

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GOOD AS A MEASURE OF HUMAN FULFILLMENT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Petre-Octavian TUCĂ¹, Dragoș BĂLAN² and Nicușor TUCĂ³,

¹ Faculty of Theology, University of "Ovidius", Constanța,

² Faculty of Theology, University of "Ovidius", Constanța,

³ Faculty of Theology, University of "Ovidius", Constanța,
ROMANIA

E-mail: octavian.tuca@icloud.com, dragos_balan1980@yahoo.com, tucanicusor@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The aspiration for good is embedded in human nature and has a universal character. Whether talking about material well-being or spiritual well-being, everyone's desire is to be better. But without realizing that, apart from God, nothing can be "better", all people's actions of people for this good become inconsistent. Material prosperity cannot bring fulfillment to contemporary man and can even be a basis for addiction and disease. Minimum material conditions are necessary, but they must not become a goal in life.

Keywords: human being; value; globalization; good;

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of extremes and meaninglessness. Good almost means nothing to man today. Contemporary life promises extraordinary living conditions, based on economic and technological progress, but the reality is cruel and makes man no longer feel any full joy. Promised fulfillment and happiness turn into sadness, suffering, and even illness. The purpose of life is the satisfaction of pleasures and needs, but these pleasures are almost unlimited in contemporary times, given that they are increased for profit. You can almost "touch" happiness, but you cannot feel it. Much distorted from the deep understanding, the good is seen through the prism of the conditions and facilities provided, through the framework of equality and opportunity, through an efficient economic process, and through the freedom to choose from as many options as possible to be happy. In short, "being fulfilled" today is equal to "being able to" buy and consume.

Goodness is not only limited to material well-being, it must also be a spiritual state of well-being. Not only externally, but also communally, and internally. Man is not only a body, but also a soul. We have an outlined distinction, according to many writings, between the sensible good - pleasure, the intellectual good - science and the moral good - virtue.

In Christianity, good does not overcome the conceptions of ancient philosophy through a better-developed concept, but through Christ, Who is the fullness of good and goodness, through which humanity has the opportunity to connect with the Holy Trinity. It is a communion by grace, not with the being of God, but it is a real, "psychosomatic" communion, not a merely rational one.

1. GOOD AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF GOD AND AS A HUMAN VIRTUE

Viktor Frankl, the great Viennese psychiatrist and philosopher, survivor of four Nazi camps, conveys in his writings very traumatic experiences. However, he manages to lay down an essential Christian teaching to which we must relate even when the forces of evil act upon us: how we will react to everything that happens to us, even in the most difficult moments of life. In *Man's Search for the Meaning of Life*, Frankl appreciated that even in the hardest moments, "a man who has nothing left in this world can know happiness, if only for a moment, when he thinks of the person he loves".¹

Relating to the loved one presupposes familiar communion and a communion with the Persons of the Holy Trinity. We cannot enter into communion with God the Father without participating in the suffering and death of the Son. Thus, "the communion with Him takes place not only through the protocols of joy and hope, but also through the trial of suffering and death",² says Andrei Pleșu.

The preferred environment of evil's influences is the human soul and if we allow evil to gain control over us it can produce brutal and direct havoc or it can manifest itself in the form of subtle aggressiveness; both in one case and in the other this association with evil, which we make room for in our mind and soul, leads to tragic and total alienation from everything that is life: from God, from love, from beauty and from meaning. Andrew Solomon believes that the bad associations we face daily, bring man closer to the edge of the "abyss of life", leading him to a continuous torment: "the rhythm of life, endemic loneliness, the interdependence between people, the collapse of traditional family structures" are the main factors leading to an increasing rate of depression. He also proposes means of healing when he says that we must seek faith in God, and help those in need, but above all we must deal with love and teach others to do the same.³

Every wisdom, every philosophy in its time, had as a purpose to make the world better, and as history proves to us, human wisdom has failed to propose something, as a medicine of medicines, as a bandage of bandages, universally valid, which fits on any wound and can heal a community, a person, a family or a nation. The savior Christ, through His incarnation, brings this medicine, fully clarifying what the state of well-being consists of and how it should be reported.

Goodness is an attribute of God, but also a human virtue. This is where some confusion may come from when we talk about good. It characterizes God's being, and therefore we cannot speak of good as a mere philosophical idea. God's actions are good, He is goodness itself, the goodness that man can never have except by grace, by likeness. Man cannot have the being of God, he never unites with the being. At the same time, we always talk about good and kindness, characterizing people or actions or even objects. A man is

¹Viktor E. FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning. The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust*, Rider Publishing, London, 2004, p. 49: „A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth - that the love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love*. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved” – p. 48-49.

² Andrei PLEȘU, *Preface to C.S. LEWIS, De ce, Doamne? O radiografie a suferinței*, translated by Tatiana Niculescu, Publishing House Humanitas, Bucharest, 2020, p. 9.

³ Andrew SOLOMON, *Demonul amiezii*, translated by Dana-Ligia Ilin, Publishing House Humanitas, Bucharest, 2014, p. 42.

called good, but never in the sense in which God is also good. That is why Christ also said: "Why do you call me Good?" No one is good but only God" (Matthew 19, 17), because the teacher of the law related to Christ not as God, but as a simple man, a teacher of the law.

Man can participate in God's goodness through grace and this process can also be called salvation or deification. This is the good that man must pursue and the path to follow is only through dispassion, through virtues, through grace, in this way man attains human fulfillment and perfection. Good is a quality of God's being, it can be done by man authentically only through grace and then man achieves the goal for which he was created, gaining communion with God, but it can also be considered a goal of man, a value to follow, but which does not lead to fulfillment and meaning, because it is a sense "manufactured" by man's reason outside of God, as is often encountered today.

As an attribute of God, it does not mean that good encompasses God or that God is reduced to a concept. "The characterization of God as good does not define Him", says Professor Mantzaridis, "but it satisfies an inner human need to say something about God".⁴ More precisely, God is considered to be the "Source of all good", but at the same time, He is "beyond good": "Orthodox apophatic theology places God beyond the meaning of good. God as transcendence is beyond all meaning".⁵

Father Stăniloae binds the good to God's omnipotence, that is, to the power to do whatever, he wants, He not being able to "work against His being" and, at the same time, not being able to "fall to the state of not being able to do whatever He wants": "With God, no act is performed independently of His will. And the divine will choose its objects neither according to the consciousness of limited power, nor arbitrarily, but according to the good being one with His being. For God is "the subsisting good", as Dionysius the Areopagite says. Or, "with God, the good coincides with the being", as Saint John of Damascus says".⁶

The problem of good as an attribute of God's being is not a simple syllogism, it is not based only on reasoning, but on the experience of God's love by the saints. All of God's actions in relation to man are expressions of His goodness. Creation is "an outpouring of the Creator's love and goodness for the happiness of the created".⁷

God cannot will anything else because ontologically nothing better exists. As we would think, evil is not the opposite of good, but a denial of God.⁸ Only man can choose between good and evil because his will is not like God's. Here comes the moment of Adam's fall, who refused to be strengthened in the good, believing that he could find the good outside of God. The tragic state of the world after the fall is exclusively the exclusive fruit of Adam's action, not God's will.⁹

Patristic theology abounds in texts in which God has good as an attribute and deeds have goodness as an attribute. Saint Athanasius the Great calls God "the Source of all

⁴ Georgios MANTZARIDIS, *Morala creștină. Omul și Dumnezeu. Omul și semenul. Poziționări și perspective existențiale și bioetice*, vol. II, translated by Cornel Constantin Coman, Publishing House Bizantină, Bucharest, 2006, p. 19.

⁵ Teofan MADA, *Despățimirea. De la etică la ființialitate. Păcatul și Pocăința, Autoconștiința neptică și Autoconștiința patogenă, poli ai Spiritualității Ortodoxe*, Agnos Publishing House, Sibiu, 2007, p. 39.

⁶ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. I, EIBMOR, Bucharest, 2010, p. 223.

⁷ Ioan CHIOAR, *Binele și răul în viziunea creștină. Sensul vieții și al morții*, Publishing House Universal Dalsi, București, 1996, p. 19.

⁸ Teofan MADA, *cited work*, p. 39.

⁹ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *cited work*, p. 508.

goodness.",¹⁰ and this is also emphasized by Saint Clement of Alexandria, Saint Basil the Great, Dionysius the Areopagite or Saint Gregory of Nyssa.¹¹ Blessed Augustine, in his writings against Manichaeism, shows that there is nothing else in God above good:

„God is the ultimate good and nothing is superior to Him. Therefore He is the immutable good, that is, the truly eternal and truly immortal. All other goods come only from Him, and not of Him. [...] In fact, apart from the ultimate good, any kind of good, even the final good, which is far from the ultimate good, can only come from the ultimate good itself”.¹²

Good cannot be just an abstract idea, but it is a good that exists as a result of a personal relationship, a relationship that is perfected in the bosom of the Holy Trinity, as Father Stăniloae points out: "But good par excellence, or absolutely, coincides with the perfect being, or with God himself, also for the reason that good cannot be an abstract concept, purely thought, but a subsisting good, which as such is a reference of one person to another person. A good that does not refer consciously, that is personal, to someone else who perceives it consciously, that is to another person, is not good.

Thus, the absolute good is the relationship or the perfect love between the absolute Persons, which form a unity that goes up to a maximum that allows the non-confusion between Them. And since the good in God is eternal, this good is nothing but the maximum and eternal unconfused unity between the three divine Persons. Eternal good is the Holy Trinity".¹³ The acts of God are an extension of the good, an extension of the interpersonal communion of the Holy Trinity, but this extension does not consist in a multiplication of the divine Persons, states Father Stăniloae, but in the creation of persons capable of communion with God, capable "of becoming god by grace", to therefore having "a nature capable of being the nature of a divine hypostasis".¹⁴

The authentic living of Christians in love towards others, having the consciousness of members of the Body of Christ, the Church, is a foundation of the understanding of the good from a theological perspective. Good is achieved in communion because life in Christ "rejects individual virtue, the particular deed, the evaluation of subjective merits", points out Christos Yannaras, who continues: "The *morality* of the Church is a liturgical *morality*, a *morality* of unity and communion, a personal participation in The Body of God's Word".¹⁵ The good becomes a goal of all, a good inseparable from God, a good of all not in the sense of value, but of living and realizing love for the other and for God. It is a "selfless giving", love having an accentuated "active character",¹⁶ "orthopraxy" being one of the missionary

¹⁰ SAINT ATHANASIUS THE GREAT, "Word against the Hellenes. Word on the Incarnation of the Word. Three words against the Arians", in *Părinți și scriitori bisericești*, vol. 15, translated from Greek, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1987, p. 92.

¹¹ Cf. Geoffrey William Hugo LAMPE (ed.), *A patristic greek lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961, p. 4.

¹² AUGUSTIN, *Despre natura binelui. Contra maniheilor*, transl. from Latin, notes and comments by Cristian Șoimușan, afterword, chronology and bibliography by Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 18.

¹³ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *cited work*, p. 224.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 227.

¹⁵ Christos YANNARAS, *Libertatea moralei*, translated by Mihai Cantuniari, Publishing House Anastasia, Bucharest, 2002, p. 79.

¹⁶ Gheorghe ISTODOR, *Iubirea creștină și provocările contemporane – perspective misionare*, Publishing House Sigma, Bucharest, 2006, p. 239.

methods of getting the world out of the crisis, of "awakening the Christ in us",¹⁷ as Patriarch Daniel points out.

In Eastern theology, the good is not a simple value that must be promoted and that can easily become a manipulative slogan, but it means a relationship with God that must tend towards the acquisition of likeness to God, manifested through deeds that lead to God.¹⁸ When we manage to distinguish God's presence in the world, everything takes on a positive, good meaning, but the problem arises when man becomes autonomous and self-sufficient: "When [man, n.n.] does not believe in God and approaches the world nihilistically, or egocentrically, all become opaque and deceptive, even if they seem good and useful. So, in the last phase, the distinction of things and events into good and bad does not depend on them, but on man and his position towards God and His things".¹⁹

Man can participate in God's goodness through grace, and this process can also be called salvation or deification. Deification by grace brings out the essence of Christianity. It does not refer to a way of life-related to some values, but to the Triune God. It does not seek to create a "better" society, i.e., more prosperous, economic welfare at all costs, faithful to impersonal principles, but it truly seeks human fulfillment and happiness that comes from Christ and are not according to the values of this world, based on autonomy, reason, consumption, and profit. It is happiness after and in Christ which, many times, is felt in lacks, in troubles, not in enjoyment or dissipation. The good, which includes in the theological vision an "existential experience in Christ",²⁰ is sharing His life, as Father Stăniloae reinforces: "Whoever works well in life is strengthened in existence, that is, in its eternity, but since through good it gets used to always moving towards God and around God, through this it partakes of Him eternally by His existence".²¹ It is not life as it appears in society, it never has been. This work is not a plea for suffering and sadness or a "slave mentality", but a plea for joy, happiness, communion, a "brother of Christ" mentality, of the son of God by grace, which transfigures any value and any social status.

2. GOOD IN THE PRESENT – MATERIAL WELFARE AS A CONTEMPORARY GLOBALIST MEASURE ON THE GOOD OF THE HUMAN BEING

Today, in a globalist vision, the understanding of the good is detached from the philosophical and theological meaning. All that matters is selfish happiness and fulfillment, we could say, based on immediate benefits and individualistic pleasures. In general, when we talk about good in contemporaneity, we enter under the dome of a so-called materialistic "good", which wants to have as an immediate consequence material well-being. For contemporaries, the good actually presupposes fragmentary attitudes and interests, but in a global framework. Concerns about the environment and pollution, war, and accumulation are somehow common. The good is maintained today through economic sanctions applied between countries. It is a selfish reporting on the world, in which the direct, palpable,

¹⁷ † DANIEL, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bucovina, *Dăruire și dăinuire. Raze și chipuri de lumină din istoria și spiritualitatea românilor*, Publishing House Trinitas, Iași, 2005, pp. 391-392.

¹⁸ Christos YANNARAS, *cited work*, p. 76.

¹⁹ Georgios MANTZARIDIS, *cited work*, p. 19.

²⁰ Christos YANNARAS, *Adevărul și unitatea Bisericii*, translated by Ignatie (Ilie) Trif și Uliniuc Ionuț Dumitru, Sophia Publishing House, București, 2009, pp. 74.-75.

²¹ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, nota 104, la SFÂNTUL MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, translated by de Dumitru Stăniloae, EIBMBOR, București, 2006, p. 172.

calculable benefits are actually pursued. In short, current visions of good are generally oriented toward material well-being. The processes of industrialization, technology, consumption, and globalization are not alien to these considerations of the good.

Material well-being does not concern man's privacy, does not seek to directly understand his inner mechanisms, but is only concerned with building a material base which, eventually, can also be used for education or spiritual cultivation. The doctor and psychotherapist Thierry Janssen perfectly summed up the state of a society imbued with materialism, driven towards production and consumption: "Peace and happiness depend essentially on the ability to act, to produce and to possess. Being has become less important than doing. Consequently, modern man is more interested in external production than in his inner potential".²² So, most of the time – if not every time – the aspect of spiritual, inner improvement is overlooked when talking about material well-being. It overlooks the fact that happiness or fulfillment cannot come from a relationship with objects, but with people.

True happiness and well-being come from our striving to attain God-likeness. Material welfare does not even bring a partial fulfillment of man, well-being comes to reorient man towards the spiritual and inner meaning of man, and well-being in God also gives meaning to well-being and welfare, both being used with their ontological meaning and it gives man not only health, fulfillment and happiness but also deification.

Sonja Lyubomirsky shows that this state has often been presented distortedly, as being caused only by money, beauty, or success at work, but in reality, things are completely different. Even an attitude in which we relate to life in a comfortable manner does not lead to fulfillment: "We need to understand that there are more facets to happiness than the ubiquitous smiley faces or inspirational posters".²³

The author shows that happiness can be hidden in curiosity and enthusiasm for new daily horizons, in making plans for the future, but also in the moments when we can't wait to read a story to our children. It offers a new perspective on the model of material well-being. Happiness does not come by itself, it does not depend on chance,²⁴ human fulfillment is more than accumulation and consumption.

Lyubomirsky also draws attention to the fact that happiness does not have a single recipe that is valid for everyone and cannot be easily achieved, even if we know, in principle, the way to it: "Of course, we would all be happy if we sincerely express gratitude for our health, family, friends, homes, and jobs, even for those things that are imperfect".²⁵

Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes the fact that happiness is a state that is reached by controlling the human interiority and does not appear as if by a miracle, the effort is needed to understand it: "Happiness is a state that is prepared, cultivated, and defended by each individual in part. Those who learn to control their inner experience will be able to influence the quality of their lives and will succeed in getting close to what it means to be happy".²⁶

²² Thierry JANSSEN, *Soluția interioară. Spre o nouă medicină a corpului și a spiritului*, translated by George Morărel, Publishing House Curtea Veche, București, 2007, p. 319.

²³ Sonja LYUBOMIRSKY, *Cum să fii fericit. O abordare științifică pentru a avea viața pe care ți-o dorești*, translated by Dorina Oprea, Amsta Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

²⁶ Mihaly CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, *Flux. Psihologia fericirii*, translated by din engleză de Monica Lungu, Publishing House Publica, București, 2015, p. 10.

Zülfü Livaneli believes that being happy is not a simple concept, but a state: "It is important to feel that you are alive, that your life has meaning, that it values something. It is not about the kind of happiness that a young woman tries when she puts on a white wedding dress and holds a bouquet of flowers, but about a deeper existential problem, about the answer to strange questions, like the meaning of your coming into the world or the small contribution you can make to the existence of the old planet, of the people who lead their existence on its surface".²⁷ The mentioned author reports that in Rome there is a cemetery where the people buried there do not write their actual age on their tombstones, but the number of days they were happy during their life: "Some were happy 21 days, others 37. Not one of them exceeded 52 days."²⁸

Well-being goes beyond the material plane, focusing on the inner resources of the approach to life. Even if he said it more than half a century ago, the philosopher Bertrand Russel shows that happiness depends on how you choose to feel and react to the events of everyday life, being a sympathetic attitude to follow²⁹. Today, researchers show that inner control is necessary for the acquisition of well-being, control not only of deeds, and attitudes but also of thoughts, an effort of a spiritual nature: "Happiness is difficult to obtain and even more difficult to explain. But if you want to experience well-being – defined as a general state of happiness and good health – the brain needs to send positive signals, not negative ones [...] You must create and maintain the ingredients of well-being. The controls are located <<inside>>".³⁰ It does not mean that it is important in the brain itself as an organ of the body, but by analyzing the activity of synapses and neural circuits, some improvements in well-being could be observed, every word influencing the activity of circuits and having concrete repercussions in human life.

Nowadays, where the good is totally torn from its original meaning and tends towards materialism, hedonism, utilitarianism, and accumulation. But not really for everyone. Although disregarding the reality of God's existence, modern research in neuroscience and psychology draws attention to the fact that human happiness does not come from without, but from within. Sociology shows that the consumerist and materialistic wave is causing great damage to human life. The ideal of happiness, human fulfillment, cannot be achieved through consumption, technology, through the abandonment of all inner effort. This time it is the Church and scientists who say it. Modern researchers sound the alarm and say that good and happiness are achieved through balance, virtues, love, every word, and even, influencing the general state of happiness.

Even if they still do not send to their source, God, the neurosciences highlight what the philocal fathers, for example, in another form, taught: guarding the mind, thoughts, dispassion, fasting, virtues, tears, spiritual life, physical activities, love, all are signs and benchmarks for the real fulfillment of man. Not only food influences health, but every word and gesture produce changes, and methylations of genes, altering their good condition.

²⁷ Zülfü LIVANELI, *Serenadă pentru Nadia*, translated by Luminița Munteanu, Publishing House Humanitas, București, 2021, p. 395-396.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 395.

²⁹ Bertrand RUSSEL, *În căutarea fericirii*, translated by S.G. Drăgan, Publishing House Humanitas, București, 2013, p. 139.

³⁰ Deepak CHOPRA, Rudolph E. TANZI, *Supercreeierul. Cum să-ți eliberezi puterea explozivă a minții pentru a-ți maximiza sănătatea, fericirea și starea de bine spirituală*, translated by Constantin Dumitru, Lifestyle Publishing House, București, 2013, p. 322.

Neuroscience thus discovers the basic rationales of creation, according to which everything leads to God and is given for the deification of man. Science may not know or accept this, but this is where theology comes in to connect all the information and make sense of it. Goodness becomes a way of life again. But for everything to have full meaning, a drop of divine grace is needed, the return to Christ and the Church, to the state of well-being in God.

CONCLUSIONS

Summarizing what has been presented so far, from a theological point of view, only God is truly good, goodness characterizes His being, and man's effort to reach from the image to the likeness of God through grace is the goodness or the maximum good of his life.

Outside of this existential reality, whatever is considered to be well or good is only a "consensual" good, in appearance. Ancient philosophy glimpsed this reality, therefore, the good of man was the rejection of passionate instincts and the work of virtue, a process that made man happy. Virtue was therefore the ultimate goal, the maximum fulfillment, while in a theological sense, the goal is communion with God, not virtue itself. To be good is to be in God. Being moral without God means nothing. By creation, man has implanted in his nature - by the fact that he is image "after God" - the ontological orientation towards Him, which Adam obscured, so that the performance of good, by any man after Adam, bears a trace of that call to God. That is why ancient philosophy was a way of life oriented towards good, but it did not know that God is actually good.

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