looking at prayer (Laird, Snyder, Rapoff, & Green, 2004) found that prayers of thanksgiving were negatively related to depression and anxiety and positively related to greater hope in patients with rheumatoid arthritis. Lastly, a recent survey found that people who have no religious preference or who have not attended church services recently are twice as likely to skip traditional Thanksgiving holiday observances, compared to people who are active religiously (Hargrove & Stempel, 2004).

Although gratitude has most often been conceived of as a discrete emotion, gratitude is also an affective trait (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). The grateful disposition is a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with positive emotions to the role of other moral agents' benevolence. At the dispositional level, grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, optimism and lower levels of depression and stress (McCullough et al., 2002). They also experience relatively low levels of negative affects such as resentment, depression, and envy. But we know

relatively little about the relative contribution that religion and spirituality play in sustaining dispositional levels of gratitude. McCullough et al. (2002) found that people who reported high levels of spirituality reported more gratitude in their daily moods, as did people higher in religious interest, general religiousness, and intrinsic religious orientation. Watkins, Woodward, Stone and Koltz (2003) found that trait gratitude correlated positively with intrinsic religiousness and negatively with extrinsic religiousness. The authors suggest that the presence of gratitude may be a *positive* affective hallmark of religiously and spiritually engaged people, just as an absence of depressive symptoms is a *negative* affective hallmark of spiritually and religiously engaged people. They likely see benefits as gifts from God, "as the first cause of all benefits" (Watkins et al., 2003, p. 437).

### Purpose of the Present Study

We have sufficient theological and psychological reasons to anticipate that individuals who are religious ought to report higher levels of gratitude compared to their less religious counterparts. In order to establish the contribution that spiritual and religious commitments make to the experience of gratitude, we seek in this study to explore relationships between trait and daily measures of gratitude and indices of spiritual and religious commitment. We included a variety of measures of spiritual concerns and religious involvement: trait inventories, self-ratings, frequency of private and public religious behaviors, and sanctification of personal goals. We predicted that we would observe strong, positive associations between gratitude and religion/spirituality. In that spiritual issues are at the forefront of quality of life concerns for people with chronic disease, we employ a unique sample: Adults with congenital or later-onset neuromuscular diseases.

### Method

#### Participants

The sample consisted of 199 persons (139 females, 59 males, 1 unknown) with either congenital or adult-onset neuromuscular diseases (NMDs). We recruited these participants through a mailing list compiled by the University of California, Davis, Medical Center Neuromuscular Disease Clinic. They ranged in age from 23 to 85, with a mean age of 57. The majority had one of three NMDs: Post-polio, Charcot-Marie-Tooth, or Fascioscapulohumeral (see [fo.net for more information about neuromuscular disease\). Eighty-three percent identified themselves as Christian. Additional demographics were available for 153 of the participants. Fifty-four percent of the participants were married, 44% had college or post-graduate degrees, and their median income was between \\$15,000-25,000. One hundred seven participants \(52% of the original sample\) also successfully completed measures of daily grateful emotions.](http://www.rehabin-</a></p>
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#### Materials

**Questionnaire measures.** We administered a lengthy survey consisting of the Personal Strivings Assessment Packet (Emmons, 1999), a 6-item version of the gratitude questionnaire (GQ; McCullough, et al., 2002), diverse measures of spirituality and religiousness (described below), and a variety of other measures that are not used in the present analyses. Due to a revision of the survey packet after some of the data had been collected (data collection took place in three distinct waves), participants either took the GQ on a 9-point Likert scale or a 7-point Likert scale. Both scales exhibited good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .95 for the 9-point scale; .90 for the 7-point scale). For the analyses, the GQ scores will be reported as standardized z-scores.

**Narratives.** We also asked participants to write about a time in which they felt a strong sense of gratitude in their lives. Participants were asked to "recreate the grateful experience in your mind so that you can feel the emotions as if you had transported yourself back in time to the event itself." On the provided paper, the participants were asked to write a description of the experience, including the experienced emotions, if and how the gratitude was expressed, and how the experience changed their life or relationships with others. This narrative writing exercise was included to provide another level of analysis with which to examine spiritual and religious expressions of gratitude.

**Sanctification.** In order to measure religious spirituality through personal goals, we asked each participant to rate the degree to which each of their strivings (1) enables them to feel closer to God, which we will call "close to God." In addition to this item, 64 participants completed a revised version of the questionnaire that asked each participant to rate the degree to which each of their strivings also (2) reflects what they think God wants for their life, and (3) the degree to which they experience

God through these strivings. Ratings were made on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The mean of the three items provides an overall index of striving sanctification (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .99$ ). We will report analyses using both the Close to God single-item measure and the 3-item sanctification measure.

**Measures of religiousness.** Several measures focused on participants' religious beliefs and practices. Participants reported how often they attend religious services, read sacred scriptures, and read other religious literature. The mean of the 3 items provide an index of religious practices (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ). Participants also rated how important religion is in their life on a 3-point scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 3 (*very important*).

The Religious Problem-Solving Scale (Pargament, 1997) measures the different ways people use religious problem-solving styles to deal with basic problems in life, and has 3 subscales rated on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The collaborative problem-solving subscale measures how much people work together with God to solve problems. The deferring problem-solving style measures the extent to which an individual gives one's problems to God, asking God to solve the problem. Finally, the self-directed problem-solving subscale measures how much a person tries to cope with problems without God's help and support. All 3 subscales had good internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas ranged from .89 to .96).

**Measures of spirituality.** Participants completed two additional spirituality measures. The first measure consisted of the mean of three items that measured one's personal relationship with God (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ). The second measure was the 24-item Spiritual Transcendence Scale (Piedmont, 1999), which has three subscales rated on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Universality measures one's belief in a universal nature and purpose in life. Connectedness is one's sense of intergenerational commitments as well as one's sense of commitment to others in the community. Finally, prayer fulfillment measures one's feeling of joy from prayer that is oriented toward a higher state of being or to a higher being. A composite score of the spiritual transcendence scale provides a measurement of the trait of spiritual transcendence. All three subscales, as well as the overall trait measure, had adequate reliability (Cronbach's alphas ranged from .66 to .88). Pied-

mont (1999) demonstrated that spiritual transcendence is associated with both religious and non-religious outcomes, even when controlling for the contribution of the Five Factor Model of personality (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism; McCrae & Costa, 1999). The scale has also been shown to have good convergence across observers (Piedmont, 1999) and across cultures.

**Daily measure of grateful emotions.** Participants were provided with a packet of 21 "daily experience rating forms." The daily form also included additional measures for use in a different study. They were told to complete one form each day, as close to the end of the day as possible but before being sleepy, using the ratings to summarize the day as a whole. The daily form took approximately 5 minutes to complete each evening. Participants were asked to mail the forms in once a week. If the participant forgot to fill out a form, they were told to omit the form for that day, rather than filling it out from memory. Finally, they were compensated \$20 if they completed all the forms; \$15 if they failed to complete all 21 forms.

To measure gratitude on a daily basis, participants completed daily ratings of the intensity with which they felt each of 32 positive and negative moods. Participants were instructed to "Indicate to what extent you felt this way during the day today" using a 5-point scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). We measured the amount of gratitude in participants' daily moods via their mean score on 3 gratitude-related affects (grateful, thankful, and appreciative). Across the 21 days of the study, the mean internal consistency for this 3-item composite was  $\alpha = .92$ .

## Results

### **Predictors of dispositional and daily gratitude**

We analyzed the data both at the level of traits and personal strivings. At the level of traits, the Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS; Piedmont, 1999) was significantly correlated with the GQ ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ). All three of the STS subscales (universality, prayer fulfillment, and connectedness) were significantly related to the GQ ( $r$ 's ranging from .41 to .48,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, spiritual transcendence was also positively correlated with the amount of gratitude in participants' daily moods ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ). People who had

**Table 1**  
*Correlations, means, and standard deviations of gratitude, religious, and spiritual variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. GQ - Dispositional gratitude	-													
2. Daily gratitude	.55 <sup>c</sup>	-												
3. Importance of religion	.35 <sup>c</sup>	.24 <sup>a</sup>	-											
4. Religious practices	.28 <sup>c</sup>	.27 <sup>b</sup>	.70 <sup>c</sup>	-										
5. Relationship with God	.39 <sup>c</sup>	.33 <sup>b</sup>	.83 <sup>c</sup>	.70 <sup>c</sup>	-									
6. Striving sanctification	.25 <sup>a</sup>	-.02	.67 <sup>c</sup>	.51 <sup>c</sup>	.77 <sup>c</sup>	-								
7. Close to God from strivings	.36 <sup>c</sup>	.38 <sup>c</sup>	.59 <sup>c</sup>	.47 <sup>c</sup>	.74 <sup>c</sup>	.99 <sup>c</sup>	-							
8. Spiritual transcendence	.52 <sup>c</sup>	.38 <sup>c</sup>	.50 <sup>c</sup>	.33 <sup>c</sup>	.57 <sup>c</sup>	.54 <sup>c</sup>	.51 <sup>c</sup>	-						
9. Universality	.41 <sup>c</sup>	.31 <sup>b</sup>	.46 <sup>c</sup>	.27 <sup>c</sup>	.50 <sup>c</sup>	.47 <sup>c</sup>	.42 <sup>c</sup>	.92 <sup>c</sup>	-					
10. Connectedness	.48 <sup>c</sup>	.28 <sup>b</sup>	.22 <sup>b</sup>	.04	.23 <sup>b</sup>	.10	.25 <sup>b</sup>	.76 <sup>c</sup>	.64 <sup>c</sup>	-				
11. Prayer fulfillment	.44 <sup>c</sup>	.40 <sup>c</sup>	.52 <sup>c</sup>	.46 <sup>c</sup>	.65 <sup>c</sup>	.63 <sup>c</sup>	.55 <sup>c</sup>	.82 <sup>c</sup>	.61 <sup>c</sup>	.38 <sup>c</sup>	-			
12. RPS - Collaborative	.30 <sup>c</sup>	.38 <sup>c</sup>	.66 <sup>c</sup>	.63 <sup>c</sup>	.80 <sup>c</sup>	.63 <sup>c</sup>	.65 <sup>c</sup>	.47 <sup>c</sup>	.41 <sup>c</sup>	.18 <sup>a</sup>	.55 <sup>c</sup>	-		
13. RPS - Self-directing	-.17 <sup>a</sup>	-.10	-.64 <sup>c</sup>	-.53 <sup>c</sup>	-.74 <sup>c</sup>	-.69 <sup>c</sup>	-.62 <sup>c</sup>	-.36 <sup>c</sup>	-.33 <sup>c</sup>	-.02	-.48 <sup>c</sup>	-.74 <sup>c</sup>	-	
14. RPS - Deferring	.20 <sup>b</sup>	.31 <sup>b</sup>	.53 <sup>c</sup>	.55 <sup>c</sup>	.65 <sup>c</sup>	.57 <sup>c</sup>	.57 <sup>c</sup>	.24 <sup>b</sup>	.18 <sup>a</sup>	-.06	.40 <sup>c</sup>	.74 <sup>c</sup>	-.61 <sup>c</sup>	-
M	0.00	3.32	2.44	2.23	2.88	3.59	3.09	3.58	3.82	3.83	3.18	2.61	2.51	2.15
SD	1.00	.90	.71	.66	.96	1.24	1.28	.56	.70	.66	.63	1.19	1.17	1.11

*Note.* Daily gratitude is the mean of three gratitude-related affects (grateful, thankful, and appreciative). Dispositional gratitude (GQ) is computed as a z-score for this study. RPS = religious problem-solving.  
<sup>a</sup>  $p < .05$     <sup>b</sup>  $p < .01$     <sup>c</sup>  $p < .001$

strong convictions regarding the interconnectedness of life and humanity and who described a history of spiritual or mystical experiences reported more gratitude in their daily moods than did their less spiritual transcendent counterparts. The correlations between dispositional gratitude, daily gratitude, and all measures of religiousness and spirituality are presented in Table 1.

The importance of religion, the frequency of religious practices, and a personal relationship with God were associated with higher dispositional gratitude ( $r$ 's ranging from .28 to .39,  $p < .001$ ) and daily gratitude ( $r$ 's ranging from .24 to .33,  $p < .001$  to .01). People who spend time reading scriptures and other religious materials, engaging in religious activities, praying, and cultivating a relationship with God tend to be more grateful in their daily lives and in general.

With respect to religious coping, collaborative religious problem solving was associated with higher dispositional ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and daily gratitude ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Deferring religious problem solving was associated with higher dis-

positional ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and daily gratitude ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As expected, self-directing religious problem solving was associated with lower dispositional gratitude ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There was no significant relationship between self-directing religious problem solving and daily gratitude ( $r = -.10$ ). People who turn to God for help with a problem, whether it be to work together with God to find a solution or to give one's problems to God for Him to solve, tend to be higher in gratitude than people who do not turn to God for help.

#### **Gratitude and Striving Sanctification**

We combined the three items measuring striving sanctification into an overall index (Cronbach's alpha = .99). Both the sanctification index and the Close to God single-item were significantly associated with GQ scores ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). Similarly, the sanctification index and the Close to God item were significantly associated with daily gratitude ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). Thus, people

who tend to imbue their strivings with spiritual significance also tend to find much to be grateful for. For example, one woman who scored over 1 standard deviation above the mean on the GQ also highly sanctified her strivings. Among the strivings she sanctified were, "I typically try to serve God," "I typically try to keep a pleasant, happy home," and "I typically try to serve the people of my community." These examples underscore a point made by Emmons (1999) that even strivings not explicitly religious or spiritual in content may be perceived as having a spiritual significance by their possessor.

### **Multiple Regression Analyses**

As a further analytic strategy, two multiple regression analyses were performed. To test the predictive value of spiritual and religious constructs on dispositional and daily gratitude, four predictors were entered into each regression. The importance of religion and religious practices measures were used to represent the religious constructs. The trait score of spiritual transcendence and the mean of the item measuring how much one's strivings enabled one to feel close to God were used to represent the spiritual constructs.

When dispositional gratitude was regressed on the four predictors simultaneously, only spiritual transcendence had a significant effect on dispositional gratitude ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $t(171) = 4.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Because no other predictor was significant, the most parsimonious model of the relationship between gratitude, spirituality, and religion, is simply the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient between dispositional gratitude and spiritual transcendence ( $r = .52$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

When daily gratitude was regressed on the four predictors, only the sanctification item measuring how much one's strivings help one to feel close to God was significant ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $t(91) = 3.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Again, because no other predictor was significant, the correlation coefficient between daily gratitude and the close to God item explains most parsimoniously the relationship between daily gratitude, spirituality, and religiousness ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### **Differences in gratitude between Christians and non-Christians**

A one-way ANOVA was performed to test whether self-identified Christians score higher on gratitude measures than non-Christians. Christians were higher in dispositional gratitude than non-Christians ( $F(1, 204) = 5.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but they did not differ from non-Christians in daily gratitude

( $F(1, 105) = .15$ ). Only 18 out of the 107 participants who completed the daily gratitude part of the study were non-Christian. This small group size necessitates a large difference between the groups to be detected. Even so, Christians appear to be more grateful in general, but not in day-to-day life.

### **Gratitude Narratives and Spirituality**

Lastly, we conducted a preliminary content coding of the gratitude narratives. Out of 86 narratives obtained, just over half of the respondents (51%) stated being grateful to God. Of these, 25% were grateful to God for bringing specific people into their lives, another 25% were grateful to God for life itself, and the remaining 50% were grateful to God that things were not worse, were grateful for technology, healing, or, protection, or grateful that their lives had been spared. An illustrative gratitude narrative is presented in Table 2.

### **Discussion**

This is the first empirical article on gratitude to appear in a journal of Christian psychology. Even though thanksgiving to God is one of the most basic religious expressions and is one of the most common themes of people's prayers and descriptions of their religious lives, little empirical research within a Christian framework on this topic has been previously conducted. All measures of public and private religiousness in this study were significantly associated with both dispositional gratitude and grateful feelings assessed on a daily basis. Although these correlations were not large (ranged from  $r = .28$  to  $r = .52$ ), they were significant and suggest that spiritually or religiously inclined people have a stronger disposition to experience gratitude than do their less spiritual/religious counterparts. We also found that gratitude was positively related to a non-denominational measure of spiritual transcendence. Grateful people are thus more likely to acknowledge a belief in the interconnectedness of all life and a commitment to and responsibility to others. In that they see life as part of a wider, or transcendent context, those high on transcendence are able to affirm life as full of opportunities and recognize in existence the possibilities of giftedness within a benevolent universe. While being religious and/or spiritual may facilitate gratitude, the correlations, even when taking measurement error into account, do not imply that gratitude requires a spiritual or religious framework.

Being a correlational study, we cannot with any certainty say that spiritual and religious incli-

**Table 2***Gratitude narrative written by a 66 year-old female.*

Our family was on vacation in Miami, Florida. My brother and I had been playing in the waves along the beach when I became very chilled and was shivering. My parents took me back to the hotel. There I became very sick with a high fever of almost 107 degrees. I barely remember my father carrying me in his arms—wrapped up in a blanket—through the hotel lobby to a car. By the time we reached the hospital, I was unconscious.

The doctors told my parents that I would not live, and they should prepare themselves for my death. For several days and nights, everyone expected me to die. Suddenly, my fever broke. My mother said that the bobby pins in my hair rusted from the sweat when my fever broke.

I clearly remember Mother telling me this, and also the gratitude upon her face and in voice that I had lived. The experience of listening to her made a profound impression on me. I think this is why I have always felt that life is a gift—and that my life is from God.

Most people do not realize that life is a gift until much later in life. I feel I am very fortunate to have known even as a child that life is indeed a gift to be cherished. So that is another gift: to have this awareness of life being a gift.

Knowing that I almost died—and was expected to die—has made me exceedingly grateful to be alive. I thank God for this gift of my life! And I like to share my experience with others, in the hope that they too may become aware of how precious the gift of life is.

Note. The participant scored .98 standard deviations above the mean on the GQ.

nations facilitate gratitude, as it is also conceivable that gratitude facilitates the development of religious and spiritual interests (Allport, Gillespie, & Young, 1948). A third possibility is that the association of gratitude and spirituality/religiousness is caused by extraneous variables yet to be identified. Finally, a reciprocal relationship is also a strong possibility, in which those whose lives are shaped by theistic or at least spiritual worldviews are more likely to perceive intentional benevolence in the world, and their subsequent feelings of gratitude strengthen both their beliefs and their sensed closeness to God.

The association between gratitude and religion may reflect the fact that people who are highly religious and/or spiritual tend to perceive positive circumstances in their lives that are not caused by human action (e.g., eyesight, a sunny day) as nevertheless resulting from the intentional behavior of a benevolent moral agent (i.e., God or a higher power). In contrast, less religious or spiritual individuals might attribute these same events as due to chance, and therefore, be less inclined to feel grateful in response. The 13<sup>th</sup> century theologian Thomas Aquinas stated that the essence of gratitude was an ability to recognize the many contributors that play a role, however distal, in one's positive outcomes. Emmons, McCullough, and Tsang (2003) referred to this aspect of the grateful disposition as *gratitude density*. Gratitude density refers to the number of

persons to whom one feels grateful for a single positive outcome or life circumstance. When asked to whom one feels grateful for a certain outcome, say, obtaining a good job, someone with a strong grateful disposition might list a large number of others, including parents, elementary school teachers, tutors, mentors, fellow students, and God or a higher power. Someone less disposed toward gratitude might feel grateful to fewer people for such a benefit.

The results of this study suggest one explanation for why religiously involved people are at a lower risk for depressive symptoms or other mental health difficulties (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). The beneficial effects of religious involvement on health are well-documented. One particularly promising explanation of causal mechanisms might involve the experience of religiously engendered emotions, such as hope, love, forgiveness, and gratitude (Levin, 2000). A grateful approach to life has been shown to confer a range of benefits, including emotional, interpersonal, and even physical (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Given that expressions of praise and thanksgiving are key components of religious worship (Wainwright, 1980), the physiological effects of gratitude hold promise for understanding the influence of religious involvement on health. It has been argued that gratitude may be a positive mood characteristic of religiously and spiritually engaged people, just as an absence of

depressive symptoms is a negative mood characteristic of spiritually and religiously engaged people (Smith, et al., 2003). In that gratitude is indicative of healthy emotional and spiritual functioning (and conversely, that a lack of gratitude portends dysfunction) we, following Pruyser (1976), recommend that psychospiritual assessments in clinical and health settings routinely measure client levels of gratitude.

An intriguing issue for future research is whether spiritually and religiously inclined individuals have resources in their repertoire to successfully counter several obstacles to grateful thinking, such as a sense of entitlement, a fear of dependency, perceptions of victimhood, and upward comparison thinking (Emmons & Hill, 2001). Narcissism is negatively related to religiosity (Sandage, Worthington, Hight, & Berry, 2000). We would then anticipate that narcissistic entitlement would reduce if not eliminate being grateful in any meaningful way. Since spirituality is a resource enabling gratefulness, an acknowledged sense of humility and surrender to a power greater than oneself would then facilitate grateful thoughts and actions. Similarly, a healthy dependency, encouraged by acknowledging one's limitations and the need to rely on the grace-based giving of others, can be developed and substituted for a fear of dependency in which we are loathe to admit that we feel indebted to someone who is our benefactor. Because of the value placed on self-sufficiency and individualism, Sommers (1988) found that Americans in general ranked gratitude comparatively low in desirability and constructiveness. A healthy dependence, formed through a mature understanding of the nature of God and God's relation to humanity might counter negative attitudes toward gratitude.

### Conclusion

Gratefulness to God is a core concept in Christian theology and in Christian ethical life. As such, it is a prime candidate for scientific integration efforts in psychology and theology (see Sorenson, 1996, for a clinical perspective on gratitude within integrative graduate programs). We hope that future research will refine our understanding of gratitude within a spiritual and religious framework and will lead to new and testable hypotheses concerning religion, emotion, and psychological well-being. In this sense, modern research stands to ratify the central role of gratitude in the Christian faith, as expressed in these words from the Westminster Confession of Faith:

"These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life" (Chapter XVI, Article II).

### Note

1 All Scripture passages are taken from the New International Version.

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