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Divine Assurance and Crippling Introspection

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A. Free-Will Perspective

“Wherefore we are neither compelled to leave our freedom of will by retaining God’s foreknowledge, nor by holding our will’s freedom to deny God’s foreknowledge.”³

The proposition “Divine Assurance and Crippling Introspection” is an oxymoron to those who believe that God is both ethical and providential. Ethical, used in this context, means that God is the exemplar of genuine freedom, love, and truth. Critics of the proposition call into question the premise that divine assurance leaves room for personal introspection. Critics of the critics of the proposition respond with what seems to be a platitude, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” That expresses an attitude of, “I am only human; what do you expect from me?” Paul used the Judeo-Christian stories of creation of man and the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus Christ to explain his doctrine of salvation.

“Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For by one man’s

¹ Books.....

² See www..

³ Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book V (London: J. M. Dent & Co.1945), pp. 155-6.

disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous."⁴

Criminal defense attorneys have long sought to build criminal defenses on the premise that the accused were conditioned to that mode of thought and behavior by the abuses they suffered as children, thus making them conditioned to act out a scripted behavior pattern. There is, however, an equally powerful argument to the contrary. The Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation is that God endowed human beings with superior mental capacity, and gifted them with the freedom to make choices. That is the natural state of human beings. True enough, humans sinned and fell from the high pedestal on which God had them. The Christian doctrine of salvation is that God has gratuitously restored the virtues natural to human beings, and that human beings have regained the virtues of love, and truth, and the capacity for responsible behavior.

Despite the above argument that God restored man's capacity to be a free and ethical actor, a significant sector of the Christian Church still teaches that original sin, or the sin of our forefathers as the Eastern Orthodox Church phrased it, leaves human beings so beholdng to God's grace that they will be forever amoral automatons. If that is true, and if human beings are mere marionettes under the control of an alien force, it is but fallacy to conceive of introspective human beings. This paper proposes to explore the extent to which original sin estranged man's relationship with God, and whether the doctrine of grace is inimical to the doctrine that human beings are responsible free beings.

The former (Old) testament of the Judeo-Christian Bible is a carefully crafted salvation history of a band of foreigners who had a long history of mixed fortune in Egypt. God selected a savior from within their ranks and held them responsible for the covenant (agreement) made while they camped at Sinai after the exodus from Egypt. One interpretation of what God (YHWH) meant when he revealed himself to Moses at Mount Sinai, was that the future remains unwritten and that he was about to lead Israel into that future. God assured them victory, but he demanded that they (the Hebrew people) do their part faithfully and diligently.

⁴ Romans 5:18 & 19.

The covenant which governs the relationship of YHWH and Israel is what is generally referred to as a casuistic covenant. It is a quid pro quo covenant. YHWH's promise to protect Israel is conditional. The promise to protect, and the assurance of victory came with the proviso that Israel remained faithful to YHWH. Is freedom possible in that context? It is possible to the same extent that members of a soccer or football team are free to do legitimate maneuvers within the boundary laid out on the field, and the rules of the game. This is what Augustine of Hippo implied in the statement, "Love God and do what you want." Love creates a positive boundary within which human beings, as moral players, can remain introspective actors.

The assumptions that will guide the direction of this study are:

1. That Christian Theology has been influenced by environmental and societal forces and philosophies that nurtured as well as challenged it.
2. That human beings and human societies are still evolving according to a divine design that makes human beings significant partners.
3. That God's end game for human beings is happiness through reunion with himself.

One of the most debated questions is whether Judas was the unwitting betrayer and a victim of God's plan of Salvation, or a self-directed strategist when he betrayed Jesus Christ to the Romans? Is it fact or fiction that what he did was motivated by malice or a will to power, or was his will to do the right thing crippled by the omnipotent and omniscient God? Could ex-president of the United States, Richard Nixon, be right when he acted on the premise that "If the president does it, it is right?" Was God constrained by the necessity to have a "Black sheep" to deliver Jesus Christ to his executioners? These are relevant questions to flush out a meaningful response to the topic, "Divine Assurance and Crippling Introspection. These were probably the type of questions that motivated a fourth grade teacher of English composition to initiate discussion of the topic, "How do you decide who to marry?"

An opinionated boy spoke even before the teacher acknowledged his eagerness to share his idea. "You got to find somebody who likes the same stuff: like if you like sports, she should like that sports. She should keep the dip and chips coming." As expected, the girls were anxious to respond. The first respondent said in a tone of protest, "No person really decides before they grow up who they're going to

marry. God decides it all well before, and you get to find out later who you've got stuck with." It may have been an asinine question for fourth graders, but it set in motion a debate on the age old question, "Does God or human beings determine actions and outcomes?"

Philosophers and theologians have politely agreed to disagree as the arguments and debates continue. For greater clarity the topic is rephrased as the thesis question, "Does Divine assurance cripple human introspection?" The thesis is phrased in this quizzical form to elicit relevant information from schools of philosophy, theology, and those who respond to the topic from a simple common sense point of view. The writer's faith and common sense opinion is that God designed and created everything from nothing, and that human beings are specially endowed with the gift of God's spirit (breath of life and image). This thesis understands the dynamics of the creation of human beings as God's plan to replicate "himself" and manage and exploit his creation. The anecdote of the ". . . tree of the knowledge of good and evil" symbolizes the limitation that God places on human beings. It posits belief that human beings are contingent incarnate beings, and had minor limitations placed on their behavior even before the fall.

B. Determinist Perspective

The Classic Christian theory of Salvation emphasizes love as the proper work of God, and wrath and hate as alien works. The axis of Christian faith is the affirmation that there is one God. It affirms both the Hebrew (Jewish) understanding of the savior God and the idea of the "One" of platonic philosophy as interpreted and popularized by the neo-Platonist, Plotinus. The God of the Hebrews is a passionately loving supreme being who selected a band of foreigners (Hebrews) in Egypt and initiated a covenant which elicited from them a promise to love, serve, and obey in return for his eternal love and protection. The supreme entity of platonic philosophy, on the other hand, is an idea this is defined as the "One".

Although the "One" of neo-Platonism is totally transcendent and cannot touch nor be touched by created beings, it is accessible via a series of eons. The God of the Hebrews (YHWH) is a hands-on creator that is pleased with the goodness and loveliness of everything

he created.⁵ The crown jewel of God’s creation is human beings, who God created in his image.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion . . . so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.. And God blessed them” (Gen. 1:25 – 28)

“then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. . . . God formed every beast of the field . . and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” (Gen. 2:7 & 19)

Someone said that for anyone to have total control over anything, he or she must create the entity to be controlled. The Judeo-Christian stories of the creation pass that test. These creation stories present the persona of more than a fabricator. To use modern nomenclature, God cloned himself. In the first creation story God created man in his own image. In the latter, God breathed his life into an inanimate object and it became a living soul. In both versions of the story of creation the Bible presents a consistent message of the elevated status of the human being as the temple of God.

Although the “One” of Platonic philosophy is in many ways incompatible with the God of Judeo-Christianity,⁶ there is one major area of agreement. They both subscribe to a doctrine of the fall. Both Neo-Platonism and Judeo-Christianity named lust as the cause of the fall. There is lust for power, lust after physical passion, and lust for superior knowledge. At the highest level of Christian scholarship it similarly conceptualized salvation as going back to the safety of home. Home is either with God or union with the “One” by way of the agent intellect. What is the relevance of all this to the doctrine of determinism? There is the perception that human beings’ have a hunger to return from whence they had fallen, and also to find happiness in union with God. Many Judeo-Christian philosophers affirm belief in this relationship of man to God. These philosophers

⁵ Genesis 1:2 - 25

⁶ Dionysus the Areopagite posits an understanding of God akin to that of Plotinus’ neo-platonism. They both define God in terms of the negative, or what God is not. The rationale for their position is that God is beyond being and categories of being, such as naming, is inconsistent with the mystery of the divine.

and theologians are divided on whether human beings can find their way home unaided, or are totally dependent on God.

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, who was recognized as the Church's first authoritative interpreter of the Scriptures especially in the west, taught that sin has corrupted the human soul and renders it incapable of unimpeded good activity. Augustine interpreted Paul's doctrine of Salvation by faith in Jesus Christ as the restoration of immortality through faith in Jesus Christ. He also that God forgave the sin of human beings for gratis and restored their immortality. Grace was necessary because fallen human beings had only de merits. That doctrine has influenced all the theological systems of the western Church. The restored immortality comes, with the gift of what Augustine named "prevenient grace", Prevenient grace put good desires into the minds of the elect. By receiving God's grace, it seems that man loses the freedom to make free choices. Read from the perspective of a modern systems oriented manager of a high-tech company, the Augustinian man with prevenient grace is an ideal assembly line worker, but totally useless in positions that demand creative inventiveness.

Augustine's position is informed by his personal experience of moral turpitude and feeling of utter helplessness until, as he felt, God gifted him with grace and he responded by faith in Jesus Christ. That explains his prayer of submission:

"I have no hope at all but in thy great mercy. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt. Thou hast enjoined on us continence, 'And when I knew,' saith one, 'that none could be continent, except God gave it, this also was itself a part of wisdom, to know whose gift it was.'"⁷

This prayer elicited a strong response from Pelagius, a British monk who visited Rome in 400 A.D. He attributed the moral decay of the papal city to this determinist doctrine of "Only grace". At face value, Pelagius had good cause for concern. Why should any make an effort to behave ethically if he believes the efforts will be in vain? Despite Augustine's doctrine of man's helplessness because of his debt to God for the saving grace, he still believed that man had a role in his salvation. His most famous statement to the effect is, "Thou hast

⁷ Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book V, pp. 40. Augustine died in 430 A.D.

made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it find rest in Thee.”⁸

This complex doctrine gestated in monasteries, ecclesiastical academies, and the changing socio-economic milieu over the centuries. William Ockham, followed by Duns Scotus among many, questioned many of Augustine’s premise. Their critique was that it has serious implications for personal moral development. The Ockhamites questioned whether one can act freely if one loves God only by the grace of God. Their counter argument was that God rewards man for doing his best in a state of nature. Augustine did not think very positively about human nature. They implied that despite the fall, God made allowances for the natural state of human beings.

Anselm of Canterbury moved the focal point of the debate from the metaphysical concepts of grace and faith with the introduction of the social issue of justice. Despite the seeming evolution of thought, he agreed with Augustine that sin damaged the relationship of God and human beings. Debt and the satisfaction of debt were relevant issues in the context of Anselm’s environment: hence his introduction of the concepts to his theology of salvation. Human beings were spiritual serfs and the price of their liberation was beyond their capacity to satisfy. God satisfied the demand of his justice by becoming human and paid the debt with his own life in Jesus Christ. Although the price of their salvation is fully paid, man is still not free not to have faith in Jesus Christ, the God-man.

Thomas Aquinas brought adventurism to theology in the thirteenth century. He was unlike Augustine on two major points. He was an Aristotelian scholar and he was sheltered from the concupiscence of ordinary teen life. He was a proponent of natural theology. Although he agreed with Augustine that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ, his theology was based primarily on reason and ordinary experiences. He taught that truth is known through reason and that a confluence of reason and faith is necessary to obtain true knowledge of God. Salvation is the end product of experience and true knowledge of God. He obviously wrestled with the implication of divine assurance and crippling introspection. He envisioned the ultimate end of man as having “Beatific vision”. Did he conceive of

⁸ Wellton’s edition, *De Civitate Dei*, vol. ii, pp. 656-658.

beatific vision as another grace moment, or was it a confluence of grace and free will? It was his belief that although faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, the will of the individual must be ordered towards charity, peace, and holiness. Whilst not saying that human beings are free to work out their own salvation, he put the onus on them to make good choices.

The Protestant Reformation was generally influenced, in matters pertaining to doctrine, by the Augustinian School. John Calvin's adaption of the doctrine of Predestination, and Martin Luther's teaching based on the principle of "sola fides" (faith only) singled out Rome's merit based soteriology and Aquinas' natural theology for criticism. There was, however, irreconcilable duplicity in the use of physical force by the Reformers to overcome their Rome base opponents. They were doctrinaire "Sola fides" but they exercised free will on the battle fields. They, in theory, depended on the grace of God, but they did not hesitate to exercise free will when the exercise of their free will was expedient. Was the militarization of the Reformation a matter of hypocrisy or expedience?

The Biblical doctrine of Predestination is the belief that God prescribed universal salvation restricted only by the individual being's decision to accept it through faith in Jesus Christ. Writing to the Roman Christians, Paul said, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested ... through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."⁹

It is normative in western liberal capitalist free market cultures to look with suspicion on determinist belief systems that assure success independent of human effort. Liberal capitalism denounces such doctrines as having the potential to cripple individual initiative. A historian of presidential inaugural speeches by presidents of the United States of America observed that everyone, including Roman Catholic John Kennedy, espoused Calvinism to express the national vision. That vision is one of divine appointment and direction. Given the fact that liberal capitalism is greatly influenced by Calvinist Reformed Theology, it itself, wrestles with the doctrine of Predestination. Predestination is not a simple doctrine. It is not a doctrine that totally emasculates the concept of free will in favor of total dependence. It encourages initiative and action to flesh out what

⁹ Romans 3:21-24.

God has initiated with his grace. One may not know ones destiny until one gets to the end of his life on earth. One facet of that doctrine is that God blesses the elect and the elect acts on that blessing and becomes successful.

The Eastern Orthodox Church and Islam also affirmed the omnipotence and omniscience of God, but neither endorsed the concept of Original Sin. Original sin condemns us for a crime committed before birth. That doctrine is an indictment of God. It places restriction not only on freedom of human beings, but it locked God into necessary action. Baruch Spinoza, a Portuguese Jewish agnostic posited a theory of thoroughgoing determinism by God. God, according to his position was the only free entity.¹⁰

Because the perspective from which theists understand creation and salvation is as creatures of God, one cannot discourse meaningfully about creation and salvation with reference to the nature of God. According to the second creation story (Gen. 2:19) YHWH introduces an element of ambiguity. After God created human beings he did something that elevated man above even the angels. By asking the human being to name everything he (God) created, God invited human beings into partnership to continue the process of creation. In this we have both a creator determinist God and a god that endorses free will.

Although many theists see a solution to the problem of “Divine Assurance and Crippling Introspection” in the last paragraph, it rankles the sensitivity of the advocates of human freedom. Rene Descartes syllogism, “I think therefore I am” was a statement of the Enlightenment period that signaled human maturity. According to Descartes, “Once man has discovered himself in his adulthood . . . he can no longer submit blindly to authority or ignore himself.”¹¹

French existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, is an example of free thinkers who would sacrifice everything to affirm the total freedom of the human being. Neil Levy tells us than in “Being and Nothingness”, Sartre sought to vindicate “the fundamental freedom of

¹⁰ Baruch Spinoza was born 1632 in Portugal and died 1677 in Amsterdam. His parents escaped religious persecution to Amsterdam where he befriended a Roman Catholic physician-theologian who assisted him in language studies and introduced him to philosophy.

¹¹ Thielicke, Helmut, *The Evangelical Faith*, Vol. 1, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 38

the human being against determinists of all stripes.... asserted the impotence of causality over human beings.”¹² Martin Heidegger in “Being and Time” complemented Sartre in saying “there is no access to being other than via beings themselves. He used the German word ‘Dasein’ in response to query about the being that will give access to “the question of the meaning of being”. “Dasein” means (human) existence or simply “being there”. Dasein is not man and it is nothing other than man. Dasein is a concept that affirms the angst of the human being. Heidegger is an advocate of the freedom of human beings to design and chart the course of their own salvation.

C. Synthesis

What is my position on the efficacy of grace as the sole means of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? The answer is a paradox of faith. I have been taught by experience that whenever I find a door closed another and a much wider door opens. At the same time, I have learned from experience that I have a choice to enter the door when it is opened or it soon closes with me on the outside.

My position on God’s grace versus free choice is thoroughgoing Christian. Christianity was initially a religion of choice. People chose to become Christians even when it was a choice fraught with much danger. Why did they make that choice? Schleiermacher is probably right when he said that religion is present in every consciousness and simply needs to be brought to life. Given the many twists and turns in my spiritual journey, I must believe in grace. I have seen many lives ended in their minority, many careers damaged beyond repair, and many hopes dashed after one or very few mishaps. I have survived too many falls not to believe that God had a plan for me and that I am sustained by God’s grace until the plan is fulfilled. That suggests that I believe in the doctrine of divine assurance through the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I believe that God did what he did to restore fallen human beings to the stated of blessedness without necessity.

How, then, does God gives assurance of salvation as a matter of grace and at the same time allows for the freedom of the human being to work out his own salvation? I am encouraged by comments of

¹² Levy, Neil, Sartre, *One World Publication* (2002), pp. 111

George Herbert¹³ whose saintly life as a country parson was driven by a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility to model Christian morality. The following excerpts from the writings of Herbert are good examples of the English via media positioning in many things, including ecclesiastical Biblical doctrines and practices.

The Country Parson is exceeding exact in his life, being holy, just, prudent, temperate, bold in all his ways ... because luxury is a very visible sin, the parson is very careful to avoid all kinds thereof, ... Herbert was forever conscious of his personal responsibility as a teacher and model as evident in his comment: “Yet hath the parson, besides this laborious work, a slighter form of Catechizing, fitter for county people. And indeed, herein is the greatest ability of a parson, to lead his people exactly in the ways of truth, so that they neither decline to the right hand nor to the left.”¹⁴

I also speak from that Anglican perspective and feel strongly that I am generously endowed with God’s grace. Fearing a fall into the heresy of Gnosticism, I will not venture to make any assumptions as to what is my destiny. God knows what he has graciously scripted me to do and to be. My duty and responsibility is to work diligently towards the attainment of that destiny.

Is my position tainted? Does it seem to waver on acceptance of the doctrine of grace? No! Using an example from the doctrine of salvation of the Eastern Orthodox Church, we are saved by embracing God’s icon in Jesus Christ. God recapitulated all of human history when he became man in Jesus Christ. It was a gratuitous self giving. He revealed himself as both a humble servant and offered his body as the temple and umbrella to shelter and to nurture all who freely accept him as Lord and Savior. Herein lays the punch line; “God so loves the world that he gave his only Son (Self), that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” It comes through Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is head of the Church. Jesus Christ gives the assurance that salvation is secured and is free, but human beings must exercise free will to enter the “Sheepfold” and become beneficiaries of God’s grace. Jesus affirmed human initiated in, among other texts:

¹³ George Herbert , 17th century Anglican priest and poet.

¹⁴ More, Paul Elmer & Cross, Frank Leslie, compilers, *Anglicanism: The Thought and Practice of the Church of England, Illustrated from the Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (London: SPCK, 1962), pp. 719-26.

1. Four men unroofed a house to get a paralyzed man to take their paralyzed friend to Jesus Christ. (Mark 2:1 – 120)
2. Jesus' invitation to eat him. (John 6:51)
3. Jesus the good shepherd instructed the disciples how to enter his fold. (John 10: 1 -9)
4. Jesus' law of love. (Luke 6:27 – 36)
5. The active faith of the woman with a chronic flow of menstrual blood. (Luke 8:43 – 48)

Jesus the omnipotent and omniscient God-man struggled through the rugged Palestinian countryside teaching by example and delivered victory through the crucifixion and resurrection and showed the power of love. My assured salvation through Jesus Christ frees me to live out that model.