

Reflections on Grace (Part One)¹

The first part of this study (the second and third parts are to appear in the next two issues of the ITQ) concentrates on a review of the interpretation of the doctrine of grace since the Reformation.

Introduction

This three-part study examines the doctrine of grace in the light of the main approaches to the subject that have emerged in Catholic theology over about the past thirty years. That discussion, however, must be seen against the background of the history of the topic since the Reformation, which is the subject of this first article. While the main focus will naturally be on theology, especially on Catholic theology, the wider context in which theology operates also has to be borne in mind. But it has to be borne in mind as the *context*, not as the *text* itself. That ‘text’ is constituted by reflection on the actual reality of grace.

According to the earliest Christian tradition, grace is God’s own life. It is, furthermore, as far as *we* are concerned, a gratuitous² gift by means of which God offers human beings the possibility of passing from their status as

¹ This is the first part of an adapted and expanded translation of an article that first appeared in French in the *Revue de l’Institut Catholique de Paris*, 51, juillet/septembre 1994, 57–92, under the title: ‘Les divers courants de la théologie de la grâce aujourd’hui’. The author thanks the journal’s editor, Michel Quesnel, for allowing the original version to be used in the preparation of the present study.

² Jaroslav Pelikan notes that, in his anti-Pelagian writings, St Augustine exploited the assonance between the Latin words ‘gratia’ and ‘gratis’ in order to emphasise the absolute gratuity of the gift of divine grace to human beings. Augustine had of course other, more substantial and pertinent grounds for accepting the gratuity of grace. See J. Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 107.

ambiguous creatures, caught between joy and hope, on the one hand, and anguish and despair, on the other, to the enjoyment of a bliss and peace that would otherwise be inconceivable and inaccessible for us and that traditionally is known as union with God, or a sharing in divine glory. Human beings, however, possess an almost miraculous gift for changing wine into water, to adapt an expression of Kierkegaard's,³ and for converting blessings into curses. The miraculous power in question that Kierkegaard alludes to is certainly much older than 'our age'. Even in the early Christian centuries, at any rate in the West, the gift of grace was soon converted into a battleground for theologians.⁴

But today, nearly five hundred years after the Reformation, there are many indications that modern man has rather lost interest in the question of grace. The situation, however, remains complex and even confused; the signs of the times are not easy to read. A work, for instance, offering a synthesis of the trends in twentieth-century theology,⁵ published in 1966, contains in its index only one reference to the doctrine of grace. A quarter of a century later, in a short booklet on the 'New Age' phenomenon, Cardinal Danneels of Brussels wrote: 'Today, the doctrine of grace is without doubt the most neglected concept in theology and in practical Christian life.'⁶ From a slightly different quarter, Gerd Theissen observed in a book published in 1978, that in modern times there was genuine interest in the Western religious heritage, but little enthusiasm for

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, tr. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 67: '[O]ur age does not stop with faith, with its miracle of turning water into wine; it goes further, it turns wine into water.'

⁴ This well-known story does not have to be retold here in any great detail. Suffice it to say that, towards the end of the fourth century, the first serious quarrels on the doctrine of grace began when Augustine came to grips with the Pelagian interpretation of grace. Augustine rejected Pelagius' views on grace and pursued his disagreement with the Pelagians relentlessly until his death. In one form or another this dispute has continued right down to the present day, but it was particularly intense at the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Indeed, the Reformation could be seen, theologically at any rate, as a renewed triumph of one understanding of Augustine (not for nothing was Martin Luther an Augustinian friar) over what was perceived as a Pelagian interpretation, or rather falsification, of Christianity.

⁵ Hans Jürgen Schultz, *Tendenzen der Theologie im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert. Eine Geschichte in Porträts* (Stuttgart & Olten: Kreuz Verlag & Walter Verlag, 1966).

⁶ Godfried Cardinal Danneels, *Christ or Aquarius? Exploring the New Age Movement* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1992 [first French ed., 1991]), 39.

receiving this heritage as a gift or a ‘grace’; people wished rather to appropriate it by their own efforts and use it for their own purposes.⁷

Endorsing Theissen’s observations are certain remarks by Gisbert Greshake, highlighting the contrast between the pre-modern world, in which the theological terminology of the Christian West was largely forged, and the democratic age, in which we now live. In former times monarchs reigned, for example, according to the hallowed formula, ‘by the grace of God’. They thus received the legitimation of their power ‘from above’, and – understood *as* God’s representatives on earth⁸ – were expected to show towards their subjects the grace and goodness associated with the divine order of things. Nowadays, our political leaders receive their legitimation, in theory at least, ‘from below’, that is to say, from the people. As for ‘the people’, they do not seek *favours* from any government or any state, but rather demand their *rights*. ‘Today’, writes Greshake, ‘no one wants to receive anything as a gift, no one wants to live by the grace of another.’⁹ If such reflections of the contemporary mood are taken seriously, then the question inevitably must be asked: ‘What is the point, at the present time, of continuing to use an apparently obsolete theological vocabulary that seems to belong to a world that has had its day?’

On the other hand, however, one can also find in modern theology contrary indications to this general impression of unconcern with, or even antipathy towards, traditional expressions of Christian faith. For, although in both the first edition of his book,¹⁰ which appeared in 1977, and in the second edition of 1992, Greshake noted the lack of sustained theological reflection on the question of grace, despite its undisputed significance for Christian living, and stressed its seeming lack of contemporary existential relevance,¹¹

⁷ G. Theissen, *On Having a Critical Faith*, tr. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1979), 21–23. Theissen’s remarks are in no sense, of course, to be taken as a crude polemic against ‘modern consciousness’.

⁸ Although the idea of the divine right of kings was to become well entrenched in the culture of the Christian West, its origins are of course much older.

⁹ G. Greshake, *Geschenkte Freiheit: Einführung in die Gnadenlehre* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1992 [new ed.]), 11. See also, on the same topic, Johannes Auer, *Kleine katholische Dogmatik*, vol. 5: ‘Das Evangelium der Gnade’ (Regensburg: Pustet, 1970), 19: ‘What [man] is to become and what is to become of his world, is something he himself wants to achieve, not something he wants to owe to anyone else.’

¹⁰ Greshake, *Geschenkte Freiheit*, 5.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, 7.

nevertheless, the same author also drew attention, in 1992, to ‘a veritable deluge of publications’¹² on the doctrine of grace that had appeared in the previous twenty years. Such conflicting evidence suggests that the doctrine of grace is, and will remain, difficult to pin down, even though it no doubt will also continue to provoke a multiplicity of interpretations without yielding any uniquely definitive or systematic understanding of its ultimate object.

In dealing with the doctrine of grace, however, it can be stated with relative confidence that one is dealing with the *whole* Christian economy. In Bernanos’s well-known phrase, which – on his own admission – he borrowed from St Thérèse of Lisieux: ‘Everything is grace.’¹³ That in itself is one good reason why it is so difficult to discuss this doctrine. But there are many others. For, in order to treat the question of grace adequately, it would be necessary to speak about both God Himself and about every aspect of his – to use Hans Urs von Balthasar’s term – ‘theodramatic’ plan. That is to say, one would have to speak about creation, sin, the redemption won for us by Jesus Christ, the life of the Church, and the eschatological consummation of the divine plan for the world.¹⁴ ‘Grace’, therefore, as Cornelius Ernst noted,¹⁵ is not simply the name given to one of God’s gifts to us. More precisely, the term ‘grace’ refers to the *totality* of God’s self-communication to us.¹⁶

Since grace does not then refer only to a single aspect, but rather to the whole of the Christian reality, it is not surprising to see that the subject has been treated in a variety of ways in the history of theology. Peter Lombard (ca1095–1160), for example, discusses the question of grace in the context of the doctrines of God, creation, redemption, and the sacraments. Thomas Aquinas (ca1224–1274), a century later, deals with questions on grace in his discussion of the Christian moral life (*STh*, Ia, IIae, qq. 109–114). Bonaventure (1217–1274), for his part, was the first theologian to begin to envisage the doctrine of grace as a doctrine to be dealt with in its own right, when he wrote a specific

¹² Ibid.

¹³ G. Bernanos, *Journal d’un Curé de Campagne*, in *Œuvres Romanesques* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961), 1259 (cf. p. 1851).

¹⁴ See J. Auer, *Kleine katholische Dogmatik*, vol. 5, 16.

¹⁵ Cornelius Ernst, O.P., *The Theology of Grace* (Theology Today Series, No. 17; Cork: Mercier Press, 1974), 29, 92.

¹⁶ ‘It is not as though we were to itemize God’s gifts and call one of them “grace”; it is rather that “grace” qualifies the whole of God’s self-communication as a gift beyond all telling’ (C. Ernst, *op. cit.*, 29).

treatise on grace ('On the Grace of the Holy Spirit'), situating it between his treatment of Christ and his treatment of the sacraments (*Breviloquium* V).¹⁷ In the revived Scholasticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Spanish Jesuit thinker Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) became the first theologian to devote an entire, detailed treatise to the question of grace (*de gratia*). As Georg Kraus points out, this work was to provide the fundamental structure of subsequent Catholic treatises on grace right down to recent times.¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* deals with the subject of grace above all in the part devoted to moral theology, i.e. Part Three (entitled: 'Life in Christ')—that is to say, within the context of the practical realisation of the Christian vocation in the life of the faithful.

The post-medieval historical background¹⁹

It was during the sixteenth century, the century of the Reformation, that the Catholic interpretation of the doctrine of grace began to be dominated by the problematic of 'nature' and 'grace',²⁰ i.e. by the question of how precisely nature and grace were interconnected. In referring to 'nature' in this context, what Catholic theology had in mind was 'pure nature' (*natura pura*), so-called. Such terms became significant in discussions of grace, as the Catholic Church sought to avoid the exaggerated optimism associated with the humanist, neo-Pelagian spirit of the Renaissance, on the one hand, and to reject equally the extreme pessimism of the Reformers regarding the human condition, on the other. In attempting to manoeuvre between these two possibilities, Catholic theology endeavoured to maintain, as against any 'total depravity' view of the

¹⁷ See Georg Kraus, 'Gnadenlehre', *Lexikon der katholischen Dogmatik*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1989 [originally published by Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1987]), 209.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ On the history of the theology of grace since the Reformation, see Henri Rondet, *The Grace of Christ* (New York, 1967), 275-384; Piet Fransen, 'Dogmengeschichtliche Entfaltung der Gnadenlehre', *Mysterium Salutis* (Einsiedeln/Zürich/Cologne, 1973), vol. IV/2, 693-765; José Martin-Palma, 'Gnadenlehre von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart', *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. III, 5b (Freiburg/Basel/Wien, 1980); Greshake, *Geschenkte Freiheit* (1992), 73-142.

²⁰ See Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946); Edward Yarnold, *The Second Gift: A Study of Grace* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1974), 26-41.

human condition, the intrinsic value of created human nature, even when deprived of grace, while agreeing with the Reformers, and indeed the general Christian tradition, that human salvation depended wholly on the gratuitous gift of divine grace and was not something that could be attained or merited by human effort alone. In order to safeguard what were judged to be fundamental truths of the Christian faith that the Reformers were perceived as disregarding or rejecting (namely, the inherent value of even fallen human nature), Catholic thinkers were almost forced into overemphasising the fateful distinction drawn by the Counter-Reformation between ‘nature’ and ‘grace’. And this distinction proved subsequently to be the basis of an unhelpful interpretation of the human condition in relation to God that was to thrive in Catholic theology over the following centuries. For it was an interpretation that presupposed a ‘two-storey’ or ‘two-tier’ view of reality, one in which, theoretically, human nature could exist in a ‘pure’ state, unconnected with God, and seek a ‘natural’ fulfilment, or alternatively could seek fulfilment at a ‘supernatural’ level by accepting the gift of divine grace. According to some commentators,²¹ it was – allegedly – a misinterpretation of Thomas Aquinas by Cajetan that first opened up this hypothetical way of envisaging the relationship between God and man, while others²² have blamed Bellarmine for this momentous, and potentially misleading turn taken in the theology of grace.

From the sixteenth century onwards, then, to put the matter in more concrete terms, Catholic theology was to become excessively preoccupied with the question of ‘actual’ (or ‘created’²³) grace, to the detriment of reflection on

²¹ For example, Yarnold, *op. cit.*, 33ff., who follows de Lubac on this question.

²² For example, Herman-Emiel Mertens, ‘Nature and Grace in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology’, in *Louvain Studies*, 16 (1991), 244, who, for his part, is guided by H. Rondet and P. Schmulders.

²³ Cf. Piet Fransen, *The New Life of Grace* (London, 1971), 94f. It is worth noting, in passing, that at the origin of the concept of ‘created grace’ seems to lie, according to Wolfhart Pannenberg, the idea of the immutability of God. If God’s attitude to man – in so far as man is a sinner – is to change, so the argument runs, that can only come about if there is a change *in man*, since God cannot change. For the scholastic theologians, the human soul had to be modified by *created* grace in order for the immutable God to be able to enter into a new relation with it. In a similar way, Descartes believed that God could not intervene in the world, since such an intervention would be incompatible with God’s immutability. All the changes that occurred in the world had, therefore, to be explained by physical causes internal to the system of the world itself. See Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 472.

what was termed ‘uncreated’²⁴ grace or the idea of the divinisation of man, an idea that has always been for the Orthodox Church of supreme importance.²⁵ In other words, Catholic theology became bogged down in trying to anatomise the effects of God’s grace in human life, while neglecting more fundamental and weightier theological and existential issues highlighted by older theologies of grace, above all by that of Augustine himself. The overall impression, indeed, given by the Catholic theology of grace after Trent is of an inability to see the wood for the trees. Faced with both the specific threat posed by the Reformers, and the pervasive challenge of the modern world, Catholic thinkers and theologians – if one excepts the rare figure of a Pascal – went on the defensive, and did not feel free, or called upon, to examine their Christian faith in new ways or in the light of new circumstances. What they did feel called upon to do, first and foremost, was to defend the Catholic faith against all errors and assaults; any other approach would, no doubt, have seemed tantamount to indulging in an irresponsible luxury. And errors were feared not merely if they came from outside the fold, but even – and perhaps especially – if they came from within the fold, as the continuing, acrimonious quarrels and disputes on grace within the Catholic Church itself at this time amply demonstrate. For in this period rival Jesuit and Dominican theologians continued to pursue relentlessly, in the *de Auxiliis* quarrel, as it was called, their mutually antagonistic and finally inconclusive reflections on the theology of grace, above all on the question of how precisely divine grace and human free will might be related.²⁶ No general consensus, however, in favour of either side in the dispute, was ever reached within Catholicism on this most intractable of questions.²⁷

The cultural context of Counter-Reformation Catholic theology

²⁴ See Greshake, op. cit., 81f., especially the following assessment: ‘Against the Reformers, Trent had asserted in a polemical, one-sided manner that God’s personal divine mercy towards man (uncreated grace) has an effect on man (created grace); this now became the main defining characteristic of the doctrine of grace’ (p. 81).

²⁵ For a discussion of the typical viewpoints on the question of grace that are to be found in Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism, see ‘Appendix III: Grace and Nature in East and West’, in E.L. Mascall, *The Openness of Being* (London, 1971), 217–250.

²⁶ See Greshake, op. cit., 85–88.

²⁷ The ‘Congregatio de Auxiliis’, a commission set up to investigate the matter, was disbanded, somewhat inconclusively, in 1607. Pope Paul V’s last word on the matter at the time was that the Dominicans should not be regarded as Calvinists nor the Jesuits as Pelagians.

In considering the development of the Catholic theology of grace since the beginning of modern times, it should not be forgotten that the humanism of the age of the Renaissance (which was, of course, also the age of the Reformation), and, even more so, the rationalism of the age of Reason, both gave new life to a deeply-ingrained, if often contested, dualism in the cultural life of the West. Mainly in an effort to find common ground on which intractable political, social, and legal problems could be tackled, the post-Reformation world, no doubt unwittingly, deepened the fundamental division between the properly human domain ('nature') and that of the divine ('supernature'). By seeking in contentious areas common ground based on reason, post-Reformation thinkers hoped to circumvent the cultural pressures exercised by specific religious allegiances. Trent had already emphasised the division between the human and the divine, for its own theological reasons, namely in order to rescue the idea of the underlying goodness of created human nature – even without grace – from the Reformers' pessimistic vision of humanity's total corruption, while for the Reformers themselves the dichotomy between God and man was characteristically conveyed by the existentially vital experience of total human fallenness and corruption when confronted with the utter holiness of the divine. Thus from different perspectives, both Reformers and Catholics reinforced the distinction between God and man. What was new about the modern, 'rationalist' approach to human life, was that it left the 'divine' half of the traditional dichotomy to fend for itself, and concentrated only on the 'human' side of things, whereas both the Reformers and Counter-Reformers tried, in their diverse ways, to find a way of relating the two sides to each other.

In the new, 'rationalist' approach to reality, Descartes was, philosophically speaking, the great initiator, but the tendency to organise life rationally made itself felt also, of course, in the political, social, and legal spheres. After the Reformation, an attempt was made to organise human life on earth in a religiously 'neutral' way or, in the celebrated phrase of the Dutch jurist and theologian, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), *etsi Deus non daretur* ('as if God did not exist'). What was perhaps not too clearly foreseen in this new departure, was the enormous influence that the strict division between the two orders, the natural and the supernatural, would exercise subsequently on the

progress of Deism in Europe. Even among the religiously committed, this division made an ominous and unmistakable impression on the way the Christian faith itself was construed. For it encouraged two essentially distinct approaches to religion, on the one hand, a rationalist, and on the other, a pietist or fideist attitude, thus neglecting the older Christian insistence²⁸ on seeing a necessary, not an arbitrary or voluntary, connection between faith and reflection, while avoiding the trap of identifying the two. In the nineteenth century, the First Vatican Council itself formally endorsed the difference between *natural* knowledge of God, and *supernatural* faith, thus giving an old and valuable distinction in Catholic theology (between faith and understanding) a modern expression, coloured perhaps more by the exigencies of the nineteenth-century debate between religion and rationalistic or ‘scientific’ materialism, than by the exigencies of Christianity itself.

As regards the defence of religion in the post-Reformation world, Christian thinkers, in general, attempted – somewhat too vigorously, it might be argued – to combat rationalist adversaries of the Christian faith on the battleground the latter had chosen, the ground of pure reason,²⁹ and in choosing to do so failed to realise that they thereby risked losing sight of the richness and subtlety of the Christian tradition itself. In short, what was specific to the Christian tradition tended to remain hidden in a kind of cultural ghetto, instead of being put, like the lamp in the parable, ‘on a stand, that those who enter may see the light’ (Lk 8: 16). Yet, at the same time, from a Catholic perspective it might be argued, somewhat perversely perhaps, that a possible advantage of the quasi-rationalistic idea of ‘pure nature’ is that it could subvert the kind of suspicion that was to be voiced most famously by Feuerbach in the nineteenth century, namely that grace is only an illusion or fantasy created by human need. For, according to the theory of ‘pure nature’, man could in principle live by a natural morality, reflect with the aid of purely natural reason, and seek an entirely natural happiness, without necessarily having to concern himself at all with divine grace. But an argument of this kind is surely implausible. The

²⁸ As found for example, to name perhaps the best-known instance, in Anselm’s ‘fides quaerens intellectum’ [faith seeking understanding], or much further back, in Augustine’s dictum: ‘Fides, si non cogitatur, nulla est’ [faith, if not reflected on, is not faith] (*De Praedestinatione Sanctorum* 2, 5 (PL 44, 963), quoted in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, #79).

²⁹ A significant manifestation of this attitude was Kant’s *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793).

apologetic advantage lying, allegedly, in the hypothetical notion of ‘pure nature’ is merely notional. Hence the price (adopting an existentially irrelevant view of the human condition) to be paid for exploiting it in order to refute the suspicions of a Feuerbach, is clearly too high.

Those who appealed to the theory of ‘pure nature’ wished to safeguard, as has been indicated, the fundamental value of human nature itself. But they also wanted to highlight the gratuitous and transcendent nature – in short, the divine nature – of God’s grace, and to stress, consequently, that human beings had no purely ‘natural’ claim on grace, nor could they earn grace by their own efforts. All of these assertions were unobjectionable. But the difficulty with the theory was that the ‘purely natural’ man it envisaged only existed as an intellectual construct or abstraction, not in reality, as Maurice Blondel³⁰ and other modern Catholic thinkers were later at pains to point out. It was thus unhelpful to have created the impression that for Christianity ‘natural man’ was anything other than the real, concrete human being of whom the classical theologians of the Western Catholic tradition had always spoken. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas,³¹ for example, expressed, albeit with differences of emphasis,³² the

³⁰ Blondel spoke of ‘the state of “pure nature” . . . which undoubtedly could have existed, but does not exist, and never has existed; we cannot even define precisely the actual conditions under which it might exist’ (‘La Semaine Sociale de Bordeaux’, in *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, Dec., 1939, 268; quoted by Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 108f.).

³¹ For Thomas’s position on this question, see Greshake, op. cit., 64; J.A. Di Noia in David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 125f.; see also Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 251 (‘The doctrine of the image of God was set forth by him [Thomas] as an answer to the question of the purpose of the creation of man’).

³² Speaking about the respective positions of Augustine and Aquinas on the question of the relation between nature and grace, de Lubac writes in *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, tr. Bro. Richard Arandez, F.S.C. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 122f.: ‘We might merely observe that the most usual difference between them, an essential difference but not a contradiction, arises because St. Thomas frequently begins by considering human nature as such in the abstract, independent of sin and its consequences; whereas St. Augustine takes as his starting point the experience of sinful man. While fully recognizing the transcendence of the supernatural, St. Thomas (giving perhaps a somewhat too facile interpretation of the *fecisti nos ad Te* of St. Augustine) “considers it as a completion bestowed on nature in the direction towards which its active inclinations already tended”’ (the last quotation is from Guy de Broglie, S.J.,

traditional view that man had been created *by* God and created *for* God, and that in Jesus Christ God had gratuitously offered man the gift of participating in his own divine life. Yet, even though the idea of ‘pure nature’ turned out to be more of a hindrance than a help in elucidating the doctrine of grace, it would be unwise to dismiss along with the idea of ‘pure nature’ the related idea of ‘human nature’, for, as we shall later have occasion to stress,³³ the concept of ‘human nature’, unlike that of ‘pure nature’, is by no means existentially vacuous.

The Enlightenment and Romanticism³⁴

The most significant watershed in the history of the doctrine of grace since the end of the Middle Ages, did not occur, as one might be inclined to think, with the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, even though the theme of grace was of course of paramount importance for both the Reformers and their Catholic counterparts. Even less so did this watershed occur with the inner-Catholic disputes on grace that followed the Reformation. Rather, the most decisive break in the history of the doctrine of grace, and perhaps even in the history of the entire Christian tradition, was that accomplished by the Enlightenment and by the reaction to the Enlightenment that the romantic movement represented. ‘The Enlightenment’ and ‘Romanticism’ are notoriously fluid terms that cannot be easily pinned down. But as starting points for further discussion, they are still irreplaceable.

The age of the Enlightenment, often characterised as anti-Christian, was in no sense, however, an irreligious age. Far from wanting to rid the world of religion, the Enlightenment was obsessed by it. The majority of Enlightenment thinkers wished to retain, not abolish, religion, but religion, for them, had to be of ‘natural’, not ‘supernatural’ or ‘revealed’, origin. Christianity’s special claim to a revealed truth was what the Enlightenment specifically rejected in the religious sphere, just as it called into question all claims to truth based on external authority or on the mere facticity or ‘positivity’ of a particular historical

‘Autour de la notion thomiste de la béatitude’, in *Archives de philosophie*, 3 (1925), 222).

³³ In the forthcoming second part of this study.

³⁴ See M. Henry, ‘The Enlightenment and Romanticism from a Theological Perspective’, *ITQ*, 63 (1998), 250–262.

tradition. For the Enlightenment – to this extent, the heir of the Reformation – the judgement of the intellectual and moral conscience of the individual was supreme in matters of religion. And human reason, presumed to be everywhere the same, was considered to be the only sound basis on which judgements about truth could be made. What was not self-evident to reason, was suspect, and deemed to be mere opinion or prejudice. The clash between truth and commonly accepted opinion is, of course, much older than the Enlightenment itself. But in the Enlightenment's debate with Christianity, the resolution of the ancient conflict between truth and opinion (or tradition) led to a temporary exaltation of Deism, as a rational 'natural' version of religion that was in principle accessible to all (though in practice reserved to the few). It also led, among large sections of the West's intellectual élite, to a much longer-lasting rejection of, indeed almost an instinctive scepticism about, Christian claims to truth. For the Enlightenment could not accept a God who, Christianity claimed, sought to redeem suffering humanity by means of a divine sacrifice. Such a God was perceived as not acting according to the dictates of an enlightened, calculating rationalism, since He was believed rather to have acted out of an unfathomable, inscrutable, and gratuitous love for mankind. Enlightenment thinkers could not accept that 'morality which has at its head a crucified God',³⁵ in Pascal's words. Not surprisingly, Pascal – who had himself been, it is worth remembering, deeply involved in the disputes on grace in his own time – did not find favour with the Enlightenment, whose archetypical spokesman, Voltaire, characterised him with exquisite sarcasm as 'that sublime misanthrope'.³⁶

Yet Deism, the religion of the *Aufklärung*, did not succeed in replacing Christianity as a widespread religious movement. Deism was too abstract – its deity too far removed from the cares and anxieties of most mortals – for it to triumph on a large scale. What Goethe saw in Christianity, when he noted in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* that it revealed to mankind 'the divine depths of suffering',³⁷ was a vital aspect of religion for which Deism had no serious

³⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, §964, tr. A.J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), 340; my attention was drawn to this passage by John Campbell, 'The God of *Athalie*', *French Studies*, 43/4 (1989), 401.

³⁶ Voltaire, *Lettres Philosophiques*, rev. ed. F.A. Taylor (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 94 [Lettre XXV: *Sur les Pensées de M. Pascal*].

³⁷ Quoted in Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, tr. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 23. In a similar vein, Oscar Wilde wrote that, 'suffering is the most real mode of life, and the one for which we are all ultimately

substitute. According to the expression of Pascal, Deism was ‘almost as remote from the Christian religion as atheism, its complete opposite’.³⁸ A deity that was only immanent in the world as the general laws of matter or the allegedly universal moral law, a deity so remote as to be beyond the experience of the majority of human beings, was a deity that could be dispensed with, as having no direct or intimate connection with human existence in the world.

The reaction (if the term is not too feeble) to the Enlightenment was Romanticism, and it was among Protestant thinkers that the new current of thought and sensibility first made a potent impact in philosophy and theology. The key names to be mentioned here are those of the most prominent German post-Kantian idealist philosophers, Fichte, Schelling, and especially Hegel, and the theologian, Schleiermacher, all of whom created new ways of interpreting human experience that have continued to mark Western intellectual life down to the present day. These recent and most influential ‘footnotes to Plato’ have been assessed since their own times in markedly disparate ways, but their significance is not in dispute. The first important Catholic response to the new ideas was made in the first half of the nineteenth century by the short-lived Catholic Tübingen School,³⁹ which endeavoured to re-express the truths of the Catholic faith in the light of the changed cultural context of the times.

The story of intellectual developments in the West in the last two hundred and fifty years is well known, and has only been briefly evoked at this point, to provide a general framework for the problematic that here concerns us. For contemporary Catholic thinking on grace can perhaps best be understood as the continuation of the first steps taken by those nineteenth-century theologians who sought to re-express traditional Christian truths in a modern idiom, with all the pitfalls such a hazardous enterprise must always involve. And what modern Catholic thinkers have been striving to accomplish, has been to hold together the two sides of any traditional, Catholic understanding of grace: that is to say, to find ways of understanding how grace – which is God’s own life – and human

created’ (in a letter to Laurence Housman of February/March 1898, in *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford, 1987), 167).

³⁸ *Pensées*, §449, 168.

³⁹ See J.P. Geiselman, *Die Katholische Tübinger Schule* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1964); T.F. O’Meara, *Romantic Idealism and Roman Catholicism: Schelling and the Theologians* (Notre-Dame & London: University of Notre-Dame Press, 1982).

history can both co-exist and be interconnected without, however, being confused or identified with each other.

The development of atheistic humanism

The plight of Christian theology became increasingly dramatic as the nineteenth century progressed.⁴⁰ Two significant milestones along the way were the appearance of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1835/36), which planted in the public consciousness the seeds of the suspicion that the Gospels were 'only' myth, rather than truth, and Jesus 'only' a religiously gifted human being, but not the incarnate Son of God, and shortly afterwards the publication of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1841), which attributed the very existence of God to the workings of the frustrated human imagination. To borrow a phrase from Peter Gay, at this time the 'road from Damascus' became at least as frequently travelled as the 'road to Damascus'.⁴¹ In Henri de Lubac's expression, the nineteenth century witnessed the unfolding of 'the drama of atheistic humanism', embryonically in the influence of the works of the period just mentioned, and fully fledged in the writings of thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche, and somewhat later, Freud. In this drama, the desire for liberation – which will become, by a curious irony, one of the principal themes of the doctrine of grace in the twentieth century – is expressed in a rejection of God. Christianity itself came to be regarded, and then repudiated, as a force for enslavement and exploitation, the dialectical opposite of its own traditional self-understanding as the religion of redemption and liberation. Thus, the young Rimbaud (1854–1891) could write at the end of the poem, 'Les Premières Communions':

Christ! ô Christ, éternel voleur des énergies,
Dieu qui pour deux mille ans vouas à ta pâleur,
Cloués au sol, de honte et de céphalalgies,

⁴⁰ The difficulties experienced by religious thinkers in that period help to explain, for instance, why a Thomas Merton should have alluded to 'the embattled inferiority complex of much nineteenth-century thought' (*The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Bro. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1985), 93).

⁴¹ P. Gay, *The Naked Heart. The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, vol. iv (New York/London, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 124.

Ou renversés, les fronts des femmes de douleur.⁴²

Other influential forms adopted by the nineteenth-century disowning of Christianity included seeing it as mere cowardice in the face of worldly existence, regarded as the sole reality definitely available to human beings, or even judging it as an expression of hatred for ‘natural’ life. In Nietzsche’s view, the God of Christianity was the ‘antithesis’ of ‘natural’ life, and so, for him, Christianity was the great enemy to be overcome in the defence of ‘life’.⁴³

At the same time, in the course of the nineteenth century, a rationalist and allegedly scientific positivism, associated with Auguste Comte, the founder of modern sociology (his term), became a dominant intellectual fashion.⁴⁴ And

⁴² Prose translation in A. Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, tr. Oliver Bernard (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 152: ‘Christ! O Christ! eternal thief of vigour! God who for two thousand years hast dedicated to Thy pallor the brows of sorrowful women, nailed to the earth in shame and in headaches – or overthrown completely.’

⁴³ Cf. *The Anti-Christ* § 15, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 135: ‘In Christianity neither morality nor religion comes into contact with reality at any point. Nothing but imaginary *causes* (“God”, “soul”, “ego”, “spirit”, “free will” – or “unfree will”): nothing but imaginary *effects* (“sin”, “redemption”, “grace”, “punishment”, “forgiveness of sins”). . . . Once the concept “nature” had been devised as the concept antithetical to “God”, “natural” had to be the word for “reprehensible” – this entire fictional world has its roots in hatred of the natural (– actuality! –), it is the expression of a profound discontent with the actual. . . .’ See also the conclusion of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (III, 28), in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, tr. and ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 598f.: ‘. . . this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself—all this means—let us dare to grasp it—a *will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life . . .’ See, finally, the remarks of Henri de Lubac on the modern view of God as a threat to human freedom and creativity, in *Le Drame de l’humanisme athée* (Paris: Éditions Spes, 1959), 20-22.

⁴⁴ There were, of course, exceptions to the general rule. The French writer Paul Claudel (1868–1955), for example, writing in his *Ma conversion*, ironically about the influence of Rimbaud, notes: ‘The reading of the *Illuminations*, and then, a few months later, of *Une saison en enfer*, was for me a major event. For the first time, these books opened up a crack in my materialist prison and gave me the living and almost physical sensation of the supernatural.’ And in a letter to Jacques Rivière, written in 1908, he repeats: ‘Rimbaud was the major influence on me . . . I shall always remember that June morning in 1886 when I bought that little issue of *La Vogue* which contained the start of the *Illuminations*. It really was an illumination for me. I was finally emerging from that hideous world of Taine, Renan and the other Molochs of the nineteenth century, from that awful mechanistic system governed entirely by laws that were absolutely rigid and – the ultimate horror – knowable and teachable . . . For me it was the revelation of the supernatural’ (quoted by Charles Du Bos, *Approximations* (Paris: Fayard, 1965), 1203).

coming from the direction of the natural sciences, the pervasive influence of Darwin proved inescapable. His *Origin of Species* (1859) implicitly questioned the Christian doctrine of creation and especially the belief in the special status of humanity as made in the image of God. From the time of its publication, the conjecture gained ground that human life was merely one example – among a profusion of others – of natural life on earth, and that any transcendent or supernatural realm, of which religion spoke, was pure illusion. In *The Gay Science* (1882), with Darwin's thought no doubt in mind, Nietzsche advocated the need to 'de-divinise' nature, and then to 'naturalise' man, in the sense of demonstrating man's exclusively 'natural' nature, and the folly, dishonesty, and wastefulness of believing in any transcendent or supernatural destiny for the human race.⁴⁵ In his paradoxical, provocative way, Nietzsche uses Christian terminology in the very act of subverting its meaning: for him, the world becomes man's place of redemption when man is finally shorn – as for Nietzsche the 'rest of nature' already is – of any pretensions to a supernatural origin or destiny. But yet, even for Nietzsche redemption is still what the world, and man, are in need of, albeit not in the sense envisaged by Christianity.⁴⁶ Interestingly, but not altogether surprisingly, given that they were contemporaries, the antithesis between Christianity and 'naturalism' that Nietzsche dramatised, raising it to a pitch of paroxysm, is also reflected in the much more restrained writings of another anguished critic, J.H. Newman. After

⁴⁵ *The Gay Science*, Bk. 3, §109, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 169: 'When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to "naturalize" humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?' Kaufmann comments on this passage (ibid.): "'Naturalize" is here used in the sense of naturalism, as opposed to supernaturalism. Man is to be reintegrated into nature.' See also *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 230, tr. W. Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 351f.: "To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been scrawled and painted over that eternal basic text of *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the rest of nature, with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all too long, "you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!"—that may be a strange and insane task, but it is a task—who would deny that?"

⁴⁶ See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Pt. II, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), 161:

'And how could I endure to be a man, if man were not also poet and reader of riddles and the redeemer of chance!

To redeem the past and to transform every "It was" into an "I wanted it thus!" – that alone do I call redemption!

his conversion to the Catholic Church, Newman claimed that, faced with the religious problems of the age, the only real choice—at least for those, presumably, like himself who felt such problems acutely—lay between what he called ‘Catholicity’ and atheism.⁴⁷

The Church’s reaction

The initial steps taken by nineteenth-century Catholic theologians in seeking answers to the questions raised for Christianity by the intellectual realities of the modern world were interrupted towards the end of the century by the publication of Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), which promoted neo-Scholasticism or, as it was also called, neo-Thomism in Catholic centres of higher learning. It was hoped that a renewal of Thomist philosophy would be the key to fending off the assaults of modern culture. Neo-Thomism, however, which may in fact have retained little, if any, of the spirit of real Thomism,⁴⁸ proved unable to hold back the flood of existential questions and anxieties that were spreading with increasing intensity not only in the world at large but even within the Church. To modern questions and anxieties, neo-Thomism had no convincing or persuasive responses. Like an old patch on a new cloak, it seemed simply quaint and irrelevant, and thus unlikely to change the direction of modern sensibilities. The description applied by George Santayana to the situation of ‘absolute idealism’ in the early part of the last century (‘nothing will have been disproved, but everything will have

⁴⁷ See, however, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1891), ‘Note II’ (pp. 495–501), where Newman explains what he meant by saying in his *Apologia* ‘that there is no medium, in true philosophy, between Atheism and Catholicity, and that a perfectly consistent mind, under those circumstances in which it finds itself here below must embrace either the one or the other’ (p. 496). Newman was clearly nettled by, and sought to refute, the accusation that his defence of Catholicism relied ‘upon the threat and the consequent scare, that, unless a man be a Catholic he ought to be an Atheist’ (p. 495).

⁴⁸ A recent commentator goes so far as to conjecture that, ‘almost certainly the rebel Thomas would at a certain time in history—perhaps when Pope Leo XIII inaugurated modern Thomism, in 1879—ceased [*sic*] to have been a Roman Catholic’ (Martin Seymour-Smith, *The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written: The History of Thought From Ancient Times to Today* (New York: Citadel Press, 2001), 143).

been abandoned'⁴⁹) could with little exaggeration have been extended to the wider world of Western religion. And a world thus drifting away from its past was scarcely going to regain its religious soul by being merely confronted with the ghost of traditional thought.

The next effort that was made, after the attempted revival of Thomism, to meet the needs of the times, was undertaken towards the end of the nineteenth century by a number of Catholic thinkers who eventually became known collectively as the 'Modernist Movement'. Unlike the earlier Catholic Tübingen School, this movement was international in character. And the pressures of modern thought were clearly not only more widely, but also more keenly felt in the Catholic world at this later time. But the efforts of the modernists, too, were nipped in the bud, when the movement was condemned early in the twentieth century.⁵⁰ The modernists' understanding of Revelation was held to smack of immanentism, with divine truth emerging gradually, rather than descending in its fullness like a bolt from the blue; their understanding of faith was considered too experiential and subjective; and their approach to history was regarded as too sceptical, especially regarding the beginnings of Christianity. Such features of modernism were thought to undermine belief in Christianity's supernatural origins, and thus to subvert the Church's claim to be founded on an absolutely unique divine Revelation.

A Catholic intellectual renewal that in due time was to gain lasting, large-scale approval did, however, finally get under way. Initiated not by theologians, but by philosophers such as Joseph Maréchal and, above all, Maurice Blondel,⁵¹ it was subsequently built upon by the historical researches of scholars like de

⁴⁹ *Winds of Doctrine*, 211, quoted by John Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, 4th ed. (London: SCM, 1989), 44.

⁵⁰ 'Modernism' was officially condemned in 1907 by Pope Pius X in the decree *Lamentabili* and the encyclical *Pascendi*. See the brief remarks on Catholic modernism in M. Henry, *On not understanding God* (Dublin: Columba, 1997), 222f.

⁵¹ According to Henri de Lubac, himself one of the principal architects of the 'nouvelle théologie': 'We must admit that the main impulse for [Latin theology's return to a more authentic tradition] came from a philosopher, Maurice Blondel . . . It was mainly because of his influence, as Fr. Henri Bouillard explained, that "we have consciously ceased to conceive of the natural and the supernatural orders as though they were two superposed storeys without inner connections"' (H. de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, 37f.). On Blondel, see Max Seckler, 'Maurice Blondel', in *Tendenzen der Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert*, 74-79 [see note 4].

Lubac⁵² in the ‘nouvelle théologie’⁵³ movement, and by the efforts of theologians like Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, both of whom had originally been trained in neo-Thomism but had recognised the need to transcend it. Thanks to such philosophers and theologians, the situation slowly began to change, and the efforts expended bore fruit, after certain hesitations and difficulties, in the course of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Looking back over the last two centuries, could say that in this period Catholic theology has struggled to cast off the burdensome legacy of the so-called ‘extrinsicist’ manner of conceiving the relationship between divine grace and the historical reality of human existence, while at the same time striving, in most cases, to maintain and to explain—more adequately than the ‘two-storey’ description of the relationship managed to do⁵⁴—the distinction and yet also the connection that must exist between God’s gratuitous offer of grace to man, and the role that man himself has to play in the working out of his salvation. In other words, to use the two terms that have become both traditional and also highly problematic in Catholic thought, the last two centuries have witnessed various attempts to express, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, what is the actual relationship that obtains between ‘nature’ and ‘grace’—if, that is to say, they are not one and the same. In the second part of this study, we shall look in more detail at some significant twentieth-century theological movements and figures who have shaped the contemporary Catholic interpretation of grace.⁵⁵

⁵² See A. Vanneste, ‘La théologie du surnaturel dans les écrits de Henri de Lubac’, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 69 (1993), 273–314.

⁵³ See José Martin-Palma, *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. III, 5b, 178–180.

⁵⁴ See above, 5ff. (‘The post-medieval historical background’).

⁵⁵ The second part of this study is to appear in the next issue of the *ITQ*.