

Reflections on Grace (Part Two)¹

In this second part, some of the main contributions to the reinterpretation of the doctrine of grace in twentieth-century Catholic theology are discussed. After outlining the new approach to grace opened up by personalist thinking before Vatican II, the article examines the understanding of grace that emerged after the Council—particularly within liberation theology. In conclusion, possible implications of jettisoning certain aspects of the classical theology of grace are considered.

Among the new intellectual movements that rejuvenated Catholic theology in the twentieth century, the first to make a lasting impact was personalism or, rather, perhaps one should speak, in the plural, of varieties of personalism.² This current of thought that had already emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century is associated with philosophers and theologians such as J.H. Newman (1801–1890), Max Scheler (1874–1928), Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), and Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950).³ Thanks to the change of climate brought about by such thinkers, the way in which basic religious questions – including of course the question of grace – were approached, was transformed. Personalist philosophers moved emphatically away from any consideration of man as a fixed essence or as a nature endowed with distinctive, immutable characteristics. Rather, they saw in man a being whose meaning or significance is to be sought in the relations in which he exists or which he is capable of establishing between himself and others, himself and the rest of the universe, and, finally, between himself and God. Personalist philosophies are frequently described as being ‘dynamic’. As such, their approach was hailed as an enormous liberation, after

¹ The first part of this study appeared in the previous issue of the *ITQ*.

² See Emmanuel Mounier, *Le personnalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1950), 6f.

³ See Herman-Emiel Mertens, ‘Nature and Grace in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology’, in *Louvain Studies*, 16 (1991), 251f.

the predominance exercised for centuries by more ‘static’ or ‘essentialist’ modes of thought.⁴

Personalism could be regarded as falling within the broad spectrum of existentialist thought and sensibility. Personalist thinkers considered that man transcends all that the human or natural sciences can know about him; consequently it is impossible to reduce him to what biology, psychology, sociology, or any other science could ever say about him. Since personalism affirms ‘the existence of free, creative persons’, it accepts at the very heart of its own philosophical approach ‘a principle of unpredictability that thwarts any will towards final systematisation’.⁵ According to Mounier, ‘The human person is not the most marvellous object in the world, an object that we can supposedly know from the outside, like other objects. The person is the only reality we can know and at the same time create from the inside. Present everywhere, it can be grasped nowhere. . . . The person is not an object that can be isolated and observed, but a centre from which the objective universe can be reinterpreted . . .’⁶ Yet personalism is not an individualistic type of existentialism. On the contrary, for personalism the human person – a unity of body and spirit – is linked to a community to which it belongs, and to the world, of which it forms part.⁷

Should this way of looking at man be allowed to guide the way one understands the meaning of grace, then grace ceases to be regarded as a divine or supernatural ‘thing’ or ‘substance’ added on, as it were, to the natural reality of the individual. On the contrary, one can begin to envisage the possibility of thinking of grace as a participation in the divine life, and as God’s dwelling

⁴ See Francis Colborn, ‘The Theology of Grace: Present trends and future directions’, *Theological Studies*, 31 (1970), 692-711, an article that reviews the personalist ideas on grace of theologians such as J. Alfaro, P. Fransen, H. Mühlen, J. Mackey, G. Baum, to name only the better-known authors. By 1970, the personalist perspective on grace was well entrenched in Catholic theology, and a corresponding reluctance to stress ‘ontological categories’ in any discussion of the doctrine of grace was widespread. Thus, in considering how grace could be envisaged in terms of an interpersonal relationship, Colborn comments: ‘This relationship is not so much defined (metaphysically) as it is described (phenomenologically). The important question to be asked is not about the essences of the persons involved but about the origin and development of the relationship between them’ (p. 694).

⁵ Mounier, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁶ Mounier, *op. cit.*, 8, 17.

⁷ See E.-H. Mertens, *loc. cit.*, 252.

among human beings.⁸ Grace can thus be grasped as a transformation of man's concrete, historical reality, a transformation which will, clearly, have social and even cosmic ramifications.

Romano Guardini

Romano Guardini (1885–1968) also contributed to the abandonment of too cerebral or rationalistic a theology of grace, and to the search for a new way of conceiving the relationship between divine grace and history. For him, the world – or creation, to use the theological term – and man, as part of creation, already are 'grace', since they were created by a free act of the divine will. But grace, in the strict sense, is the offer of 'dialogue' or 'encounter' that God makes to man in Jesus Christ. Guardini sees the connection between creation and the grace 'of encounter' in the following terms: man was created *in order to* find fulfilment beyond his own historical existence. Man is thus urged to transcend, in an encounter with God, the world in which he exists historically. Such an encounter is only possible because of the goodness and the will of God who invites man to seek him, and who himself goes out constantly in search of man in the course of human history.⁹

Karl Rahner

The thought of Karl Rahner (1904–1984),¹⁰ dubbed the 'Holy Ghost writer'¹¹ of Vatican II, had a huge influence on the theology of grace in the

⁸ Cf. Gisbert Greshake, *Geschenkte Freiheit: Einführung in die Gnadenlehre* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1992 [new ed.]), 91–95.

⁹ 'God approaches man, gives himself to man and makes man capable of receiving Him' (quotation from Guardini, '*Gnade und Schicksal*': *drei Kapitel zur Deutung des Daseins*, cited by H.-E. Mertens, loc. cit., 252). See also José Martin-Palma, 'Gnadenlehre von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart', *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. III, 5b (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1980), 180–181.

¹⁰ See Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1979), ch. 6; Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), ch. 4; George Vandervelde, 'The Grammar of Grace: Karl Rahner as a Watershed in Contemporary

twentieth century.¹² For Rahner, as for Henri de Lubac, the existential reality of human life is one in which God's grace is in fact always offered to man. The only historical order that exists is that of grace. 'Pure nature' is only a theological possibility, but one that has not in fact been actualised. Rahner, like de Lubac, wanted to say, without beating about the bush, that grace is, in the first instance, God's own life, which God wants to give to man for his salvation and fulfilment. Therein lies for Rahner the primordial truth about grace, and all other questions about how man actually receives grace are secondary. For Rahner, too, there is a universal presence of grace in the world, since God's saving will is itself universal. Consequently, Rahner can envisage a so-called 'anonymous Christianity' outside the Church, a concept that was to be sharply contested by, among others, Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Rahner obviously wished to avoid 'extrinsicism', but without falling into the opposite error of saying that God's grace is indistinguishable from creation, and is neither transcendent nor in any strong sense gratuitous, that is to say, not gratuitous except in so far as creation itself could be said to be 'gratuitous'. His attempt at a quasi-squaring of the theological circle clearly created tensions in his thought, and may perhaps explain the occasional obscurity of his writings on grace.¹³

The problems raised by Rahner's theology of grace, are discussed by George Vandervelde, who suggests that it is not possible to provide, as Rahner attempts to do, an ontology of grace without compromising either the unpredictability¹⁴ of God's grace or else the real relation that exists between the

Theology', *Theological Studies*, 49 (1988), 445-459; J.A. Di Noia OP, 'Karl Rahner', in David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), ch. 7.

¹¹ See G. Vandervelde, loc. cit., 445.

¹² Cf. R. Haight, 'Sin and Grace', in F. Schüssler Fiorenza & J.P. Galvin, (eds.), *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan), 1992, 433: 'In the twentieth century no Catholic theologian has done more than Karl Rahner to restore the theology of grace to its position close to the center of Christian thought.'

¹³ See, for example, 'Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade', 'Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit der ungeschaffenen Gnade', in *Schriften zur Theologie*, I (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1954), 323-345, 347-375; 'Natur und Gnade', in *Schriften zur Theologie*, IV (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1960), 209-236.

¹⁴ And it would seem that 'unpredictability' is a minimum expectation one should have with regard to grace, given that it is even a quality 'which quantum physics accords [in some measure] to inanimate nature' (Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*

order of nature and the order of grace. Vandervelde concludes: ‘If God is truly the mystery presupposed by our being and our thinking, grace cannot be grasped by an ontology, i.e. by a human logos of divine being.’¹⁵ And according to J.A. Di Noia, ‘with the introduction of the supernatural existential conceived in terms of transcendental philosophy of mind and metaphysics, Rahner cannot provide a description or analysis of the natural order at the theoretical level that is not dependent upon the supernatural order.’¹⁶ The decisive anthropological notion of ‘supernatural existential’¹⁷ (*übernatürliches Existential*) turns out then to be quite ambiguous, for it does not appear to allow Rahner to respect sufficiently the relative (not of course absolute) autonomy of the order of creation; consequently, he is not really able either to respect the always surprising novelty of grace. This flaw, if it is one, could well be linked to another aspect of Rahner’s theology which has been commented on, namely that he does not underscore too strongly what one might call the ‘revelational’ value of the Old Testament,¹⁸ and hence of the doctrine of creation to be found there. For Christian faith, however, this doctrine is surely indispensable.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

As is well known, it was Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), in a critique some found slightly ungracious, others quite legitimate, who passed the

[London: Arkana Books, 1989], 17). Unless, that is, one imagined that grace, in contradistinction to nature, should always be entirely ‘predictable’, a view which would in fact accord well with the notion of divine immutability. God could then always be relied on to be gracious. But that of course would still leave the basic ‘meaning’ of ‘gracious’ unelucidated.

¹⁵ Loc. cit., 459. This rather cryptic statement I take to mean simply that the created human intellect is incapable of grasping the reality of God the Creator.

¹⁶ Op. cit., 126.

¹⁷ The expression ‘supernatural existential’, like Balthasar’s notion (mentioned below: see n. 24) of ‘*praecognitio inchoativa*’, refers to the human capacity for, or openness to, transcendence, a capacity that is real but not satisfactorily definable.

¹⁸ Richard Schaeffler, for instance, remarks, ‘that Rahner hardly ever took the revelational character of what the Old Testament proclaimed as a theme for his own deliberations, and frequently categorised in an undifferentiated way the history of faith of the People of God in the Old Testament as part of the history of the “natural” religions of humanity’ (*Die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Philosophie und katholischer Theologie* [Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1980], 205).

most severe judgement on Rahner's theology of grace.¹⁹ Balthasar could not but be uneasy about the notion of 'anonymous Christianity', an idea that was to become associated almost emblematically with Rahner's theology of grace. For Balthasar, Christianity in no sense excludes the value of other religions and other spiritualities, but at the same time his 'emphasis on the dialectic between grace and judgment also obliges him to emphasize the normative character of the revelation form, the sense in which, in its light, all other forms of spirituality are not only affirmed but judged.'²⁰ There was clearly between the perspectives of Rahner and Balthasar more than a difference of emphasis. Although the open dispute between the two men only broke out after the Second Vatican Council, Balthasar's reservations about Rahner's understanding of grace go back much further, to the publication in fact of Rahner's *Geist in Welt* (1939).²¹ With reference to Balthasar's critique of this early work of Rahner's, John Riches and Ben Quash write:

There Balthasar warns against the attempt to build a theology simply on a study of the human spirit's transcendence of experience in its judgments and actions. Such a move effectively short-circuits all attempts to perceive the nature of the divine freedom by contemplation of the world of objects. Should we not rather begin by contemplation of the natural tendency of Being to take *form*, by attending, that is, to the way in which the wonderful diversity of created things speaks of the sheer creativity of Being and points us to a source of creativity and freedom beyond Being itself which is God? It is this that kindled the wondering attention, the *thaumazein*, of the myth-makers and the philosophers of antiquity. Analogously, it is as believers contemplate the divine form of the revelation in Christ that their eyes are opened to the grace and majesty of God, and that grace generates new forms of life as it is perceived and obeyed.²²

To summarise the critical dimension of Balthasar's approach,²³ one could say that he is suspicious of any attempt to develop a theology of grace on the

¹⁹ Especially in *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1966); see also, John Riches and Ben Quash, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar', in D.F. Ford (ed.), op. cit., 145f.

²⁰ Riches and Quash, op. cit., 145f.

²¹ A point made by Rowan Williams, according to Riches and Quash, op. cit., 145.

²² Ibid.

²³ This summary of Balthasar's ideas on grace follows closely the outline given by J. Martin-Palma, op. cit., 198f.

basis of an investigation of the structure either of our intellect, or of our moral sense, or of our affective needs. If we attribute to God the role of satisfying our desire to know, or our concern for justice, or our need for love, then from that moment on the danger exists that we will perhaps sacrifice the transcendent, gratuitous, and unpredictable quality of grace, and paradoxically kill the very thing we are looking for.

On the constructive side, Balthasar set about composing the multi-volumed work, *Herrlichkeit* (1961–69), a theology that aimed to overcome the defects of an excessively rationalistic or analytical or moralistic (or even moralising) theology, by putting at its heart the ‘transcendental’ quality of the beautiful. This theology turned out to be at the same time a theology of grace of vast proportions. God does not, primarily, reveal himself as the truth one seeks to understand, nor as the moral law or goodness one should follow or strive to imitate, but rather as the beauty of an unexpected, free, and sovereign love to which man surrenders with delight in a willing act of adoration, because he *wants* to, and not because he needs or has to, or even because it arouses his intellectual curiosity. This divine love or grace is pure and self-existent; it is not oppressive or exploitative. In the perspective of this understanding of grace, man can remain other than God, and God other than man. This revelation of grace is, moreover, no abstraction: on the contrary, it is the revelation of a personal love which is perceived as such by the human heart, not by pure reason (if there is such a thing). It is this love that is at the basis of Christian ethics, but the perception of this revelation is not itself an ethical act.

While some may consider that Balthasar’s theology, like Karl Barth’s, seems to rest on unquestioning acceptance of the ‘positivity’ or sheer givenness of the Christian revelation, as traditionally understood, this criticism itself scarcely does justice to the nuances of Balthasar’s position. For, in line with his acceptance of the value of other religions and spiritual traditions, he does allow that there is in human beings a *praecognitio inchoativa*²⁴ of the divine, to use his

²⁴ Martin-Palma, *op. cit.*, 199. Literally: ‘inchoative pre-cognition’. See, for example, H.U. von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation*, ed. A. Dru (London: Sheed and Ward, 1977), 51: ‘[Man] certainly has a pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) of what love is; if he did not he could not make out the sign Jesus Christ.’ See, also, *id.*, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, tr. E. Leiva-Merikakis, ed. J. Fessio S.J. and J. Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 167: ‘There is a natural religious *a priori*, given with the essence of the creature as such, which coincides with

own cautious expression. This capacity or ‘antenna’, as it were, for being in some attenuated way in tune with the reality of God, would correspond to the *potentia oboedientialis* of the scholastics, for instance, or to the ‘supernatural existential’ of Rahner and his disciples. Even for Balthasar, then, man is not completely passive before divine revelation, and hence before the grace of God. The prevailing thrust of his theology, however, has been to counteract any move that might reduce the reality of grace to the measure of man. But he has also pertinently argued, as already indicated, that if grace is genuinely received, it will in fact always be embraced freely and joyfully – in a childlike way, one might say – by the human subject.

In view of the qualities inherent in Balthasar’s theology, Martin-Palma ventures to conclude that of all the current bids to reinterpret the doctrine of grace, Balthasar’s offers the Church the most solid and promising basis on which to present this ancient doctrine to the contemporary world.²⁵ Certainly, his overall vision combines the two classical hallmarks of the theology of grace: respect, on the one hand, for the transcendence, gratuitousness, and unpredictability of God’s grace, and, on the other hand, respect for human freedom. As with all standard theological vocabulary, however, the key terms here are akin to the tip of the proverbial, always insufficiently explored, iceberg, though in Balthasar’s case, the exploration is already on a prodigious scale.

Further developments after the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council was the first Council in the history of the Church to be held after the invention of television. The enhanced visibility this ensured for religious debate in all probability helped to heighten the profile of theology in the Catholic world, and may even subsequently have fostered the

its ability to understand all existents in the light of Being, which is analogous to and points to God.’ Cf. Eamon Conway, *The Anonymous Christian – A Relativised Christianity? An Evaluation of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Criticisms of Karl Rahner’s Theory of the Anonymous Christian* (Dissertation: Maynooth, 1991), 256.

²⁵ ‘[Balthasar’s] theology has not sought the popularity of an analytical or praxis-oriented theology. As such, we can venture to predict that it will have a more secure future, one that will be more promising and hopeful for the Church. Since Balthasar’s theology of “doxa” is at the same time a theology of grace, it can offer a path towards a recovery of the theology of grace’ (Martin-Palma, op. cit., 198).

illusion that matters of great moment were now being aired publicly by theologians and other interested parties. Certainly, the Council was experienced as a liberation. At last people could breathe more freely, and say, and be seen to say, what they wanted, on all aspects of religion. But, as time went on, it was to prove much easier to cast aside perspectives that had grown too narrow and too rigid, and that seemed completely out of touch with the contemporary mood, than it was to find new, persuasive ways of interpreting the Church's traditional doctrines and, above all, to create new forms of Christian living that could really match the achievements of earlier periods, ambiguous though these often were. Even making allowances for the temptation to idealise the safely distant past, it still seems fair to say that the *movimenti* that have cropped up the last half century are scarcely the equivalent of, say, the emergence of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century. This is not of course a moral 'value-judgement' on the former, or indeed, for that matter, on the latter. But the visceral intensity that is religion's invisible – and also potentially explosive – asset, that deep, uncompromising, unforced sense of commitment and identity which, in the past, seems not only to have made possible the heroic sacrifices of the faithful, but also to have been, in less dramatic ways, existentially and culturally significant—that profundity has in recent decades not been as easy to conjure up as the 'enhanced visibility' just mentioned.

Put slightly differently, when religion *is* life, not an aspect of life one has to be made conscious of or about which one has become self-conscious, then key religious realities like 'grace' have a different 'feel' about them, than when they become problematic objects of reflection and study.²⁶ That a change of this nature, characterised by the intrusion of critical self-consciousness into the heart of religion, has occurred in the Catholic world over about the last fifty years seems indisputable. It might be the case that an understandable fear of dangerous extremes, so palpably present in the ideologies of the earlier part of the twentieth century, has subtly modified religious attitudes in the West since, roughly speaking, the end of the Second World War, thus helping eventually to bring about the seismic change just alluded to within the Catholic world, and accelerating the general decline in the cultural significance of Christianity that

²⁶ In a rather similar way, as the American writer Mary McCarthy noted many years ago, 'being taught the Bible as Great Literature in a college humanities course . . . does not stick to the ribs', in the same sense presumably as if it were an essential and unproblematic aspect of one's life (M. McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976; first published in the USA in 1957], 24).

has been noticeable since the Enlightenment. The Second Vatican Council might perhaps be viewed, then, as marking Catholicism's loss of innocence about itself, with all that that implies both in loss—and gain.

The point could of course be made, and has been made,²⁷ that heroism, traditionally a glamorous commodity in Western culture, is in fact a distorted expression of Christian faith. One could then conceivably take this notion a little further and argue that to foster 'mere' survival with some modicum of human decency might represent in fact more than a sufficient recommendation for Christianity (or indeed any religion). And consequently, in the sphere of theology (the Christian faith's intellectual expression), the worst thing that could happen to Christianity would not necessarily be to lose its (phoney?) intellectual glamour. As against that, however, the power of the elemental forces²⁸ that religion can still unleash and thrive on will probably continue to captivate those for whom 'homeliness' is not enough, and who want grace to be dramatic. The sublimity of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* may always, for some, be preferable to a God who is 'simply' *gemütlich*. This could, to some extent perhaps, explain why the profusion of well-meaning²⁹ theologies of grace that appeared in the wake of the Council, failed to ignite much interest among contemporaries outside the Church. Even inside the Church, when, for example, Henri de Lubac finally had the freedom to publish in 1965 what he had had for so long to keep out of public view, this turned out to be a non-event.³⁰ In an earlier age, a Jansenius (1585–1638), it is reported, would read the entire works of Augustine ten times, and his writings on grace thirty times,³¹ before launching into his own fateful exposition of the subject; but such an intense

²⁷ Hans Dieter Betz, for instance, argued 'that in the understanding of Christianity, faith is a gift. Thus any attitude of religious heroism or of doctrinaire fanaticism will be ruled out as inappropriate to this faith' ('Ursprung und Wesen christlichen Glaubens nach der Emmauslegende [Lk 24.13–32]', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 66 [1969], 14). Less radically, Baron von Hügel claimed that, 'The material of the Supernatural is not only the heroic but also, indeed mostly, the homely' (quoted in P. Franklin Chambers, *Baron von Hügel: Man of God* [London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946], 11).

²⁸ Evoked, for example, in Yeats's lines: 'The Babylonian starlight brought/A fabulous, formless darkness in;/Odour of blood when Christ was slain/Made all Platonic tolerance vain/And vain all Doric discipline' (*Collected Poems* [London: Macmillan, 1977], 240).

²⁹ One is reminded of the cynical piece of Germanic wisdom, that the opposite of 'gut' ('good') is not 'böse' ('evil'), but 'gutgemeint' ('well-meant').

³⁰ Cf. H.-E. Mertens, loc. cit., 258, citing H. Küng, *Existiert Gott?* (Munich, 1978), 574.

³¹ See Leszek Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 101.

level of interest in the classical disputes on grace, in the old quarrels over the relation between the natural and the supernatural, had long since declined and had almost entirely melted away by the time the Council ended.

Catholic theologians were now concerned to focus attention on the world of more immediate experience, even though the world did not seem to be turning with anything like the same enthusiasm towards the theologians. Some response, however, had to be made to the changing times, as the old cultural universe of faith rapidly began to disintegrate, without being replaced by anything of equal weight or cohesion. The Catholic world was in fact itself, as already intimated, finally being permeated by the sense of disorientation and unease that had long characterised Western culture generally. This feeling of disorientation, of being 'at sea', or of being 'exiled' from some happier or more secure or serene world, is doubtless more keenly, or perhaps only seriously, experienced in periods of crisis, when cultures (and religions) have to try to negotiate the difficult terrain between worlds they can no longer inhabit, and new worlds where they do not yet feel at home.³²

In the post-conciliar Catholic world, at any rate, the movement from one style of religious culture to a tentative search for a new one, got under way on a fairly broad front. Whatever the precise motivation and origins of the newer approaches, their proponents generally tended to accord more importance to *becoming* than to *being*, and to pay more attention to the historical consciousness of man and to his historicity than to the traditional metaphysical questions that had preoccupied their theological predecessors. In the new search for a credible Catholicism, however, the difference between 'freedom from' and 'freedom for', was soon to be painfully rediscovered. The price of change, indeed, is still evident in the tensions that have continued to colour, some might say 'discolour', the history of the Catholic Church since the Council. But at least efforts were being made to seek appropriate ways in which the newly heralded

³² In this connection, it is interesting to note that the West's main foundational document, the Bible, itself not only incorporates a great transition from Old to New, but also contains many less dramatic, though still significant variations on the theme of crisis and transition. It may have been partly on account of such features of the Bible, that it was so easily embraced by the migratory barbarian peoples who were to form the backbone of Western culture. As for the periods of crisis and transition themselves, they may be symptomatic of a larger, perhaps even universal human truth, or they may be simply the expression of something more parochial, in this case the West's own endemic restlessness.

freedom might find expression within Catholicism. Modern theologians sought a new language and, above all, a new basis in contemporary experience on which to develop an understanding of grace compatible with the new sense of freedom that was abroad in the Church, and worthy of belief in the eyes of a sceptical world. A sharp reminder of how pervasive this scepticism had become was the ‘Death of God’ movement that emerged from within theology itself. This fairly short-lived episode occurred in the same decade as the Council itself, and was most intensely felt in North America. Although dismissed by some – perhaps too peremptorily – as superficial, it was still symptomatic of a more widely diffused malaise.

In the new circumstances in which Catholic theology now found itself, some sought to reconceive the doctrine of grace in terms of the unity between God and the world, stressing man’s free co-operation with God in the ‘fulfilment’ of the created order. This was the approach taken by the Dutch theologian, H.A. Hulsbosch, who, exploiting the notion of evolution – popularised by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) in his occasionally unguarded writings³³ – presented ‘a dynamic vision of the world’³⁴ in which grace barely appeared to differ from creation itself. Grace, which before the Council had usually been referred to as ‘supernatural’, constituted in Hulsbosch’s vision the final phase of God’s *creative* activity. There was thus no longer any vital distinction between creation and the grace of redemption. This unified vision of reality had some points of contact with patterns of thought to be found outside the specifically Catholic world: with process theology,³⁵ for example, and also with the evaluation of human experience in an increasingly secularised world that was characteristic of such varied theologians as P. Tillich (1886–1965), D. Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), J.A.T. Robinson (1919–1983), and H. Cox.³⁶

³³ See P.W. Medawar’s influential critique (‘philosophy-fiction’) of *The Phenomenon of Man* (ET 1959) in *Mind* (January, 1961), reprinted in *The Art of the Soluble* (London: Methuen, 1967), 71–81. Even more disquieting than his ‘philosophy-fiction’ are Teilhard de Chardin’s comments (in September, 1946) on ‘the spiritual repercussions of the atom bomb’. No mention is made of the bomb’s victims, but man’s newly acquired sense of power is stressed. See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (ET 1964), ch. 8; cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Drugs, Mysticism and Make-believe* (London: Collins, 1972), 175–184; id., *Our Savage God* (London: Collins, 1974), 248–9.

³⁴ H.-E. Mertens, loc. cit., 257; cf. also E. Yarnold, op. cit., 47–49.

³⁵ Cf. S.J. Duffy, op. cit., ch. 7 (‘The Supernatural as Process: Reframing the Problem’).

³⁶ Cf. Martin-Palma, op. cit., 185–192.

Another significant, and perhaps more influential contribution to a renewed understanding of the doctrine of grace was made by the theology of liberation, which will be discussed in the next section. The potential of the concept of liberation as a way of unlocking the meaning of grace was felt not only in the 'Third World', where the best-known theologies of liberation emerged,³⁷ but resonated also with some North American and European theologians, such as R. Haight,³⁸ E. Schillebeeckx,³⁹ O.H. Pesch,⁴⁰ and G. Greshake.⁴¹

The theology of liberation

In the perspective of liberation theologians, grace was no longer visualised as a private, solitary reality for each individual, as allegedly, it was sometimes claimed, it had been in the past, but as the presence (or indeed absence) of God's liberating reality in all aspects of man's historical life. Liberation theologians underlined explicitly the political, economic, and social dimensions of the doctrine of grace, placing at the very centre of the Christian project the task of liberating those oppressed by 'suprapersonal' structures of injustice and exploitation.⁴² Illustrative of this shift in perspective is, for instance, Leonardo Boff's preference to speak of 'liberation' rather than 'justification',⁴³ the classical term being now deemed too abstract to carry any serious meaning, at least at an existential level. At the same time, it should be said, Boff does not identify in any simplistic sense the human experience of God's liberating grace with grace itself. Thus he can write that grace 'mingles

³⁷ See, for instance, Juan Luis Segundo, *Grace and the Human Condition* (New York, 1973); Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

³⁸ See below, note 49.

³⁹ Cf. Mertens, art. cit., 259: 'In Schillebeeckx's work, the theology of grace is called "soteriology". Another word is "liberation".'

⁴⁰ O.H. Pesch, *Frei sein aus Gnade: Theologische Anthropologie* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1983).

⁴¹ G. Greshake, *Geschenkte Freiheit: Einführung in die Gnadenlehre* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1977¹); *Gottes Heil – Glück des Menschen* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1983).

⁴² Cf. T.P. McCaughey, *Memory and Redemption: Church, Politics and Prophetic Theology in Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1993), 66.

⁴³ Cf. Mertens, art. cit., 261.

with profane realities, without losing its own identity'.⁴⁴ But for Boff – and here he echoes several modern theologians and thinkers, such as Nietzsche, Gehlen,⁴⁵ Pannenberg,⁴⁶ and Greshake,⁴⁷ among others – man has no fixed, predetermined nature. Rather, he is open to what is not himself and seeks to encounter and connect with the 'other', the implication appearing to be that it is God who is the ultimate 'other'.⁴⁸ Grace is, then, for Boff, the reality that makes this human openness to the 'other' possible and constantly sustains it. To the extent that man co-operates with (or even takes cognisance of) this truth, he encounters God. Such an encounter will of course also have ethical implications, which will have to be pursued in response to whatever specific socio-political contexts people may find themselves in. Although liberation theology is mostly associated in the public mind with Latin America, it has, as we have already said, not been without resonance in North America and Europe as well. Roger Haight, for example, spoke of 'social grace', and claimed that, 'the movement of grace is toward the construction of social institutions of grace in every sphere of human life.'⁴⁹

Even though the heyday of liberation theology now appears to have passed, its legacy has continued and will surely continue to have undeniable strengths. Two important aspects of this legacy were, in the first place, the stress

⁴⁴ *Liberating Grace*, 214.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940); *Urmensch und Spätkultur* (1956).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983).

⁴⁷ See Greshake, *Geschenkte Freiheit* (1992), 15–16, who invokes Nietzsche (and then Pascal) as endorsing his own view about the 'unfinished' nature of man: 'According to Nietzsche man is "the animal whose nature has not yet been fixed [tr. Hollingdale]", . . . "the greatest possibilities in man are still unexhausted [tr. Hollingdale]".'

⁴⁸ It might be remarked, in passing, that to see God as simply the ultimate 'other' is not without its drawbacks. For God, surely, cannot simply be 'other' in the way people and things of this world can be distinguished from each other as being one thing or person rather than any 'other' thing or person. To see God's 'otherness' in this way would be to fail to take account of the difference between 'creator' and 'creation', a difference that cannot be described in the same terms as are used to distinguish one aspect of the created order from another. Not for nothing did Nicholas of Cusa speak of God as the 'not-other'. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation*, 122.

⁴⁹ R. Haight, 'Sin and Grace', in F. Schüssler Fiorenza & J.P. Galvin (eds.), *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, 455-6. Cf. also Haight's book *The Experience and Language of Grace*, ch. 7 ('Liberation: A Contemporary Language of Graced Experience') and ch. 8 ('Social Grace: A Liberationist Theology of History').

liberation theologians placed on justice as an imperative of Christianity, and, in the second place, the emphasis they gave to the dimensions of the reality of evil that undoubtedly transcend the purely individual responsibility of human beings.⁵⁰ On the former point, it might be said that to restate the importance of justice for Christianity looks like restating the obvious – already explicitly restated in any case, if rather more circumspectly, by Leo XIII and Pius XI, well before the Second Vatican Council – but the obvious in theory is often at variance with the obvious in practice, and so constantly needs to be reaffirmed. It is one of the merits of liberation theology to have done this, even if its concern for justice occasionally does take on a moralising tone that somewhat dulls the expression of this concern. At its height, the liberation theology movement was, like many previous efforts at renewal in the history of Christianity, not free of controversy, too well known to be rehearsed here yet again. A brief examination, however, of two problematic areas of liberation theology – namely its claim that man has no fixed predetermined nature, and, secondly, what could be termed the question of its characteristic, quasi-Marxist rhetoric – might still be instructive for contemporary thinking on grace.

* * *

The claim that man has no fixed, predetermined nature (a claim, one might add, not seriously undermined, indeed possibly enhanced, by any emphasis on the ‘situatedness of all knowledge’⁵¹), is one about which questions could be raised concerning, for instance, the possible link between the idea of the ‘indeterminacy of human nature’ and totalitarianism.⁵² Such a link would certainly complicate any direct or unqualified appeal to the notion of the ‘indeterminacy of human nature’, as a way of elucidating the doctrine of grace, if stress were to fall too exclusively on the notion of ‘indeterminacy’, to the

⁵⁰ Cf. Eph 6: 12: ‘For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places’ (RSV, Catholic Ed.).

⁵¹ Rebecca S. Chopp, ‘Latin American Liberation Theology’, in D.F. Ford (ed.), *op. cit.*, 421.

⁵² George Santayana detected, as Noel Malcolm pointed out (*TLS*, January 29, 1993, 6), a ‘hidden connection between liberalism and totalitarianism (both presuppose the indeterminacy of human nature)’. When, therefore, a thinker like Ortega y Gasset asserts: ‘Man has no “nature”; he only has history’ (quoted by Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* [London: SCM, 1967], 72), one could wonder what he means by ‘man’.

neglect of any other way of looking at ‘human nature’ (as God-created, for instance). For, while human beings undoubtedly have a changing and thus ‘indeterminate’ history, can human nature itself be said to have a history, i.e. to change over the course of time, and in this sense to be ‘indeterminate’? Presumably it cannot, for otherwise how could one then ever have a sense of the history of the *human* community?

The very idea of the indeterminacy of human nature may, indeed, be derived from the Reformers’ (and ultimately the Augustinian?) notion of ‘total depravity’, that is, from the notion that, in its ‘fallen’ or historical condition, human nature is completely corrupt and has no intrinsic value or ‘meaning’ whatever in God’s eyes. Translated into secular terms, this would mean that human nature has no intrinsic structure or order,⁵³ but is simply a *tabula rasa*. If this were accepted, it is not difficult to see how totalitarian leaders or thinkers could write their own script on this *tabula rasa*, with potentially devastating consequences. An alternative to this view would be to see – as traditional Christianity does – human nature in history as ‘fallen’, that is to say, ‘disordered’ but not without underlying ‘order’, that basic order being God-given. And in this perspective, grace would be seen as involving a reordering, but not a replacing, of human nature, and man would always have an innate sense of what cannot be foisted on him.

At the same time, change is an undeniable fact of human history, and it is tempting to see at least one of the generating factors of such change in what Nietzsche called humanity’s ‘abyss of indeterminacy’. However, surely such indeterminacy, which in any case cannot be total (if it were, how would one ever know?), can only be one of the factors that account for historical change, since total indeterminacy is both literally ‘unthinkable’ and, as was mentioned, incompatible with an awareness of (or is it ‘only’ a belief in?) the continuity and hence unity of the *human* community. It might be argued, therefore, that human nature, rather than being wholly ‘indeterminate’, is in a vitally important sense predetermined, in that it has a God-created form, even if we do not understand this form ourselves in any complete sense. Man, in short, is not free to invent

⁵³ An idea that Nietzsche applied to all of reality: ‘The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms’ (*The Gay Science*, Bk. 3, §109, tr. W. Kaufmann [New York: Vintage Books, 1974], 168).

himself, even with the worst will in the world. For – to use more familiar language – it is the ‘will’ itself, the ‘free will’ of man, that is surely the factor of indeterminacy so many moderns talk about. But for Christianity human free will is ‘created’ by God, as a kind of divine ‘signature tune’ in man.

* * *

As for the question of its rhetoric, it is noticeable that in liberation theology an assertive, ‘preaching’ tone was often struck by its representatives—understandably, in view of the dire circumstances they faced and were committed to changing. It is of course also possible that the clerical origin of many liberation thinkers coloured their theological style. But the jargon-ridden nature of much of what they wrote threatened to undermine the intellectual seriousness of their project, and to make them, unfortunately, appear more as ranting and diffuse ideologues, than as reliable or profound thinkers. Not that they did and do not have a lot to rant about and criticise. But in contrast with liberation theology’s unequivocal exposure and denunciation of injustice, the revulsion at the cruelty of existence, expressed so powerfully by, say, an ‘atheistic’ writer like Schopenhauer, might indicate that concern for justice is not quite enough to ensure even liberation theology a hearing beyond its own confines.

What such a contrast might also suggest is that liberation theologians, or indeed any theologians who believe in a good creator God, are precluded, by reason of their faith, from passing the kind of outraged condemnation on the world that, ironically, so enlivens the writing of a Schopenhauer and makes ‘mere’ moral earnestness and exhortation pall by comparison. And indeed, how could Christian believers ever write as scathingly and uninhibitedly about the horror of existence as Schopenhauer did (even if they subsequently wished to bring in grace as the medicine for all human ills), and reject as contemptuously as he did the very idea of a good creator of the world? And if it be objected that, for their part, Christian writers are free to speak as uninhibitedly of the goodness of God’s grace, as the Schopenhauers of this world are to speak of life’s defects, this claim would still have to be made good in the face of the continued suffering of the world—a daunting task, if one accepts, as seems undeniable, that not all the woes of the world can be traced back to human beings’ misuse of their free will. Theology, it would seem, will never be able to trump the

indignant, exasperated pessimism of the world with a convincing justification of grace. But the consolation of theology lies in its belief that grace has finally to be its own justification.

Such considerations, while they may ‘on paper’ be valid – or as ‘valid’ as mental shadow-boxing ever can be – will to some undoubtedly seem abstract, or at the very least devoid of any obvious existential urgency. All the more reason, then, to let liberation theology at this point speak for itself and put its own strong card on the table. For, it is indeed one of the strengths of liberation theology that it desires to move beyond abstractions to ‘real’ issues in concrete, historical life. From a ‘liberation theology’ perspective, grace has to be, as it were, ‘enacted’ in Christian praxis, not simply ‘theologically interpreted’. Liberation theologians can argue they are not primarily concerned with describing or interpreting or reacting to the world, philosophically or emotionally or aesthetically, but – following Karl Marx’s famous assertion⁵⁴ – with changing it. And the fact that Marx’s dictum – with its tacit assumption of the primacy of action over contemplation, or of ‘praxis’ over ‘theory’ – cannot be validated by argumentation alone, should not matter. For, the nature of the claim is such that presumably only practical results could count, in any case, as clinching or refuting its validity.

Curiously, however, at this point one can see how even a ‘liberationist’ interpretation of the Christian faith is faced by a similar problem as has constantly dogged historical Christianity, namely the continuing existence of the disparity between promise and reality. If liberation theology cannot appreciably change the world, any more than traditional Christianity succeeded in redeeming it, in a publicly recognisable way, are both thereby invalidated? Traditional Christianity can of course always appeal to its eschatology as its supreme court of appeal, postponing any final solution or transfiguration of life’s agonising conundrums to the End of Time. And liberation theology is at one with traditional Christianity on this essential issue, even though it wishes to stress – more urgently than perhaps was often the case in Christian history – the imperative of changing structures of oppression into ones of liberation. For it too

⁵⁴ In the eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach*: ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it’ (*Early Writings*, intro. by Lucio Colletti, tr. by R. Livingstone and G. Benton [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975], 423).

believes the latter will never be definitive within human history.⁵⁵ Liberation theology would thus see practical ‘liberation’ as an indispensable, but not as the only, key to unlocking the Christian understanding of human existence and the reality of grace.

A world-view like Marxism, however, unlike Christianity – even in its ‘liberation theology’ mode (at least as represented by a figure like Leonardo Boff) – would seem to be committed to ‘delivering the goods’ within history itself. Christianity (and so too liberation theology) may be frequently, indeed even always, embarrassed, but it cannot be definitively refuted, by the continuing scandal of evil and suffering in the world, since its sustaining origin, it claims, is ‘not of this world’. Christianity is then only being consistent with itself when it refuses to grant the enduring presence of evil and suffering the same status as belongs to its own source. In short, suffering and evil can never be, for Christian faith, the ‘last word’—a belief that is also decisive, as shall be discussed below, for Christianity’s debate with pantheism. Considered from this perspective, grace might indeed be understood as the actual source of human hope—in specific terms, that which encourages human beings, despite the reality of evil, to wish to have a future.⁵⁶ Or as Boff more forthrightly puts it: ‘[H]ope reveals itself as sovereign courage (*parrhesia*), which endures and confronts everything in the certainty that it is fighting for the only thing that has a future and that will one day be revealed as the truth of all things.’⁵⁷

The present situation

‘The doctrine of grace is at present in a phase of radical change.’⁵⁸ Georg Kraus’s judgement is confirmed by some recent publications. The Canadian Jesuit, Jean-Marc Laporte, for instance, who in the early 1970s had written on

⁵⁵ Cf. L. Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 155: ‘Historical liberations anticipate eschatology but they do not establish the eschatological state, for that would amount to the end of history.’

⁵⁶ For Cioran, interestingly, the idea of the possibility of the future pointed to a more than human reality: ‘Every time the future seems conceivable to me, I have the impression of having been visited by Grace’ (*Aveux et Anathèmes* [Paris: Gallimard, 1987], 27).

⁵⁷ *Liberating Grace*, 167.

⁵⁸ Georg Kraus, *Lexikon der katholischen Dogmatik*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1989 [originally published by Herder, Freiburg, 1987]), 210.

the fairly traditional theme of Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of grace,⁵⁹ produced in 1988 a work on grace for the 'first world',⁶⁰ in which a clear shift of focus is evident. Contemporary concerns, such as the interdependence of all human societies, the ecological crisis, and even the 'New Age' phenomenon, are the elements that now predominate. But also a more tentative approach to the meaning of grace is hinted at in the reference to 'patience' in the book's title. Because human action is ambiguous, and because the final completion of all things can only be effected by God, patience will always be required of human beings in their search for the fullness of life that grace confers. Patience is thus an aspect of hope, and hope is an admission that grace is God's gift and equally an acceptance of human beings' own inability to produce salvation.

The stress on this-worldly existence that is evident in Laporte's work can be found even more clearly represented in another study of grace emanating from North America.⁶¹ In it, James Carpenter recommends what, if one wished to avoid the term 'pantheism', might be described as a kind of 'theological naturalism'. Carpenter's approach, which prolongs the immanentist drift of much Catholic thought in the second half of the twentieth century, is reminiscent of, if not influenced by, process theology. For him, everything is 'nature', even man, and grace is everywhere in nature; the strict division which the Enlightenment introduced between man and nature should, in his view, be dissolved, and equally the excessive importance this move accorded to history, should also, he argues, be reduced. Social justice and justice towards nature are indeed, in this perspective, intertwined, almost interdependent. Both our explicitly 'religious' experience and our experience of nature form then, for Carpenter, part of a general experience of God's revelation. Carpenter's controversial thesis does, none the less, have an undeniable logic: if God is banished from nature, He disappears for us too, since we also are part of nature. While the logic is clear, the basic assumptions are somewhat less so. And even less clear, or at least equally arbitrary, would appear to be Carpenter's suggestion that the whole drama of the creation and redemption of man perhaps only constitutes a tiny part of God's total cosmic activity.

⁵⁹ Jean-Marc Laporte, *Les Structures Dynamiques de la Grâce. Grâce médicinale et grâce éminente selon Thomas d'Aquin* (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1973).

⁶⁰ *Patience and Power: Grace for the First World* (New York, 1988), a book S.J. Duffy's review (*Theological Studies*, 50 [1989], 811–13) drew to my attention.

⁶¹ James A. Carpenter, *Nature and Grace: Toward an Integral Perspective* (New York, 1988), also reviewed by S.J. Duffy, *Theological Studies*, 50 (1989), 580-1.

How should such, at first sight, new and rather startling ideas be assessed? It is undoubtedly true that the New Testament speaks about a cosmic liberation in Christ (cf. Rm 8: 18–23), but Carpenter does not appear to establish any specific link between redemption in Christ and God’s creative activity with respect to the *cosmos*, whereas the New Testament does make such a connection. Indeed, far from establishing such a link, Carpenter, as was just mentioned, seems to see the creation and redemption of man as fairly minor aspects of God’s overall activity. This somewhat quantitative approach to God’s relationship with his creation is not obviously in clear continuity with classical Christianity, which saw the incommensurability of God with respect to creation as providing an important key for interpreting the divine closeness to humanity.⁶² Even more significantly, Carpenter’s approach neglects the sense in which, for Christianity, redemption is, as it were, on a different, qualitative plane from creation, a point made explicitly by St John of the Cross,⁶³ among others. In short, Carpenter appears to have adopted a position on grace that, whatever other strengths it might have, does not accommodate in any obvious sense fundamental aspects of the traditional doctrine. But Carpenter’s theology does appear to be symptomatic of a deep sea change that seems at present to be underway in Western Christianity. In concluding the second part of these reflections on grace, the question of what implicitly is at stake in a possible total jettisoning of significant elements of the classical interpretation of grace will be taken up.

Concluding remarks

⁶² This point was memorably encapsulated in an epitaph composed anonymously for Ignatius of Loyola: *Non coerceri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est* (‘Not to be encompassed by the greatest, but to let oneself be encompassed by the smallest – that is divine’), quoted in J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, tr. J.R. Foster (London: 1968), 101.

⁶³ The formulation of the idea is of course much older. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* informs us, for instance, that, ‘It is the opinion of St Augustine that “the justification of the wicked is a greater work than the creation of heaven and earth”, because “heaven and earth will pass away but the salvation and justification of the elect . . . will not pass away”’ (CCC, §1994). St Augustine’s rhetoric may not explain too much, but it does at least reveal the relatively early acceptance of a real distinction between creation and redemption in the Christian Church.

For the West, at any rate, it was the theology of Augustine that was perhaps the most decisive factor in shaping Christianity's fundamental self-understanding. The overpowering influence of Augustine may not be as strongly felt now as in former times, but his interpretation of the Christian faith, or what is left of it, is still – or was at any rate until the Enlightenment – the dominant, or at least the most coherent, view of Christianity in the West. It is not of course, and rarely – if ever – has been, without its critics, notably on the question of predestination. Yet even if the potentially predestinarian implications of Augustine's teaching on grace could be 'toned down', the question of his intensely focused concentration on the redemption of fallen humanity through Christ as the heart of religious truth, will remain for many a stumbling-block. It would, however, be disingenuous, or at the very least erroneous, to imagine that the deficiencies of his 'system', if one accepts them as such, could ever be made good, and a more 'balanced' view of grace achieved, by combining the strengths of what he achieved with the strengths of what he neglected. It may be more realistic to suggest that the special position claimed for humanity by Judaism and, in an even more dramatic and circumscribed way, by Christianity (especially under the influence of Augustine) with its doctrines of incarnation, grace and redemption, will always appear suspect, or to be more precise, will always appear suspiciously self-serving, to a seemingly more reasonable, less excitable, more universal, and above all more immediately accessible religious sensibility, for which Neo-Platonism in the world of late antiquity may be taken to be symbolic, and which in the modern period could be said to have been reaffirmed in the theology of Schleiermacher. While it is surely impossible to be totally unresponsive to the religious charm of the vision of the *cosmos* represented by the 'Platonism' that was neglected by Augustine⁶⁴ and, in

⁶⁴ In the new edition of his celebrated biography of St Augustine, Peter Brown points out how the 'Platonism' that was so vital for Augustine, was by no means the only 'Platonism' available at that time, or even 'necessarily the best' (Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, new ed. [London: Faber and Faber, 2000], 503). Whereas Augustine fastened upon the aspects of Neo-Platonism that enabled him to explore the depths of human 'inwardness' or 'interiority' in ways that still speak to the contemporary world, there was also what Brown calls 'polytheist Platonism' (ibid.), from which Augustine turned away, in focusing attention relentlessly on the *unum necessarium*: 'Augustine's extraordinary capacity to construct from his reading of Neo-Platonic material an entirely new sense of the inner life of the individual was achieved at a cost. He allowed the Platonic sense of the majesty of the *cosmos* to grow pale. Lost in the narrow and ever fascinating labyrinth of his preoccupation with the human will . . . , Augustine turned his back on the *mundus*, on the magical beauty associated with the

modern times, reinstated by Schleiermacher, yet time and again that charm has been unable, at least in the West, to overcome the more enduring appeal of human suffering. At those times, when the music of the *cosmos* is not convincing enough to enchant or seduce human beings into a celebration or even a mere acceptance of their lot, when the universe seems as empty of gods as of meaning, it is then that the attraction of the ‘impossible’, crucified God of Christianity can be most powerfully felt⁶⁵ and the divine descent into the world of human desolation – the presence of grace – can be welcomed, with relief, as both ‘unimaginable’, and yet paradoxically, as the only appropriate response to the magnitude of human need.

Yet in tailoring Christianity exclusively to meet human need, as Augustine tended to do, in seeing divine grace primarily as the only effective medicine for fallen humanity, there is always of course the danger – acutely perceived, as we saw, in recent times by Balthasar – of conceiving God in the image of man, thus limiting God, or the equally real danger of special pleading, of inventing God for the convenience of man. It is then no doubt only a matter of time before the suspicion of ‘projectionism’ begins to cast its shadow over what Christianity claims to be the truth about the nature of reality. And this, it scarcely needs to be emphasised, is precisely what has occurred in the modern

material universe in later Platonism’ (op. cit., 504). Brown’s judgement that, ‘The effect of a major breakthrough in the history of ideas is to block all alternative visions of the world’ (op. cit., 505) is a useful reminder of how light can blind as well as illuminate.

⁶⁵ The emphasis here is on ‘can’. From earliest Christian times, as the history of Docetism shows, the notion of a crucified God has for many been extremely problematic. A strong modern tradition, intensifying since the Enlightenment, rejects above all the Cross in Christianity. Goethe’s attitude to this nerve-centre of the Christian faith was deeply ambiguous (see the pertinent observations on Goethe’s ‘Christian Paganism’ in Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, tr. David E. Green [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 20ff.), while his most ambitious nineteenth-century admirer, Nietzsche, notoriously made the notion of a crucified God a main focus of his attack on Christianity: ‘*God on the Cross* – is the fearful hidden meaning behind this symbol still not understood? – Everything that suffers, everything that hangs on the Cross, is *divine*. . . . We all hang on the Cross, consequently *we* are divine. . . . We alone are divine. . . .’ (*The Anti-Christ*, §51, tr. [modified] R.J. Hollingdale [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990], 178f.). Negatively, as it were, Nietzsche is surely right. If the uniqueness of Christ’s divinity and humanity is not accepted, then the Cross can always be suspected of being ‘simply’ a potent, if ambiguous or even possibly pathological, symbol of the human condition, rather than a statement about God, and can then be dismissed as a projection of human need, a glorification of suffering, or even a grandiose example of human self-assertion, of no ‘objective’ significance.

world, with ever increasing force since Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*.⁶⁶ It may, however, simply not be possible – and it may, as was said, be disingenuous to imagine it ever could be – to do justice both to the reality of the *cosmos* and to the Christian belief in the grace of redemption, in short to do justice to the orders of both creation and salvation, within the confines of any theological system, and it may only be possible, if at all, to do so at the level of living: 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it',⁶⁷ as Yeats's wisdom has it.

But to neglect either main aspect of Christian teaching (either 'creation' or 'redemption'), that is, to stress redemption in an almost Manichaeian fashion to the exclusion, if not utter rejection or condemnation, of the entire created order, or to let cosmic religion absorb completely the meaning of the human search for redemption, such one-sided approaches to the presentation of the Christian faith will – if past experience is any guide to the future – scarcely be able to convey adequately the specificity of that faith. Rather, approaches of this undifferentiated kind will in all likelihood only lead either to the acceptance of a bleak, disenchanting naturalism (since a belief in redemption without a belief in creation will sooner or later appear so arbitrary as to be unsustainable), or else to the acceptance of a serene, not to say complacent, but for that very reason 'inhuman' pantheism, just as distant from Christianity as naturalism. If one asks: 'How is pantheism "inhuman"?', the answer can presumably only be because pantheism is unable to acknowledge or assert, as Christianity emphatically does, humanity's special likeness to God, and God's special concern for humanity—an assertion which leaves open the possibility, excluded by pantheism, that humanity's refusal to accept evil and suffering as reality's 'last word' will one day be vindicated. It may have been the still not extinct cultural force of this conviction that prompted thinkers like Hobbes and Schopenhauer⁶⁸ to dismiss pantheism as simply atheism in disguise, and more recently led Santayana to see in pantheism merely a 'subterfuge for atheism'⁶⁹ (a deeply ironic reversal of earlier times when Christians were accused of atheism by the guardians of Greco-Roman paganism). While this dismissal of pantheism itself no doubt begs many questions, it does none the less highlight, without of course necessarily

⁶⁶ Originally published in 1841; ET by George Eliot in 1854.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Joseph Hone, *W.B. Yeats* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 480.

⁶⁸ Cf. M. Henry, *On not understanding God* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997), 39.

⁶⁹ Speaking of Santayana, Will Durant writes: 'He will not permit himself the luxury of pantheism, which is merely a subterfuge for atheism; we add nothing to nature by calling it God' (*The Story of Philosophy* [New York: Pocket Books, 1953], 494).

sharing them, what must surely remain the essential assumptions on which the Christian doctrine of grace rests, namely, belief in a transcendent distinction between God and creation, belief in humanity's special position within that creation, and belief, finally, in the correspondingly unique connection between the human and the divine. How that connection might now be interpreted will be the subject of the concluding part of this study.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The concluding part of this study of grace is to appear in the next issue of the *ITQ*.