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Grace and Divine Transcendence

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Abstract.....	1
Introduction	2
A. Definition of Grace and Divine Transcendence	2
B. Towards a Personalist Interpretation of Divine Grace and Transcendence.....	10
C. The Universality of God’s Grace.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
References	13

Abstract

The theme of grace and divine transcendence has dominated theistic discourse. It brings to question quintessential doctrines of the Christian faith that include: creation, divine providence, redemption, and the Incarnation. Patristic, scholastic, orthodox and neo-orthodox theological discourses tended to define divine transcendence in static terms and divine grace as a substance to be infused intermittently to redeem sinful humanity. Today there is a tendency to understand divine transcendence in ways that align transcendence with immanence; to set the divine-human relationship as personal and

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mutual; and to see grace as God’s way of being present and active in human history and life. The article seeks a way of talking about the gratuitousness of God in creative dynamic ways that present God as an all encompassing loving presence, who in the God-human-cosmos mutual connectedness and through the Incarnation is self-limiting and condescending to humankind.

Introduction

The theme of “grace and divine transcendence” is highly significant in the understanding of God-humanity-cosmos mutual connectedness. The Christian community in the Nicene Creed professes God as “Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” talk about the gratuitousness of God and the God-human relationship as “graced”. Because God is the Creator who is immanent and provides and directs creation to its destiny, God is understood to be “supremely Pantokrator” (one who holds all things in place). We can therefore talk of God’s “lordship”, “sovereignty” and “mightiness” in a unique way (Link 1984: 29-32). Thus the discourse of divine grace and transcendence is undergirded by quintessential doctrines of the Trinitarian God, creation, providence, redemption, ecclesiology and eschatology. This perspective also implies that the concepts of divine grace, transcendence and immanence are mutually inclusive. This article attempts to portray divine grace and transcendence in a way that underscores divine tremendous love and sovereignty that is aligned with God’s immanence and dynamism as an all-encompassing presence in all of creation, and as undergirded by the Incarnation. Furthermore, special emphasis is put on the gratuitousness and universality of God’s grace. The many nuances of grace in relation to divine transcendence and immanence are explored starting from Augustinian and Thomistic roots leading to a personalist understanding of the graced state of humanity and all created reality and God’s dynamic presence and self-agency in all of creation.

A. Definition of Grace and Divine Transcendence

According to Colborn (1970:692), classical theology’s approach to the theology of grace and divine transcendence since the time of Augustine (354-430 CE) has metaphysical, analogical, ontological, mystical, soteriological, and eschatological overtones. Grace as

attributed to God is understood as something “freely given” so that we can talk about the gratuitousness of God and the God-human-cosmos relationship as “graced”. Because God is the Creator who is immanent and provides and directs creation to its destiny, God is understood to be “supremely Pantokrator whose glory is sung by the psalmist (Psalms 8, 24 etc.). Furthermore, biblical sources depart from describing God as a War Lord (who fights Israel’s battles) to a universal Pantokrator (who loves everything into existence). Concerning the graced state of humanity and other created reality as a creation given (created grace), Genesis chapter one sings of the integrity or goodness of creation - “God said let there be ...and found [it] was very] good” (Gen 1:3, 12, 21, 25, 31). It adds that humanity as created co-creator with God, was made steward of God’s graces (Gen 1: 28-30). Furthermore, humanity is given a creation dignity of the “imago Dei” (Gen 1:26-27) and the grandeur of God is appreciated in that all of creation reflects, reminds and remembers the Creator.

In metaphysical speculation of the transcendence of God, orthodox theology acknowledged that God is incomprehensible or supra-rational. Never-the-less by postulating the classical solution to the problem of theological language, an attempt was made through “*analogia entis*” (the analogy of being). Here the use of analogy appeals to correspondences with human images and metaphors. Thus analogical God-talk depicted divine transcendence using the *via negativa* (Latin: negative way, i.e. God being the opposite of what we perceive of human beings – impeccable, “not liable to sin”; infinity, immortal) and superlatives (God being more than, above and beyond what human beings are – supra-rational, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent). God is also portrayed in mystical terms as the “Numinous” (the wholly other - the holy, cf. Rudolf Otto, in, *The ideal of the Holy, 1917*) and the “Ultimate concern” or “Ultimate Other”; (Paul Tillich cf. Berkhof 1979:12). According to Balder, “metaphysical transcendence” is a “projection” or “negation” of some mode of “finite immanence.”² In metaphysical ontological foundations of divine transcendence God is the efficient cause - the Prime mover or First cause. According to this perspective, God is in,

² See <http://integralpostmetaphysics.inng.com/forum/topics/types-of-transcendence>.

within, and for creation. God labours with creation towards its fulfilment.

In giving divine grace moral significance, classical theologians, in particular, St Augustine claim that the creation natural dignity of humankind of the “*imago Dei*” has been corrupted by sin (original and personal). Sin, according to Augustine is misuse of human freedom. It is specifically a deliberate turning away from God towards other creatures (cf. Macquarrie). However, in this condition, humanity is totally dependent on God for healing and redemption. Grace, then, has a moral redemptive import as God’s generous and unmerited gift given to humanity out of love for salvation from sin (cf. McGrath 1994, 1997:428-431). In this context, Augustine defines grace in three conceptual categories, “prevenient grace”, “operative grace” and “cooperative grace”.

The etymology of prevenient is from the Latin, “*preveniens*”, literally meaning “going ahead”. In prevenient grace, Augustine shows that God’s grace is active in human life before conversion and the process leading to conversion is one of preparation in which prevenient grace is operative (McGrath 1994,1997:433). This understanding of God’s unconditional love, mercy and initiative in forgiveness of sinful humanity is in accord with the teaching of Jesus Christ, for example, in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11ff.) and the lost sheep (Lk 15:1-7). The emphasis is on the gratuitousness of God in loving us while we are still sinners. By “operative grace” (“*gratia operans*”) Augustine shows that conversion is purely a divine process in which God operates upon a sinner without human assistance. On the other hand, Augustine understands “co-operative grace” as involved in God’s collaboration with the converted sinner. He sees operative grace as the manner in which grace operates within humanity after conversion (McGrath 1994, 1997:433-434; Lonergan 1970:3-5).

Aquinas (1224/5-1274 CE), in his metaphysical Scholastic ontological argument of divine transcendence and taking it on from Augustine, proposes two concepts of grace, that is, “actual grace” and “habitual grace”. For Aquinas, actual grace is “*gratia gratis data*” (grace which is freely given). “Habitual grace” on the other hand is “*gratia gratis faciens*” (grace which makes pleasing). Here Aquinas sees a gulf between divine transcendence and sinful humanity as

necessitating a mediating status within the human soul. This permanent intermediary in the process of human justification, Aquinas called the “habit of grace” (McGrath 1994, 1997:434-435; Lonergan 1970:21-61). Aquinas then portrays grace in substantive static terms and this does not satisfy our modern understanding of person in relation to God. Classical theology metaphysical theology combines the concepts of created grace and uncreated grace in giving grace a soteriological import. McGrath adds that further, developments in the doctrine of grace affirm it as “the gracious favour of God.” This is closer to the present understanding of grace in relation to God’s agency in dynamic interpersonal relationships especially as a trajectory of the Incarnation. We therefore see precursors of a personalist view of grace and divine transcendence in orthodox, neo-orthodox and Reformation and modern theologians.

Orthodox theology of grace and divine transcendence operates within the framework of divine self-communication in the person and work of the Incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. Here the Incarnation presents a twofold movement or relationship of God becoming human and humanity becoming like God (divinisation). St Irenaeus (130-200 CE) as a proponent of this view of deification or the graced state of humankind could say, “the glory of God is humanity fully alive” (cf. Leonard 2006: 101; McGrath 190, 1997:353). The Incarnational salvation historical approach to grace and divine transcendence is also highlighted in dialectical analogical transcendence.

According to Balder (op. cit.), dialectical analogical transcendence is associated with the middle and later Barth and it is grounded in *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith). Here the relation between the Immanent and Economic Trinity is dialectical and analogical. He explains that there are three distinctions of this approach to the metaphysical model in that:

- (a) The basis of the analogy is strictly located in Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation; (b) there is nothing about God’s immanent transcendence that is not revealed in God’s economic immanence; and (c) the entire relation between transcendence and immanence is known only to faith.

In Barth’s thesis, the key to interpreting the relation between grace and divine transcendence is God’s self-agency in divine epistemology and human salvation. In other words, God’s immanence, graciousness and self-manifestation can be understood in the doctrine

of the Incarnation. In the Incarnate Jesus of Nazareth, God acted in a personal way. Barth is emphatic that our God is the God who comes and is the beginner and accomplisher of human salvation (Barth 1960:37, 46-52).

In his dialectical theology (following on Søren Kierkegaard), Barth is emphatic that because of human corruption by sin, there is an “infinite qualitative distinction between God and man” - an infinite gulf between God and sinful humanity (Karl Barth 1960:42; cf. Macquarrie 1990:279). In other words, it was understood that humanity, left to itself would either perish in the divine encounter, or, would not know or find God. Insisting on God’s absolute graciousness and transcendence, Barth, in his book, *The Humanity of God*, postulates that God has acted in a personal way. In an incarnational kenotic Christology, Barth shows that the transcended, merciful, and loving God was self-communicating, self-revealing, self-condescending and self-limiting in taking the initiative to reconcile sinful humanity to Godself.

Subscribing to “divine encounter” approach, Barth says God takes the initiative in uniting humanity to Godself. In the person and work of Christ, God enters human history. In the incarnate Word, God has spoken. Karl Barth, again in Kierkegaard’s dictum, proposes that in the story of human salvation, Jesus Christ is the absolute paradox in God’s condescension in this initiative. In other words, the acme of God’s gift to humankind is Godself (the Incarnate Jesus of Nazareth). In the person and work of the Incarnate Jesus of Nazareth, God meets humanity in the “plane where people suffer and sin” (cf. Macquarrie 1990:279-280). In other words, Barth emphasises God’s unconditional graciousness, love, and mercy in and through the Christ event in justifying sinful humanity. In other words God acted graciously in the Christ-event.

Rudolf Bultmann is close to Barth in proposing a dialectical-eschatological type of divine transcendence. Here, and, according to Balder (op. cit), in the dialectical-eschatological view of divine transcendence, God is portrayed as the “Wholly Other” in a concrete historical way. God is not an object available for our investigation, and, in Kantian diction, neither a “thing-in-itself” nor a thing as it appears to us. In this context, for Bultmann, God is an “encounter” within history and is only perceptible to faith. The eschatological

moment is in the here and now when humanity is addressed with the Word of God and challenged with a decision in responds to the message of God. Balder (op. cit.) explains that this kind of transcendence is set against all forms of “supernaturalism”, which try to identify places within history where God is directly accessible. He adds that dialectical-eschatological transcendence therefore also excludes all natural theology since:

There is no way from “here” to “there”, because there is not “there” as an identifiable place or object. Eschatological refers to what is “quantitatively” different from the world as available to scientific and historical research.

On the other hand, Karl Rahner (1904-1984), subscribes to metaphysical divine transcended that takes note of both general and special revelation of God. In his doctrine of perichoresis - the interpenetration of Trinitarian Godhead in *opera ad intra* (internal works of the Godhead, implied in the Trinitarian fellowship – *koinonia*) and *opera ad extra* (external works of the trinity, i.e. in the economy of salvation), Rahner admits to orthodox theology’s postulation of created and special. Rahner is emphatic that there is no tension between God’s transcendence and immanence in his dictum that the Immanent Trinity is the Economic Trinity and vice-versa (cf. McGrath 1994, 1997:298-300) Rahner goes further in the understanding of created grace and special grace in relation to divine transcendence and immanence by ascribing to the universality of divine grace. According to Balder (op. cit.), this position undergirds what he terms non-competitive divine transcendence.

Karl Rahner is a proponent of the universality of divine grace. In positing both God and humanity as transcendent beings, Rahner takes an ontological, phenomenological, existential, experiential perspective of God’s grace and transcendence. Balder (op. cit.) calls this non-competitive view of divine transcendence. In this context, humanity stands in complete openness to God. As transcendent beings human beings are well disposed for reaching out to God and their destiny and fullness of life. Rahner (1987:31-32) explains that transcendent humankind has an “infinite horizon of experience.” It appears that Rahner’s theory of the existential experience of divine grace and transcendence is base on considerations of nature and person and human destiny. John Macquarrie (1984:280) concurs with Rahner is saying that God is absolute mystery and humankind is

irreducible mystery. In this context, humanity “becomes the place where finite and infinite meet” and also “the place where an orientation to transcendental mystery becomes possible”.

Balder (op. cit.) recognises Reformation transcendence or transcendence as Deus absconditus (hidden God) found mostly in the theologies of Martin Luther and John Calvin. On one end of the tension-filled continuum, God is hidden through human sinfulness and on the other hand, God becomes (Deus revelatus) visible through the gift of Godself in divine self-revelation or self-communication. Here, and for Luther, there is distinction between “external grace of God” (favour Dei) and the divine gift (donom) – the Living Christ. In this perspective, Luther, in turn distinguishes between grace in the order of creation and the order of salvation. In the order of creation, Luther then speaks of fatherly love towards humankind (benevolentia) and Trinity at work within creation as the economy of salvation as God’s blessings (Latin: benediction). Luther juxtaposes the notions of “pater pro nobis” (Father for us) and “pater in nobis” (Father in us) with “Christus pro nobis” (Christ for us) and “Christus in nobis” (Christ is us). Furthermore, in his theology of the Trinity, the grace of God is operative in earthly as well as spiritual matters (Gregersen 2005:19-20; cf. Luther’s *Against Litmus*, 1521).

Luther is emphatic that the work of creation and the work of salvation are done out of “pure, fatherly and divine goodness and mercy”. Luther also proposes that creation is a blessing, that is, a “mystery” because God is working from within creation, and also “vocation”, because God creates or “calls out of nothing” (creation ex nihilo) the things that are not and gives them life. In the latter concept, according to Luther, God’s calling and human vocation belong together (Gregersen 2005:19-21; cf. Luther’s writings *Against Litmus*, 1521; “Small Catechism” and “Large Catechism” in *The Book of Concord*, 1529; *The Book of Concord*; *Lectures on Genesis*, 1535-1545).

John Calvin (1989, 1998: III, 43 ff.; cf. McGrath 1994, 1997:189-191), ascribing to general revelation argues that humanity is graced at creation with a “sense of divinity” (*sensus divinitatis*) or “seed of religion” (*semen religionis*). In other words, through created grace, every people of every race and culture have an orientation towards God. However, Calvin is emphatic that knowledge of God the

redeemer (special revelation or special grace) is distinctively Christian. In this perspective, Calvin proposes grace as obtained through faith in Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

But metaphysical portrayal of divine grace and transcendence is fraught with problems or limitations. The main problem of classical theology in its metaphysical speculation is that it portrayed “divine transcendence” static ways that tended to preclude divine immanence. Colborn (1970:699) concurs with this in saying that modern dissatisfaction with metaphysical speculative theology of grace and divine transcendence is that it does not fully account for theology as a science (the relation between nature and grace and the meaning of divine indwelling), the relation between theology and contemporary culture (the concrete, the individual, the existential and experiential aspects). In other words, there is neglect of the, psychological, phenomenological, interpersonal aspects of the gratuity of grace in relation to divine transcendence.

In the context of the above limitations, it can be said that orthodox theologians have grappled inconclusively with the tension between a supremely loving, merciful God (the gratuitousness of God) and God’s transcendence (lordship, sovereignty and mightiness) as regards existential and experiential realities. How to reconcile or justify the existence of God and the understanding of a loving, compassionate, omnipotent and omniscient God amidst the experience of evil, sickness and sin has proved to be problematic as undergirded by the classical problem of theodicy“ (cf. G. Leibnitz, in Rorty 2001: 161-164). Problem areas included the understanding of the existence of God per se, the divine creative will, divine providence and the existence of evil in relation to human participation and responsibility and divine limits of human freedom.

A practical example today of the problem of theodicy is the recent (11 March 2011) Japanese triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami and radiation leaks from nuclear reactors). Here it is difficult to reconcile the picture of a supremely gracious Pantokrator (one who holds and governs all things) (Link 1984:29-31) with catastrophic cosmic forces that indiscriminately wipe out thousands of people (sinful as well as innocent) in a flash of time. Orthodox view of divine transcendence particularly as Pantokrator has problems in demonstrating that evil has independent ontology from God. In this

particular problem, a related question concerns the divine salvific will and its limits on human freedom.

Concerning the God-humanity-cosmos mutual interdependence, underlying the question of the gratuitousness of God, is the question of human receptivity or response. It is generally understood that a gift is not a gift until it is received. In this context, and as regards moral evil, understood in Augustinian terms of misuse of human freedom, it is easy to locate human contribution and responsibility (environmental degradation contributing to floods and pollution) in the so-called natural disaster mentioned above. The big question is how are we to understand God's transcendence and graciousness in a way that does not diametrically contradict our existential realities?

Concerning divine omniscience as a category of divine transcendence, orthodox theology as given in reformed theology of John Calvin and Barth, runs into problems in its doctrine of predestination – that God predetermines who will be saved or condemned to damnation even before creation and also that God has pre-knowledge of calamities to befall human beings and yet does nothing to prevent them from happening.

B. Towards a Personalist Interpretation of Divine Grace and Transcendence

The static language of theistic theology is broken by the introduction of interpersonal relationship between God and humankind. According to Colborn, the personalist perspective of divine grace posits a relational, phenomenological and existential image of God's transcendence that is implicit of immanence. We see precursors to this personalist approach in Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and Juan Alfaro. A clearer affinity to this personalist approach is found in the works of Heribert Müller and James Mackey, Piet Fransen, John Cowburn, Charles Meyer (1970:694-698). To this list we can also add the perspective of liberation theology.

Liberation theology (Gutierrez 1987, 1995:xi-xvii) acknowledges the gratuitous character of God's love in showing preferential attention or a predilection for the poor and marginalized. This is accentuated in the biblical theme of the *anawim* (poor of Yahweh – specifically the widow, orphan and stranger, cf. Ex 22). Here God has sacramental presence in distressing disguise of the poor and suffering.

According to Colborn (1970:695) Alfaro is close to Rahner in defining humankind as a “finite spirit” or “created person” who seeks fulfilment from the “infinite, uncreated Person.” For Alfaro, then, grace is primarily God’s free gift of God-self to humanity. Its effect is created grace in the sinner, a mysterious inner call to personal union with God. Again, in the justified human being, grace is a permanent disposition for an “I-Thou” relationship with God. Colborn adds that Alfaro in this scheme of understanding relates grace with faith, hope and charity. Alfaro also acknowledges the use of categories not drawn from the sphere of interpersonal relations, that is, uncreated, created, finite, nature, etc. In later writings, Alfaro related his personalist approach to revelation, Christology, ecclesiology and here he is close to Barth.

Piet Fransen (cf. Colborn 1970: 695-696) wrote a dramatic presentation of the theology of grace in the context of divine-human interpersonal relationship. This was in the backdrop of the parable of the prodigal son. In this, Fransen emphasized the merciful love of God. For Fransen, then, grace is a fundamental option of the love of God given to sinful humanity. It is important to note that God, although transcendent, never-the-less is immanent and gratuitously takes the initiative in bringing humanity to Godself. Fransen is close to Rahner in giving trinitarian treatment of the theology of grace. Here the grace is seen as the presence within the human being of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Colborn claims that Fransen is able to highlight “the ecclesial dimensions of grace” and also to relate theology to psychology.

According to Colborn (1970:696), in his theology of the trinity and ecclesiology, Müller explains grace and divine transcendence in the framework of the “I-Thou” interpersonal relationships. Here the Holy Spirit unites the Father and the Son and the personal “We” and the Church “in which the anointing of Jesus by the Holy Spirit is continued”, draws humanity into personal relationship modelled on the trinitarian koinonia (fellowship). The spotlight of this view, then, is the graciousness of God in loving humanity and all of creation. God as mystery is also given the attribute of Love. Furthermore, in the in God’s salvific plan, the greatest love God has given to humanity is the total giving of Godself in the Christ-event, and in our

Christian living, we are commanded to do the same in the love of God, neighbour and ourselves.

However, a personalist view of grace and divine transcendence runs into problems. The main problem of personalist theology of grace runs the risk of aligning with orthodoxy. According to Colborn there are problems involving the use of personalist categories to describe the realities of grace. In analogical God-language, it appears we need to borrow from contemporary psychology “a model and vocabulary for a theology of the relationship between God and humankind. It appears Colborn is correct in affirming that a purely personalist view of the theology of grace is not attainable. In other words it is true to conclude that a personalist theology of grace is complementary to the orthodox theology of grace in relation to divine transcendence.

C. The Universality of God’s Grace

Rahner’s perspective of human transcendence in relation to divine transcendence given above takes note of the universality of divine grace. Dermot Lane (1992:11) concurs with this view by proposing sacramental representation of God in humanity and all of creation saying:

Our universe in the light of the Incarnation is symbolic and sacramental ... the whole of life from the speck of cosmic dust to the personification of that dust in the human being is shot through symbolically with divine life.

This brings us to what Balder (op. cit.) terms mystical divine transcendence. St Ignatius of Loyola (15...) in his *Spiritual Exercises* urges for “finding God in all things”. In the exercise “*contemplatio*” (Contemplation for attaining love), Ignatius portrays God labouring with Creation towards fullness of life.

St Augustine (McGrath 1994, 1997:188, cf. Augustine’s *De Trinitate*) emphasizes humanity stands in a disposition of longing for God. In this state Augustine explains that our souls are restless until we find rest in God. He says:

You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you (cf. McGrath 1994, 1997:229).

Here he echoes Rahner’s view of humanity having an infinite horizon of God.

Conclusion

These diverse understandings of grace and divine transcendence, in our pursuit of dynamic interpersonal relationship between God and humanity can be seen to be complementary and mutually inclusive. God is mystery and in-so-far as we use human analogies, the theology of grace and divine transcendence is open to historical development. It cannot be over-emphasized that the heuristic key to understanding God's graciousness, love and presence as Pantokrator is God's self-communication in the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. The creation category of the gratuitousness of God exists in that the whole of creation bears an imprint of the Creator. All human beings are open to both created and uncreated grace even without knowledge of the special revelation of God in and through the Incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. People of every nation, race and creed are open to understanding the existence and graciousness of God who lets the sun shine and the rain fall on good as well as bad people even without receiving the special revelation in and through the historical Jesus. But often this picture of a gracious, transcendent and yet immanent God is often blurred by stark realities of life specified in the problem of theodicy.

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Testamentum Imperium – Volume 3 – 2011

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