

GRACE IN CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Divine Grace may be said to be the most fundamental religious concept of the Christian tradition. For the Judeo-Christian strand of religion faith is not an ontology of God for man nor its final goal a dissolution and disappearance of the INDIVIDUAL in the transcendent and all embracing reality of the ABSOLUTE. Instead it is more an anthropology of man before God, the meaning of divine graciousness and generosity for the life of human beings. Religious history is salvation history, history of the great deeds of God showing concern and compassion for all his children. Grace is *charis*, a free gift, a gracious self-communication from God to the human self, rendering it pleasing and acceptable and raising it to a divine level of existence. Such a concept has full relevance only in the context of a God-man interpersonal relationship on which the whole Christian religion is built up. In this paper I shall briefly examine the Judaic background of the Christian concept of Grace, its evolution in the New Testament literature, later development along with other points of Christian faith, and the contemporary issues that bear on Christian life as a life of grace.

1. Judaic Background of the Concept of Grace

The Torah, the books of the Penteteuch, the core of the Hebrew religious literature was probably composed during the reign of Solomon, a time of peace and social harmony. So the relationship with God also was conceived in the same fashion. Going beyond the outstanding figure of David, Jews looked back on their ancient history as centred in great mythological personalities like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. These ancestors not only provided effective leadership to the people, but were also eminently successful in maintaining a cordial relationship with the Supreme Lord of heaven, Yahweh, their tribal God, who slowly emerged in their religious consciousness as the creator of heaven and earth. This God was not an impersonal force, unknowable and unreachable by human beings, nor a *Deus ex machina*, a functional deity who occasionally intervened in the affairs of human beings to render certain services for a price. He is a gracious Father who out of sheer love and generosity created man and made him a partner in a sort of treaty laying down certain conditions and making promises in return. Though Adam and Eve the first human couple made a

mess of their life by violating the divinely established covenant, God remains the same gracious Lord, promising human race eventual salvation through a Messiah. Israel found signs and pledges of that final redemption in their political liberation from Egypt by Yahweh against all odds (Exod. 3, 7 ff; 15, 21; 18, 8 ff) and their conquest of Canaan as given to them as a personal gift by the Lord. (Gen. 12, 1 ff.; Exod. 3, 8; 33, 1 ff).

The nature of this friendly relationship with God can be understood to a certain extent in contrast with the situation of sin in which that friendship is lost: Sin of the first parents was a violation of God's command in a vain attempt to be like God; So Grace is one of humble obedience to the heavenly Father. The fratricide (Gen. 3, 1 ff) of Cain as a model for human sin gives an idea of the state of divine fellowship as one of harmony with other human beings (Gen. 4, 8-15). The tragedy of Babel coming out of man's attempt to attain security all by himself, gives a hint that man's acceptability before God requires his recognition of his ontological reality of total dependence on God (Gen. 11, 1-8). The story of the Deluge presented in the 6th chapter of Genesis is a myth common to different religious traditions. The corruption provoking God's wrath is man's attempt to become a superior race by the mating of "sons of God and daughters of men." For many rabbis and early Christian thinkers this is the Original Sin story, man's search for immortality as graphically described in the Epic of Gilgamesh. God even expresses a fear that man may eat of the tree of life and live for ever (Gen. 3, 22). The idea behind the whole story is that life belongs to God alone by right and that man has to obtain that life in intimate union with God. The moment man begins to act as if he were the source of his being, he is out of truth, and this inner contradiction is expressed in terms of discord and violence in society. When man crosses his limits God removes the limits set by him in creation over the primeval watery chaos, by opening the flood gates of the firmament.

Another aspect of the life of grace is presented in the Old Testament by the condemnation of fertility cults and abuses connected with it. Its view of sexuality stresses its procreative possibility and sharing in the creative work. Absolutization of sexual experience shown in promiscuity, mixed marriages and fertility rites, is again a challenge of the divine creativity, a passionate hatred of every limit and a blind desire for the destruction of the other. So it is seen as a violation of grace and of divine fellowship. The central positive symbol of the life of grace in the Old Testament is that of the Covenant: Man becomes a partner in a treaty with God; but the first instal-

ment from the side of God is the creation of man, the partner! In the semi-nomadic condition of ancient Jews, wandering up and down the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East, the model of fellowship with God was that of a contract with the tribal deity. The community, and not the individual, counted, and its special deity dwelt in the midst of the people, forming the divine shekina or divine presence. Various myths used by the Bible such as the creation myth, the paradise myth, the myth of 'divine' marriages, and the Nimrod myth, already introduce themes that will be central to the Christian perspective on Grace: Life as a venture of faith, Christ, the God-made-man as the centre and model of the new life, and the ritual passage into the new life are some of such themes. But in the JUDAIC PERSPECTIVE the grace of Yahweh remained within the framework of a formal covenant with the people of Israel, somewhat remote and never intimately personal. Abraham's call and the promise made to him created salvation history. History is what happens between promise and fulfilment. Even Jacob's struggles right from his mother's womb lasting throughout his life were symbolic of the whole people of Israel, rather than the personal experiences of an individual. The Sinai Covenant combines the divine initiative experienced in the invincible righteous power, and the human response through right human relationships that are to be raised to the level of absolute values. The blessings are all temporal, and there is a stubborn refusal to translate them into a timeless spiritual plane. Even in the prophets the promises are never detached from concrete historical realities. Amos's cry for justice is that everyone should fulfil his obligations in one's particular position in society. Isaias of Jerusalem is pleading with his people that it should recognize the supremacy of Yahweh and rely on him alone for its political security and should not go for opportunistic political alliances which would back-fire in the long run. The prophets proclaimed that the Lord was a gracious God. Even after the period of judgement and destruction merited by the infidelities of the people¹ he would bring to an end the distress of the present time.² But in the whole Old Testament the theme of an ongoing promise of Yahweh can be understood only in the idea of a 'corporate' personality. The end of life itself is not death, but a life with a purity of heart. Since man himself cannot attain that purity of heart, God himself would produce the transformation in their hearts.³ The experience of the Babylonian exile helped to confirm the idea of God as a God of

1. Is. 30. 18; Zeph 3. 5; Is. 1. 19

2. Amos 5. 18

3. Jer. 24. 4ff; 31. 33ff; 32. 36ff; Ezek 11. 19f; 32. 25ff

righteousness and the need of absolute obedience to him. But the prophets of the exilic and post-exilic periods endeavoured to show that God of grace, and that he never rejects those who repent. He will bring people into light.⁴ He is waiting to have mercy on his people and he shall be exalted in sparing them.⁵ From the period of the exile there is greater emphasis on the individual's personal relation to the Lord, repentance over sin, and hope in his forgiveness, and his closeness to all who call upon him.

There is a certain evolution in Israel's concept of God's presence and activity in the life of people. It began with an awareness of the occasional divine interventions. Any event too hard for man is taken as a 'sign' of God's power. Thus political events like the escape from Egypt and deliverance from an Assyrian invasion, or even an 'impossible' occurrence like the moving backward of the shadow of the Sun given to Hezekiah⁶ are clear indications of the presence and activity of God. In this light the liberation of the world from primeval chaos, escape from Egypt and the freedom from Babylonian captivity are all seen as different moments in the saving activity of God for Israel and humanity. The Song of Hezekiah⁷ marks a clear change in Israel's perception of God's saving presence. Till that time, the relationship with God was seen to end with death. Hezekiah discovers that the Lord is master of life and death. But firm belief in life after death developed only during the Babylonian exile.

2. The New Testament Doctrine of Grace

The great change from the Old Testament to the New in the perception of Grace is the shift of emphasis from the signs and deeds of God to the personal presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth, in whom the human race encountered God in flesh and blood. Redemption itself is the human experience of God's holiness in action, meeting the human need and establishing right human relationships. The life and work of Jesus Christ is the perfect demonstration of God's redemptive holiness and human cooperation. His crucifixion and resurrection show that God will not compromise nor withdraw from the human situation, until the power of divine holiness overcomes all that opposes it. St. John states the essence of Christian message at the beginning both of his Gospel and of his first epistle. The

4. *Mich* 7, 7-9

5. *Is.* 30, 18

6. *Is.* 38. 1-39. 8

7. *Is.* 38. 9-20

epistle is perhaps the more ancient formulation of the Christian witness: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life . . . this we do bear witness to and declare unto you."⁸ Every action by Jesus is seen as a sign pointing to his real character as God. The main events of Jesus' life are presented as signs which came to focus in his crucifixion and resurrection. As a whole they indicate the range and extent of God's creative power as it was shown by Jesus and as experienced by those who accepted him. "Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is no other name under the heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved."⁹

But the word "grace" (the Greek 'charis') occurs very rarely in the Gospels. It does not occur in Mark and Mathew. The few times it is used in Luke it means 'thanks' and the Old Testament sense of 'favour' (1.30). In John it occurs in the Prologue referring to the fullness of truth and grace in Christ from which we received grace upon grace.¹⁰ "Grace" is an abstraction having a wide variety of meaning like thanks, charm, kindness and favour. The Gospels are more interested in stating in concrete idioms what has been accomplished in Jesus Christ. The parables speak about the inauguration of the kingdom of God, the rule of God in the hearts of people. It is the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that germinates and grows into a large bush; the precious gem hidden in a field to secure which one has to sell all that one has; the seed that is sown in all kinds of soil, but takes root and yields best in the best soil; the wedding banquet into which all are invited and almost forced to enter, but from which those without the wedding garment are thrown out. The new life brought by Christ baffles all human conceptions and calculations. Jesus is the gracious saviour who casts out devils, and shows compassion and mercy towards the sick and the suffering and heals them.¹¹ Similarly the miracles of Christ are signs of the new kingdom, the personal presence of the Son of God in the midst of the people, the encounter between the need of man and the gracious love of God.

i. *Accommodation to the Greek Outlook.* If we look at the development of the theology of Grace in the New Testament itself, it appears first as an

8. 1 Jn 1. 1-2

9. Acts 4, 12

10. Jn 1. 14, 16, 17

11. Mk 5. 19; 10. 47f

accommodation of the Gospel to the Greek concerns and preoccupations. In fact it was the sophisticated Greek audience that challenged the Christians to develop systematically their new religious message. St. Paul and others who took the Gospel to the Greeks wanted to make it intelligible to them. In his speech at the Athenian Areopagus Paul starts by pointing out the obviously superficial aspect of their religion namely dedicating temples and altars to all Gods: "God who made the world, and all things therein; he being Lord of heaven and earth, dwells not in temples made with hands."¹² Yet God is very close to man since even according to certain Greek philosophers "in God we live, and move and are", and we are the offspring of God. This closeness to God is that is concretely realized in the man Jesus and his resurrection.¹³ Death and resurrection of Christ were the stumbling block for the Greeks in accepting the Christian message. But Paul presents these the concrete realization of the saving presence in man of the divine Logos and Pneuma so familiar to the Greeks. Christ crucified looks foolish to the gentiles who sought wisdom, and a stumbling block to the Jews who looked for signs. But to those who are called by the word of God, both Jews and Greeks alike, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.¹⁴ For the cross of Christ stands as the sign of the self-emptying of God in love for the sake of man.¹⁵ What reveals the divinity of Jesus Christ more than his stupendous miracles is his immense love manifested in his total self-surrender in death for the sake of man. The crucified saviour is not a mere man, but the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, in whom heaven and earth, everything visible and invisible were created. He is before all and by him all things exist.¹⁶ Christ is the unique expression of the divine gracious decision to redeem man and bring him into fellowship with the Godhead. Since he alone is truly God and truly man he is the one true mediator to reconcile all things to God.¹⁷

In fact the divine plan of salvation for humanity is to reestablish all things under a new head, Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Salvation is an organic project of establishing a divine presence in humanity, that each individual and the community may be strengthened by the Spirit of God from within, that

12. Mk 2.1ff. 2. 13ff; 11, 26; Mt 5.7; 6.12; Lk 10.25ff.

13. Acts 17.28-31

14. 1 Cor. 1.22-24

15. Phil 2. 6-8

16. Col. 1.15-17

17. Col. 1.20

18. Eph. 1.10

Christ may dwell by faith in the hearts, and that all may be filled unto the fullness of God. Thus being rooted and founded in charity the faithful will be able to comprehend the breadth and length, height and depth.¹⁹ In these words of Paul one can easily discern an echo of the Greek mystical aspiration of being inspired by the seminal Logos, to be filled and transformed by its indwelling form and to be carried upwards by its transcending dynamism! St. Paul's cogent argument against sins of lust is the divine presence in the body of man: "Know you not that your members are the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God; you are not your own."²⁰ The same is his argument against idolatry: "What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God."²¹ The gracious and intimate presence of God in the human beings is Paul's stringent argument against all enslaving ritualism and superstition both to the sophisticated Athenians²² and to the traditionalist Judeo-Christians.²³ What the Greeks were looking for in their mystical aspirations, Christianity proclaims as realized in Jesus Christ.

Another Greek concept that became a handy tool for Christian evangelizers to drive home their message of divine grace was that of mystery. According to Cicero the noblest religious contribution of the Greeks was the Mystery Cult: The Eleusian mysteries alone every year persuaded thousands of young men to fast and restrain themselves for weeks in preparation for an initiation into the mysteries. Those who took part in the memorial celebration of the death and resurrection of the Mysterical deity were supposed to attain a certain identification with him/her. St. Paul tells the Greeks that Christ is the true divine mystery. Man's inclusion in him was the true wisdom hidden in God before the beginning of the world and revealed by the Spirit of God in the fullness of time in the incarnation of the Son.²⁴ The church, the community of the initiates is the fullness of him who fills all in all.²⁵ Baptism itself is an identification with Christ in his burial and resurrection so that the baptized are enabled to walk in the newness of life received from Christ.²⁶ Paul does not hesitate to tell the

19. *Eph.* 3.16-19

20. *1 Cor.* 6. 19

21. *2 Cor.* 6.16

22. *Acts* 17.24

23. *Rom* 8.15-16; *Gal* 4.5-6

24. *1 Cor.* 2.7ff

25. *Eph* 1.23

26. *Rom* 6.4

Colossians : "You are dead ; and your life is hidden with Christ in God,"²⁷ Christians are grafted on to Christ, and Christ dwells in them ! As many as are baptized in Christ have put on Christ, and all, without distinction of Jew or Greek are made one in Christ.²⁸ Paul declares about himself : "and I live, now not I, ; but Christ lives in me."²⁹ St. Paul presented to the Greek world an ideal of mystical union with God in Christ that far surpassed the aspirations and expectations of the followers of the Mystery Cults.

This Pauline doctrine of grace indicates the earliest stage of Christianity, which started out as a reformation movement within Judaism. Like the Essenians and Qumran communities it represents a certain flight from the world, renunciation of worldly goods and sometimes life in community waiting for the Parousia, the second coming of Christ which was expected to be imminent. Paul shows a vehement opposition to the Law, which for the Jew was a means for obtaining divine grace.

ii. *Later New Testament Perception of Grace.* But the New Testament writings that came after the Pauline literature present a slightly different view in the aspects of the life of grace. If Paul's stress is on a passive assumption of the individual in Christ, the later writings bring out more the aspect of grace as an active personal encounter with God and fellowmen, and a positive mission to continue the work of Christ in transforming the world. In St. Mark's Gospel written for a persecuted church, Christ is presented as a hidden figure, an ideal charismatic, model for the Christians. He is the symbol and pioneer of the new creation. As a sort of repetition of the original creation from the waters he undergoes baptism of penance at the hands of John the Baptizer, and is driven by the Spirit into the desert to reenact the dry creation mentioned in Gen. 2., in a forty day fasting and penance. In all his works he is led by the Spirit to heal the sick and to drive out the devils. The ideal of Christian life is outward oriented to the service of one's fellow human beings. Showing his own example Jesus said : "The Son of man also is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a redemption for many."³⁰ St. Paul's quarrel with the Jews was that they pretended to gain salvation by their works fulfilling the law, while in reality it was the pure gift of God to be gained through faith. On the other hand, Mark's view of Jesus' conflict with the pharisees is that

27. Col. 3.3

28. Gal 3.27-28

29. Gal 2.20

30. Mk 10.45

the Jews demand conformity to the law for law's sake while the law is for the sake of man. Christ works miracles on sabbath day to show that sabbath is for man and not man for the sabbath.³¹

But there is no denial of the law itself. The gospels of Matthew and Luke written towards the end of the first century of the Christian era, evidently after the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews, clearly reaffirms the Law: Christ says: "Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For amen I say to you till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall not pass of the Law till all be fulfilled."³² But the scope of the law is to create the fellowship of human beings and to safeguard their mutual relationships.³³ The final criterion for judgement is what each one did to the least of one's brethren.³⁴ Hence the essence of divine grace is not only to bring individuals closer to God, but also to bring them closer to one another. The law of Deut. 6, 5 to love God with one's whole soul can be stated also in the prescription of Leviticus 19, 18: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."³⁵ As St. Paul says the whole law is comprised in the word "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."³⁶ The scope of divine grace imparted by Christ is not simply to bring people into an experience of God but to send them out on a mission to transform this world into God's kingdom.³⁷

Luke's gospel was written in the post-apostolic age adapting the tradition to the needs and challenges of the times. It shows Christ's grace effecting the fellowship of joy in the Spirit, manifesting the power-laden presence of God in the midst of his people. This community that recognizes the authority of Jesus as God's spokesman, receives the Spirit as the Father's gift. For it the reality of heaven is immediately significant since the Spirit provides the contact between the visible and the invisible. The disciples of Christ are moved by the Spirit to continue the work of the prophets and kings, and engage in the wider warfare between God and satan, Jesus and the demons. Here divine grace is not viewed primarily

31. *Mk* 2-3

32. *Mt* 5.17-18; *Lk* 16.17

33. *Mt* 5.21-48

34. *Mt* 25.35-40

35. *Mt* 23.37-39

36. *Rom* 13.9; *Gal*. 5.14

37. *Mt* 28.19

in the privacy of individual souls but in the community of believers, where the Gospel is preached to the poor healing given to the sick and liberation proclaimed to the captives.³⁸ In the true spirit of the Old Testament the early church recognized itself as a spiritual house built up of living stones, a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.³⁹

The fourth Gospel shows clearly the interpersonal aspect of supernatural grace. Human salvation is the plan of the Father who so loved the world as to give his only begotten Son, that all who believed in him, may receive adopted sonship through him. Eternal life is knowledge of the Father and of the Son. One cannot gain direct knowledge of God through descriptive information. Such information will always be through created forms which can never equal the infinite reality of God. So no one can know the Father except through a personal encounter with the Son, sharing his filial sentiment, nor can any one know the Son except through a personal encounter with the Father from whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named! So the life of grace is the fellowship of human beings in a personal encounter with the divine Persons. One expresses, however, one's love for Christ by keeping his commandments. "And he that loves me, shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him," says Christ.⁴⁰ This is the indwelling of the Father and of the Son in the faithful. This is the fellowship Christ prays for his disciples in his sacerdotal prayer: "That they all may be one, as thou Father in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us."⁴¹ John relativizes the importance of institution and office in the church at a time when these were assuming importance in the established church. He does not pay any attention to the category of "apostle". For him the primary category is that of the "disciple". The relation of disciple to the master is based on love and is a direct and personal. What is truly essential for this is the living presence of Jesus in the Christian through the Holy Spirit. Even the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist are only continuation of the ministry of Christ when he opened the eyes of the blind and fed the hungry. Even the different functions and charisms in the church stressed by through the analogy of the body⁴² is replaced by the simple and direct relationship between master and disciple through the example of the vine and the branches.

38. *Lk* 4.18f

39. *1 Pet* 2.5

40. *Jn* 14.21-23

41. *Jn* 17. 21-23

42. *1 Cor* 12

It is immaterial in what ecclesial context and historical situation the Johannine tradition evolved.⁴⁴ John is not, after all, presenting a new faith. All the elements of his doctrine are in one way or another present in the other New Testament writings too. They also recognize that Jesus is our unique way to the Father, that he is truly the Son of God, the author of life. But the importance of John is that he places the central emphasis on Jesus as the one way, truth and life, the life and resurrection. Religion is not a matter of organization, beliefs, structures, officers, powers and ceremonies, but primarily the openness of the human person to the person of the Son of God, fellowship with the Trinity through the Son and fellowship with human beings. That is why in defining the new life brought by Christ John places the greatest emphasis on discipleship to Christ and on true love and charity towards others.

3. Grace and Theological Controversies

The essence of Christian faith as handed down by the Apostles was that Christian life consisted fundamentally in a sharing of divine life communicated to us by Jesus Christ and his Spirit. But in making this doctrine intelligible to their Greek audience the post-apostolic preachers easily borrowed ideas from Platonism, Stoicism and other sources. In this they often unwittingly compromised the nature and personality of Jesus Christ, the nature and function of the Spirit, and other doctrines of Christian faith. These early deviations in philosophical interpretation gave rise to serious theological controversies in the fourth and fifth centuries of Christianity. Appollinaris, who wanted to explain the unity of the divine and human natures in Christ denied the rational part in Christ's human nature and conceived a direct union between the divinity and the "flesh". Arius who took certain texts of the Bible in the literal sense argued that the Logos was only a creature, of course, the first-born of all creatures. Others denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit as well. Nestorius and others saw in Christ two distinct persons, one divine, the Logos, and the other purely human, Jesus of Nazareth.

A consequence of these doctrinal controversies was a diversion of the energies of the Church from fulfilling her mission in the world, to preserving her doctrinal and organizational integrity. Grace itself became a key-

43. *Jn* 15.1-8

44. See Raymond E. Brown. *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York : Paulist Press), 1979

doctrine in the deposit of faith in the light of which doctrinal aberrations were discerned and judged. If grace was the communication of divine life to the whole man by Christ, the whole human nature including the rational part had to be in Christ. The Church fathers argued against Appollinaris : What was not assumed from us by Christ was not really healed. Against Arianism they declared that if divine grace was a true participation in divine nature, Christ who gave us that divine life should be truly God. The same was the argument for the divinity of the Holy Spirit against the Eunomians. The response to Nestorius was that Mary was truly the Mother of God, because otherwise her son who really saved us would not be the Son of God and we would not have been truly saved and divinized. In all these doctrinal disputes the divine nature communicated to us by Christ remained the key doctrine accepted by both sides of the contending parties.

The Fathers, especially the Cappadocians endeavour to explain the nature of our divinization by the divine persons as a sort of direct divine immanence in us explained by various analogies. The impression made by a stamp on wax, the anointing produced by oil on the body and other similar examples explain the transformation of human souls through the divine indwelling. At this stage doctrinal orthodoxy was the main concern, and no effort was made to expand its intelligibility and relevance to human life. In the effort to refute the heretics the particular aspect of faith they were calling attention to was not sufficiently taken into account. Thus Arius's efforts to show that salvation and sanctification were primarily the work of the Father, accomplished, of course, through the Son and the Holy Spirit, and that the only way for us to know the Logos was through his human nature were not paid attention to. Similarly Nestorius following the example of Theodore of Mopsuestia and a host of others was trying to impress on people that Jesus Christ had a human individuality and individual human consciousness as well, and that he was not only our Saviour but also the prototype in whom our sanctification was first effected, and so our model and leader in the life of grace. Not only were the implications of such particular emphases for Christian life not heeded, but also there emerged even a reluctance to reflect on faith through reason. In its place there appeared a certain apophatism or negative thinking that took the mystery of divine grace out of the range of mere philosophy and endeavoured to explain it through other mysteries of faith.

i. *The Greek Contribution* : In understanding the life of grace the Greek Fathers had their own unique contribution to make. In the first place they

did not consider the original friendship Adam enjoyed with God as something purely gratuitous and superadded as if from the outside to the nature of man, as their Latin counter parts in their juridical frame of mind did. They considered original justice and grace enjoyed by the first man as something organic to the human being created in the image and similitude of God. There was no gap between nature and grace. The basic image was the rational faculties of man, and the similitude was the positive disposition for friendship with God. Nature itself is in a sense grace since it is the first instalment in the self communication of God to human beings. But this similitude as "the disposition for perfect virtue" was rather precarious since it was a potentiality to be realized. The principle of this internal disposition is the person of the Holy Spirit whose indwelling presence assimilates us to the Father. The ideal form of this similitude is in the Logos, who in redemption restores it to us by giving us his Spirit.

This divine likeness looked at from the side of man is the intrinsic orientation of the rational faculties of intellect and will to attain God as he is in himself. Original sin or fall caused the loss of physical incorruptibility and spiritual imperturbability or the tranquil anticipation of the beatific glory as one's final goal. This broken similitude can be repaired only by the living revelation of the archetypal image, the Logos, in the Incarnation. So salvation is a total revivification, making possible the connaturality of the Son of God with his brethren in the flesh. So looked at from the side of God this transformation of the rational orientation of man towards God is some thing truly divine, and it has to be described as divine energies received from the Son and the Spirit. "The free creature has the initiative of its free acts," says St. John Damascene; "God foresees them, but does not predetermine them."⁴⁵ So they are truly human and created. But as effectively oriented to the divine persons they have also to be truly divine. So they can be characterised as divine energies communicated to man. So St. Maximus the Confessor says, "Man has two wings, freedom and grace." This synergism, the flowing together of the energies of man and of the divine persons in the grace-life, the fellowship of the divine persons with the human person, is the essence of grace in the perspective of the Greek fathers.

ii. *Latin Rationalism* : The Latins went ahead to interpret grace in the light of philosophy. St. Augustine on whom Manicheism as well as Neo-Platonism exerted a great deal of influence was the leader of Western thought

45. John Damascene. *De Fide* II, 30

on Grace. He took a very dim view of human nature beset with sin and concupiscence. On the other hand Platonic thought enabled him to see human intellectual activity itself as an illumination by the divine light. Latin theology concentrated rather on the ethical aspect of grace. It meant liberation from sin and the healing of the corruption of nature. For the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages Aristotelian concept of nature came in handy in understanding the working of grace. Actions follow nature and flow from nature. So if human rational actions are to attain God effectively in faith and love, there must be an added "super-nature", grace, an ontological quality of the soul, gratuitously given by God. This created grace makes human beings pleasing to God, justifies them, and makes them capable of merit before God through their pious works.

But Martin Luther, "passionately opposed to Aristotelianism and Scholasticism, Roman justification by works and glorification of the Church, Renaissance worldliness and Renaissance papacy,"⁴⁶ challenged the whole Scholastic approach to justification and grace. He wanted to skip the whole Western tradition and go back to the Scriptures to raise anew the old questions about Christian reality, to remove all doubts and establish a new certainty not based on works, but solely on faith. He went back to the clear statement of St. Paul: "For we hold that a man is justified only by faith, apart from the works of law."⁴⁷ Accordingly he stated that God's gift of salvation for believers is not tied up with any human condition, nor is it restricted to individual forgiveness of sins, nor to a merely external declaration of the sinner's justification. Through the justification realized in the Christ-event, God's righteousness is conveyed to the sinner, really encompassing him and establishing a new life for the believer. This position of Luther was grossly misunderstood in the 16th century and led to the ecclesial split of the Reformation which has now lasted four centuries. But today the rightness of Luther's position is recognized by all: "Lutherans and Catholics are agreed that the Gospel is the foundation of Christian freedom. This freedom is described in the New Testament as freedom from sin, as freedom from the power of the law, as freedom from death, and as freedom for the service of God and neighbour."⁴⁸

Luther and after him Kant and Hegel placed the autonomy of the person at the centre of their theory. But this overemphasis on the allocation of

46. Hans Kung, *Justification*, Introd. chapter to the new edition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) p. x

47. *Rom* 3.28

48. Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Malta Report p. 539 quoted in Kung, *l. c.* p. xiii

freedom to the inner sphere of the person had a disastrous after-effect in the Western Church. This transcending of the system of earthly authorities, by personal authority and reason, showed that it could coexist with the subjection of the outward man under repressive secular authorities. Luther and Lutheranism failed to draw with sufficient clarity the sociological consequences from the doctrine of justification regarding the authoritarian rule of princes and the condition of the enslaved and impoverished peasants. So Christian doctrine of justification and grace has in many countries co-existed with centuries of oppression and well-entrenched structures of injustice.

But removed from the external dictates of tradition and the teaching authority of the Church, for Protestantism Grace became the decisive factor for Christian doctrine. It did not ascribe importance even to liturgical worship, but only to personal prayer. As Emile Brunner explains in his *Dogmatics*, in contrast to a pantheistic concept of substance, grace can be attributed only to the highest sovereign act of a ruling will bound by no law. It cannot be a speculative and theoretical concept in a non-personal interpretation of the world. It can describe only the personal relations of man in his freedom not only to God and to eternity, but also to the world and time, "decisively and absolutely within the realm of salvation". Understanding of grace is the recognition of the paradoxical unity of the divine attributes of holiness and love. Creation itself has to be acknowledged as an act of divine grace. God's grace is revealed above all in the fact that he enters into an eternal covenant with disobedient man. As the German word for grace, *Gnade*, indicates, it is a coming down, a condescension, a divine bridging of the abyss. So the innermost meaning of divine grace is first fully revealed in the forgiveness of sins that brings sinful man into communion with God. This forgiveness had to be declared for the whole humanity. So grace is the deciding factor even for the Cross of Christ as the place of atonement and reconciliation.

iii. *Contemporary Catholic Theology of Grace* : Catholic theology of grace in the twentieth century had a more difficult obstacle-race to follow. Hampered by the burden of the past, and ecclesiastical suspicion of anything smacking of modernity, development in the doctrine of grace had to come as conclusions from ecclesiology, Christology and eschatology. But in fact the element of newness was introduced by developments in psychology, existential phenomenology, personalism and sociology.

Analytical psychology under the leadership of Freud, Jung and others drew world attention to the inner experience of man. So a discussion of divine life in contemporary world had to start from the psychic life of human beings, enlightened, attracted and recreated by grace. Henri de Lubac in several books endeavoured to emphasize two points in this line as already present in Christian tradition: 1. Grace is the object of a desire deeply rooted in the personal nature of human beings. 2. The divine free self-gift, that is, grace comes as the fulfilment of humanity's yearning.

Karl Rahner endeavoured to arrive at a synthesis between the metaphysics of Aquinas and the existentialism of Heidegger. On the basis of this religious ontology he tried to show that there exists in the human reality a supernatural existential, an ontological openness to the Absolute. So in every action and at all times we are in touch with God and his grace. Just as the humanity of Jesus was open to the divine Logos to be assumed by the Son of God and to be truly human at the same time, in an analogous manner our human selves become authentically human and also divine by the saving activity of the divine Spirit in grace.

Romano Guardini drew inspiration from the personalism of contemporary philosophy. Taking up Edmund Husserl's concept of horizon, he described grace as a horizon of dialogue between God and human beings. Horizon is the particular range of perspective intended by the subject and the implied or expressed type of interpretation put on the object of inquiry. Divine grace gives us an intentional consciousness and noetic framework to view things from the perspective of God. It establishes us human beings as persons in relationship with the Trinity of God through Jesus Christ.

Latin American theologians like Leonardo Boff and Juan Luis Segundo have dealt with grace from the sociological angle. They start from the realization that social, political and economic structures are not external to human beings. This is a point where traditional discussion of grace was rather defective. It dealt with justification in terms of the private individual and the inner life, and not in social and structural terms. So the Liberation theologians discuss grace in terms of the integral liberation of human beings from every sort of bondage and oppression.

4. Living Issues in Christian Theology of Grace Today

In the past theology of grace was very much an abstract, conceptual and theoretical explanation of grace to make it intelligible and meaningful

in the general framework of human life and experience. It showed the mystery of supernatural life in relation with other mysteries of faith like that of the Trinity, redemption and the Sacraments. In the light of the task set forth for theology by Vatican Council I, effort was also made to show how grace led to the realization of the final goal of human life. But with Vatican II a new consciousness has emerged in the Church regarding the task of theology. Rather than dealing with divine revelation as a set of truths disclosed to man, and faith as a passive acceptance of certain propositions thus communicated, it deals with the divine self-disclosure as a mission and a task. What God said and did for the sake of man requires from man's part certain creative responses. So the principal question in the theology of grace today is how man should respond to God's gift of grace.

i. *The Relevance of a Discussion of Grace.* A first important question today is the relevance of a discussion of grace itself. One can come across manuals of Christian belief and practice that do not discuss grace at all nor terms connected with it like justification, sanctification, habitual and actual grace, theological virtues and merit. These are abstract ideas that belong properly only in a theoretical system that defines doctrine against heterodox systems. On the other hand, human sciences have brought greater attention than in the past to bear on the dynamics of psychological, moral and religious processes that relate to human development. As Kohlberg, Piaget, Erickson and others endeavour to show, there is an organic quality in the sequence of phases one has to go through to be able to attain maturity and meet crises. So in the process of Christian identity too a certain pattern may be discerned. God's self-communication to persons is a conscious process which touches deeply the fundamental dynamism of the human person in his quest for meaning and identity and search for an authentic culture.⁴⁹ So the talk about grace should articulate the present day experience of grace in a way an individual can understand one's own growth in God, and the community of faith can creatively prolong its encounter with God in actual life. Instead of dealing with grace as an objective system, one should let grace talk. One should create an idiom and a line of reflection that would make one conscious of divine grace as divine milieu encountered in life. Grace should not be identified with the Church, as if it had a monopoly on grace. It is not the Church that contains grace, but rather divine grace contains the church as one of its

49. See Brian O. McDermott S. J. *What are They Saying about the Grace of Christ*, (New York : Paulist Press, 1984) p. 1.

mediations through which life of grace is made explicit, conscious and communitarian.

The most obvious and basic locus of grace is culture itself, which is the sum total of perceptions, values and orientation by which human beings organize their personal and social existence. It is the intricate web of learned responses to the world, the effort of people to counteract the life-threatening forces and to fashion a special identity and destiny for themselves. The divine life communicated through grace naturally come within this framework of culture. But how these conscious reactions are expressed depends to a great extent on the tools and methods adopted by a particular culture in the area of communication, in the style of living, and in the mode of approach to human problems. Hence to be really intelligible and relevant, a theology of grace has to be articulated in the communicative tools of a culture and in the style of its daily experience. The theology of grace should, therefore, interpret the symbols, doctrines and rituals of a people as they express their experience of divine life, and also show how those same symbols, practices and expressions deepen the life itself. Culture gives expression to what is most basic to humans. Divine grace incarnate in a particular culture both deepens individuality and unique character, and also opens it up to a certain fellowship with all cultures leading thus to the formation of a world-church.

ii. *Grace as the Reciprocal Relation between God and Man.* As Emile Brunner has pointed out grace has no relevance in a nonpersonal interpretation of the world, since it can lead only to a pantheistic concept of a substance that is the basis of all being. It describes a relationship which affects the personal nature of man in its openness to the one Father from whom all paternity is named, to the only-begotten Son in whom all are made adopted sons and coheirs, and to the Spirit who embodies and personifies the self-gift of God. This interpersonal relationship in divine life is the unique mode of divine revelation in which divine reality discloses itself as it truly subsists in three persons. So the Trinity of God is not a modification of the absolute and immutable reality of God, but its basic and transcendental dimension.

This reciprocal relation between God and man is also the reason, according to Theodore of Mopsuestia why God has permitted man's present condition of sin and corruption. Human fall was not an accident that marred the divine plan, but rather something integral to it. God deliberately placed man in this condition of mutability and death so that man could

learn and develop as a true child. Mutability is to make us learn to appreciate immutability, and death so that we yearn for immortality.⁵⁰ This unique relation of the human person, standing naked before God confessing that he has received all that he is and all that has from Him, like a child before the father, is the essence of grace.

iii. *Grace and the Humanity of Christ.* Another aspect that makes the theology of grace a summary of Christianity is its intimate relation with the humanity of Christ. In brief, grace is Christ; it is the new life human race gained through Jesus Christ. As Theodore of Mopsuestia says, the beginning of all grace was the birth of Christ and its culmination his crucifixion. Christ's humanity was the unique object of divine benevolence, (1) by the unique grace of union that attached it to the person of the Logos; (2) by the various graces conferred on the same human nature during Christ's earthly life as a consequence of the union; and, (3) by the glorification of the resurrection in which the humanity of Christ became the source of grace for the whole human race. Transformed by the anointing from the divinity and by the work of the Spirit Jesus Christ became the new head of human beings, able to give them his own Spirit and to make them members of his body.

Here the psychology of Christ has an unique importance today. The theological framework of the New Testament authors do not attach much importance to the religious psychology of Jesus. But against the background of the great emphasis placed on the psychological development of each person, the few references the New Testament writings have made to the psychological evolution of Christ have assumed great importance today in understanding our own growth in holiness. Jesus' growth in grace and wisdom before God and men, his humble submission to the baptism of penance from the hands of John the Baptizer, withdrawal into the desert for forty days of fast, frequent invocation of the Father in prayer, especially with the endearing title "Abba", his consorting with sinners and publicans, great many other instances that reveal the inner workings of his soul, show the openness of Christ's human mind and heart to a living and conscious experience of God. Jesus' personal concern for the sinners and demoniacs and compassion for the sick and afflicted are particularly revealing.⁵¹

50. Theodore of Mopsuestia *In Gen.*, PG 66 col. 633 A

51. Idem. *Catech. Hom.* VI & VIII 51 bis Sebastian Moore. *The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger* (New York : Seabury, 1947)

Christ makes the gift from God so much his own that he is able to communicate it to all his brethren. In this Jesus-centred perspective, grace itself appears a more authentically human fellowship than a mere addition to our soul from the outside.

iv. *Experiential Aspect of Grace.* Today more than ever religion is perceived as experience and this experience is most dramatically focussed in the life of grace. It is an experience of the life directly communicated by God. This experiential aspect of grace is opposed to its conceptual aspect. The original reality of grace is history, what God did for the sake of humanity, disclosing himself at a particular moment in time. In history, at a particular moment in one's existence each individual encounters and experiences God as more intimate than one's own interior. God's life is felt in the concrete human situation, as existence, as a moment of decision and commitment. Human beings define themselves, discover their identity and grow by living in the world. God possesses real meaning for man only if he emerges from within human history. Divine transcendence is at the same time immanence too. God would not be really transcendent, above and beyond all particulars, if he were merely outside of and additional to them; he has to embrace them all in the most intimate depth of their reality.

Experience is the way we relate ourselves to the world. We make the world present inside ourselves and render ourselves present in the world. But this relating to the world cannot have real depth unless it goes out from our radical rootedness in the divine reality. In fact, human experience is grounded in radical experiences that each individual goes through, those privileged moments in which we present ourselves in our nakedness to our Maker. Today people do not want to see the world as numinous or mythical or mysterious. They see it as something that has grown out of the past. So the essence of religion is no longer the sense of awe and fascination at the unknown, as Rudolf Otto defined it. It is more a sense of lost innocence that has to be regained, a wounded humanity that seeks healing, and awaiting for the Lord who is coming. It is the experience of the saving grace. This experience is mediated through gestures, words, encounters, prayers, and liturgical acts. They are not felt as unknown quantities or magical rubrics, but as conscious experiential expressions, and hence truly aesthetic in creativity. People can voluntarily plunge into them and experience the dimension of grace they contain. Thereby they build themselves into a church, the people of God.

v. *Church's Mystagogy.* Church, however, is not to be conceived as a mere grace-dispensing institute exercising a sort of monopoly on it. Still, it is the most visible, objective presence of grace. As Maximus the Confessor says, "the holy Church bears the imprint and image of God since it has the same activity as he does by imitation and in figure."⁵² God brought out all things and organized them out of the primeval chaos. The numerous and almost infinite number of men and women and children who are distinct from one another and vastly different by birth and appearance by nationality and language are born into the Church, and through it are reborn and recreated in the Spirit.

The Church to be really relevant and meaningful in the modern world should be an epiphany of grace. Accepting people as they are and assuming all that is good in their concrete situation and life-circumstances, Christian fellowship has to transform them into the reality of God's kingdom. The sin and evil of the people here and now, their aches and pains, the injustices they endure should be this community's primary concern and object of a clear programme of action. Christians who really experience the grace of God should be impelled by the same grace to communicate that grace to others. This means that the dynamics of human development and community building should become the natural expressions of a life of grace. There cannot be a dualism between ecclesial life and the sociopolitical existence of people. Instead of people coming to the church, the Church should go to the people. The church cannot be a closed community, a sort of ghetto within which its members live and act in order to be made holy by the exclusive care of a maternal church. Nor should it serve as a sort of haven for people to escape into, from the corrupting world. Rather, the Church as a grace-conveying community should be in the midst of the world as the leaven in the mass, a part of the entire world that has to be transformed into God's kingdom.

vi. *The Critical Function of Grace within the Church.* Life of grace expresses itself in the fruits of the Spirit, enumerated by St. Paul as charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness longanimity, mildness, faith, modesty, continence, and chastity.⁵³ Supernatural grace exercises its dynamism on the one hand against the life of the flesh and the spirit of the world, and on the other against the rigorism of institutions and law. This

52. *The Church, the Liturgy and the Soul of Man*, trs. Dom Julian Streat, 1982

53. *Gal* 5. 22-23

is the critical function of grace. The prophetic function of grace is to challenge the reification of life and consciousness and the 'public orthodoxy' that tries to bring all expressions of faith within the manageable framework of rules and regulations. Ours is a secular world where an epiphanic conception of God does not hold sway. Our conception of the world is historical. Human beings are not passive products of nature but create their own world. Nor can that world and its wealth be exhausted by the dictates of abstract reason and law. Imagination and creative originality have a great say in its creation and functioning. So the new life communicated by grace makes people reject being ordered in their individual and social conduct by established institutions including the church and even transcendental norms and ideologies. The church caught up in the midst of social and political situations tends to become an institution eager to justify the status quo. It sides with the powers that are, especially the dominant culture of the age, to crush originality and newness and thus to be a counter sign to grace itself.

But the life of grace has a more critical function to perform towards the life of the flesh and the social order itself, where most activities are governed by the profit motive. From a domestic economy in which small communities tried to satisfy their normal material needs through personal collaboration of individuals and communities, today the world has passed to a situation regulated solely by the mechanism of the market place. Here each one is inspired by the desire to create an artificial demand for the things one has to dispose off and thereby to make greater profit for oneself. The leading virtue is not altruism or desire for the common well-being but selfishness. This transition is reflected also in the political sphere. Here a network of interpersonal relations is replaced by a juridical order that administers government impersonally, applies uniform laws to all individuals without taking into consideration their personal needs, preferences and scope for free decisions. This plunges human persons into anonymity and often into alienation from an unfriendly society itself. The rule of divine grace protests against the rule of the flesh, and even the rule of rationality that looks only for increased efficiency and profit. It calls for a more authentically human view of man's existence, and for goals and values that are higher than those of rational planning and external activity. This is the main thrust of the Christian ideal of evangelical poverty. This is not a negative ideal but a clear affirmation that man does not live by bread alone but by every word from the mouth of God.

5. Conclusion

In the context of world religions the Christian tradition on Grace has made an unique contribution. Religion discloses the ultimate meaning of human life. In the perspective of Buddhism life is suffering, arising out of desire, and the only escape from the present bondage is through illumination that makes one realize that this chain of births and deaths have to be broken in Nirvana. Jainism pleads for the breaking down of the wall of bondage that hides our innate knowledge and power, through the development of one's personality using every help that can be gained from every particular situation and event. Hinduism points the finger at the relative unreality of the phenomenal world and declares that liberation and fullness of consciousness can be attained only by realizing that Brahman, the Truth of truth and really Real, is the one Self of all. Both Judaism and Islam state that man can attain his final goal of happiness only by submission to God's will and humble obedience to His Law.

Christianity without denying the truth of the above positions places the emphasis on the fact that our world is not merely one of being or of values, but one of relationships, of persons in relation. Divine reality is not impersonal, but tri-personal, the fellowship of Father, Son and the Holy Spirit in the one absolute divinity. Human beings are persons and are invited to share in the knowledge and love of the Trinitarian communion. In fact, the only way beings gifted with knowledge and love can attain the ultimate meaning of their existence is through fellowship. Knowing and loving are not mere passive reception but active spiritual coexistence and self-surrender to the object of knowledge and love. If we look at the total openness of our faculties of knowing and loving the only object that can match that infinite potentiality are the divine Persons. The indwelling Spirit reveals to our spirit the infinite love of God of which we are fruits and expressions. The Son gives us the power to feel that as persons we are sons of the one Father, whom we can call 'Abba' with confidence.

Differences within Christianity have helped to emphasize the different aspects of this God-man relationship in grace. Western Catholicism stressing the mission of man to make this world the kingdom of God, placed the emphasis on the role in supernatural life of history, tradition and of the ecclesiastical authority as a sort of mediation between individual human beings and God. For Protestantism having no particular concern for history, tradition and ecclesiastical ministry and government, life of grace communicated to the individual by Christ is the decisive factor that evaluates every

other point of religious doctrine. Eastern Christianity at the same time as admitting the importance of history, tradition and ecclesial authority, emphasizes the fact that these alone cannot fully explain the reality of grace. Grace cannot be explained away as a created quality of the individual soul, conferring on it some mysterious similitude to God. Since it effectively relates the individual and the community itself to the divine persons of the Spirit, the Logos and the Father, it has also a divine character which has to be explained as divine energies received directly from the Spirit and Christ. Thus supernatural life according to Christian traditions is an elevation of man beyond the human limits so that he is enabled to share in the life God himself without losing his human identity and personality.