

## Reflections on Grace (Part Three)<sup>1</sup>

*What meaning can the Christian doctrine of grace still have in a world marked by an all-pervasive disenchantment with traditional religion and a deepening scepticism about reality's ultimate status? If no final answer can ever be given to this question, does one still have the right to believe in grace?*

In the concluding part of this study, an attempt must be made, hazardous though such attempts inevitably will be, to interpret the current situation, and to suggest how, in the light of – or perhaps, more aptly, ‘in the darkness of’ – this situation, the doctrine of grace might once again be interpreted.

### Life with and without grace

Faced variously with the indifference, scepticism, confusion, and never too distant anguish of humanity, one might well pose the question: Is the burden of existence too heavy for human beings to carry? Or, to rephrase the question: Is the burden of existence really worth carrying? While explicitly recognising life's arduous character (‘taking up one's cross’), the Christian faith has also consistently answered the question just raised by claiming that the burden of life is indeed worth carrying, because God is believed to have a concern for human life, over and above ‘merely’ sustaining it in existence as its creator. And if such a concern exists on God's side, as Christianity claims, then what is meant by this must be something more than ‘simply’ humanity's inklings of transcendence, to which joint witness, so to speak, is borne by the religious and metaphysical traditions of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> The first two parts of this study appeared in the last two issues of the *ITQ*.

To claim that life's burden is made worth carrying or made easier to carry by Christian faith, however, is not to say that it can in fact always be borne. Nietzsche's wise and humane restriction in this regard is worth recalling: 'If we possess our *why* of life we can put up with almost any *how*.'<sup>2</sup> But if there is a divine interest in human existence, it must presumably be thought of as being more than a 'passing' interest, more indeed even than a concern fully co-extensive with creation; it must in fact be thought of as being even more fundamental than creation itself, since God, as the doctrine of creation implies, is more 'fundamental' than creation. So, even though the actual burden of existence remains the same for all, it is, Christianity claims, the belief that life has not only a God-given source but also a God-given goal beyond itself that can make life's burden 'easier' to carry: it is carried for the sake of, or as the means to reach, the goal God has provided for it. From this perspective, the 'accidents' of life—as in the Eucharist—look and are the same but the 'substance' has changed.

To consider human life in this way might, nevertheless, give rise to the suspicion that such a perspective demeans life, by appearing to make it less valuable in itself, as though it were being 'exploited' as a means to an end. This suspicion can, however, be at least somewhat allayed if one accepts the contention that, for Christian faith, this life is at no point replaced or superseded by some other divinely created reality here or hereafter, but rather it is transformed. In more traditional language, grace presupposes—needs, if you will—and builds on nature, but it does not destroy, or become a surrogate for, nature. 'Life is changed, not ended', as a Preface for the Requiem Mass has it. Indeed, it is vital to the Christian understanding of 'grace' that 'nature' not lose, but retain its intrinsic reality. Otherwise, the transcendent goal that Christianity claims God wishes to grant to human life would have nothing with which to connect. But the reverse side of that coin is equally important, namely that human life itself ('nature'), despite having an inherent value in the order of creation, still has in itself, for Christian faith, no final goal or meaning. But precisely as such it is seen as eminently worth living.<sup>3</sup> This conclusion might

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<sup>2</sup> *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Maxims and Arrows' §12, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, although—given its eschatological commitments—perhaps not entirely so, Christianity's assessment of earthly life is echoed in the rigorous scepticism of a Cioran, who writes: 'Le fait que la vie n'ait aucun sens est une raison de vivre, la

strike some as paradoxical, even perverse. Yet it follows fairly uncontroversially from the realisation that one cannot have two final goals, just as one cannot, as it were, ‘serve two masters’. Viewed from this angle, the reason why human life is seen as ‘eminently worth living’ is that life, even without a transcendent, God-given goal—perhaps the only kind of ‘goal’ truly worthy of the name—would still (as God-created) be considered worth living (this perspective is indeed represented by strands of the Old Testament, and is associated in the New Testament with the Sadducees<sup>4</sup>); but with that God-given goal, life is seen as, so to say, even more worth living.

Seeing the goal of human life as lying beyond this world, rather than in it, can also, as has often been remarked, be of immense benefit to humanity in the short as well as in the long term. That is to say, not actually having an intrinsic goal or meaning, can be of immense, positive benefit to human life in this world. For life can perhaps only be lived freely and non-exploitatively, if no ‘meaning’ or ‘goal’ can ever be achieved or created by human effort alone—by ‘works’, according to the traditional theological formulation. Only grace can give ultimate, or real, meaning to human existence. If on the other hand human life (as ‘nature’) were considered to have in fact an intrinsic meaning or goal in this world, then grace could clearly have no specific meaning for us, but would be at best a high-minded, uplifting, though finally vacuous synonym for ‘nature’, not unlike the ‘God’ of pantheism. Such considerations are perhaps an echo of Augustine’s dictum on God: ‘If you understand, it is not God’. One might equivalently say: ‘If life has its own meaning, it is no meaning.’

### Grace prior to creation

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seule du reste’ [‘The fact that life may well have no meaning is in itself a reason for living, and indeed the only one’] (*Aveux et Anathèmes* [Paris: Gallimard, 1987], 48).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion*, (Oxford: O.U.P., 1982), 158–159: ‘[B]elief in God and belief in immortality . . . seem to be logically separable from each other, i.e., one may, without contradicting oneself, accept either belief and reject the other. Sadducees, according to the testimony of Josephus Flavius, worshipped God and denied human immortality; so did their seventeenth-century spiritual descendant, the luckless Uriel da Costa who wrote a striking treatise on the subject, part of which survives . . .’ (Uriel da Costa, c.1585–1640, was reprimanded by the Amsterdam Synagogue for his heterodox views. He eventually recanted, but in such humiliating circumstances that he subsequently committed suicide. Cf. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* [New York: Pocket Books], 1953, 148; Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997], 53–63).

Creation, that is to say ‘the created order’, we saw, has for Christian faith no meaning or finality within itself. And even though it is undoubtedly what we experience most immediately, its very opacity precludes it from being ultimate truth, or at least precludes it from being perceived by us as ultimate truth. This state of affairs presumably will hold good for as long as we and our confusions remain part of the world. It is no doubt always possible to dismiss the very idea of ‘ultimate truth’ out of hand as ‘meaningless’, and to think of the world as in no sense calling out to be understood or interpreted, but as being simply and self-sufficiently there. If that were the case, orthodox Christianity and the most pure form of naturalism would curiously enough then share a common view of the world’s intrinsic status: both would see the world in itself as lacking ultimate meaning, or at least an ultimate meaning we could perceive as such. This coincidence may also perhaps be the (inevitable?) result of the evolution of classical Christianity’s own theology. For if the world is thought to be meaningless, that can probably only be because its meaning was traditionally derived from its link with a creator God, now believed in a secularised world to be obsolete. Had no such prior belief ever existed, it is unclear why one would now want to speak about the world as being either ‘meaningful’ or ‘meaningless’. Presumably one would speak about the world in quite different terms, or perhaps not speak about it at all. Is it possible, for instance, to speak of a world or a ‘universe’ rather than, say, a ‘pluriverse’, if in fact there is no principle of order, holding together everything in existence in some kind of unity, and hence conferring meaning on it?

But if creation is believed to have in fact an abiding or transcendent meaning, that meaning must in some sense precede it, or ‘take precedence over’ it, and – to be of relevance – it must also come from the same source as creation itself. Such meaning can scarcely be ‘born of time’s mystery’<sup>5</sup> alone. Contingency, with the best will in the world, cannot bring forth even from the seemingly limitless resources of time, space, and matter, that which is not contingent, though it may receive it as grace, since God is – Christianity claims – free to interact with his own creation. And that is what Christian faith claims to have happened supremely at the Incarnation. Yet, to use an intellectual image,

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<sup>5</sup> The expression occurs in Gore Vidal, *Julian* (London: Abacus, 1993), 532.

while for Christianity nature or creation is God's 'thought', grace or redemption is not an 'afterthought', but should be seen rather as God's 'forethought'.

In other words, creation and redemption, or nature and grace, in a Christian perspective at least, are seen as interconnected, and as having the same origin. We cannot but think in human categories—of beginning, middle, and end—and hence we speak of creation, redemption, and eschatology. But as between creation and redemption at least, it might be less misleading to see the primordial theological category—and significant witnesses to the Christian tradition have tended to do so—as redemption rather than creation, or to use the terms just mentioned, to see grace and redemption not as God's 'afterthought', but rather 'forethought'. In more mundane terms—though terms taken from a sphere familiar to Christian thought—redemption is like a post-dated cheque, made out to humanity, which will one day (one eschatological day) be 'cashable', but not just yet, and creation is the cheque itself. It is, however, God—the 'sum' involved, as well as the 'writer' and 'guarantor' of the cheque, as it were, making its eventual cashing possible—who is of primary and overriding interest. Despite the suspicions of Feuerbach and many others, therefore, the idea of an eternal, desirable purpose to human life is, as far as Christianity is concerned, not predicated on the existence of human need or desire, which is inevitably contingent, always obscure, and, to use a Proustian term, 'intermittent'. It is predicated rather on a view of the nature of God, who—faith believes—cannot 'not be', who is immutably good and therefore trustworthy, and who finishes what he starts. This is, admittedly, a statement of faith, and as such is no more free from the taint of contingency, if taint it be, than any other statement of an existential character. Yet it is not thereby manifestly false; it is merely unprovable. Religion, it scarcely needs to be emphasised, does not have the same kind of clarity or certainty as pertains to logic or mathematics, at least as far as a lay observer might conceive the latter. Which is neither bad news for religion nor, of course, for logic or mathematics.

### **Grace and predestination**

The idea that human life might have a purpose beyond itself which grace brings to realisation, will undoubtedly for some conjure up the vexed and

disquieting notion of predestination.<sup>6</sup> Yet predestination does not have to be interpreted to mean automatic ‘election’ to bliss for some, and automatic ‘condemnation’ to misery for others. On the contrary, what predestination could be taken as pointing to, is simply the belief just outlined, namely that, if life does have a purpose beyond itself, then that purpose must also have pre-existed life, and cannot simply be an ‘afterthought’ to life; life cannot, in other words, be open to a future purpose or goal simply by accident, but must have been created ‘open’ to such a goal by the same source that also provides life, through grace, with its final purpose. Grace, understood in this sense, can enrich human life by showing it to be worth living, and, indeed, by *showing* it to be worth living, can actually *make* it worth living.

The contrary argument is: we have in fact no guarantee that it is not some kind of *malin génie*, a kind of Schopenhauerian—endless, mindless, relentless—*Wille zum Leben* [‘Will to Life’], which presides over humanity’s fate. From this perspective, the human struggle to endure (‘le dur désir de durer’<sup>7</sup>) and even enjoy existence, without expecting any outside help, is humanity’s only path to ‘real life’ and to true greatness, indeed humanity’s only real possibility of justifying life—to use, paradoxically, a religious term. By contrast, religion itself—for Nietzsche and all ‘Promethean’ thinkers—can only diminish life and erode human dignity.

While one can certainly say, with Kolakowski, that ‘the time-honoured Promethean axiom holding that God’s sway over the human race is a denial of man’s dignity’ constitutes ‘a value judgement which is far from being more obvious than the opposite one’,<sup>8</sup> one presumably then has to go on, however, to argue *why* and by what *right* Christianity proposes its specific faith in God, its image of man, and its affirmative attitude towards life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It is undeniable that some passages of the New Testament (see, for instance, Eph 1. 4ff.; Rev 13. 8) already foreshadow the fraught history of the notion of predestination.

<sup>7</sup> George Steiner translates this well-known line from Paul Éluard thus: ‘the harsh, difficult desire to endure’ (*Errata: An examined life*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997, 29).

<sup>8</sup> Kolakowski, *Religion*, 214. Kolakowski reaffirms the point by adding: ‘Human dignity is not to be validated within a naturalistic concept of man’ (ibid.).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the similar questions raised by Gerd Theissen, *On Having a Critical Faith*, tr. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1979), 95.

## Grace and the mystery of suffering

Human life is often so harrowing, and so monstrous, and human suffering so unlimited, that one is driven to ask if, and how, the world can really be the creation of a good and merciful God, as Christianity claims it to be, to say nothing of how the world can be said to be redeemed. Such questions are central to religion, and have been recurrent themes in Western literature and philosophy from ancient times down to the present. As an epigraph to his novel, *Adrienne Mesurat*, set in an oppressive and claustrophobic world of frustration and anguish, Julien Green used a remark from a perhaps somewhat unlikely source, Marivaux, to capture the essence of the problem: ‘We who are so restricted in every respect, how is it that so few restrictions are placed on our suffering?’<sup>10</sup> Albert Camus, who was likewise attracted by the theme of human suffering, has Caligula, in the play of the same name, announce with heavy sarcasm: ‘I’ve made the simple discovery that there’s only one way of being on a par with the gods: all you have to do is to be as cruel as they are.’<sup>11</sup> Small wonder that Camus was captivated by the sombre wisdom of the ancient Roman poet Lucretius,<sup>12</sup> who seems to have found the Epicurean view of the gods as not interfering at all in human existence, to be the least offensive form of religion, and certainly as preferable to any religion with a supposedly ‘good’ and ‘all-powerful’ deity, involved in human affairs, at its core. For Lucretius, any religion of the latter variety foundered on the issue of theodicy.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Nous qui sommes bornées en tout, comment le sommes-nous si peu lorsqu’il s’agit de souffrir?’

<sup>11</sup> ‘J’ai simplement compris qu’il n’y a qu’une façon de s’égalier aux dieux: il suffit d’être aussi cruel qu’eux’ (Albert Camus, *Caligula*, Acte III, Scène II, in *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles* [Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967], 67). See also Thomas Finan, ‘Total Tragedy and Homer’s *Iliad*’, in *The Maynooth Review*, 5/1 (1979), 80.

<sup>12</sup> Commenting on Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, Martin Seymour-Smith pointed out: ‘Albert Camus, who was devoted to the poem, said it was the first “attack on divinity in the name of human suffering”’ (*The 100 Most Influential Books Ever Written: The History of Thought From Ancient Times to Today* [New York: Citadel Press], 2001, 81).

<sup>13</sup> As for theodicy itself, this religious issue of issues, Stendhal’s celebrated epigram puts the matter in a paradoxical nutshell: ‘God’s only excuse is that he doesn’t exist’ (quoted, without source, by John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* [London: Collins, 1970], ix; Nietzsche admired and himself cited this epigram [*Ecce Homo*, ‘Why I am so clever’, § 3]).

The enigma of pointless suffering in human existence is also the ‘black hole’ towards which Samuel Beckett’s works seem endlessly drawn, but from which no response ever emerges to the ‘question’ of life’s meaning or value.<sup>14</sup> Yet neither is any attitude of detachment from the sadness<sup>15</sup> of the world ever embraced in Beckett’s bleak though (in its dark humour) still resilient universe. And that is perhaps the ‘point’ of suffering: it teaches,<sup>16</sup> or at least it can teach, that human distress and helplessness, for all that they are symptoms of powerlessness, are – paradoxically – also powerful enough to keep alive the belief and the hope – otherwise, why keep searching? – that human existence cannot remain for ever defeated and deprived of a meaning that would in some (for us) inconceivable sense redeem and justify it. In that sense, suffering can never be entirely ‘pointless’, although being able to see its ‘point’ will undoubtedly not be the same as being able to follow a tightly constructed argument to its conclusion. The obscure, but at the same time inescapable and thus penetrating mystery of suffering, to which Beckett lends such unremitting attention, this mystery is a force that can encourage human beings to stretch beyond themselves, not in hubris but in hope and also defiance, in a desire to overcome suffering, and so to preserve or ‘save’ that which suffering and evil constantly seek to diminish but whose value they thereby also constantly

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<sup>14</sup> Such a response would be, if one accepts what Christianity has to say about eschatology, tantamount to a ‘last judgement’, and hence presumptuous, or at least premature. Even if one does not accept Christian teaching on eschatology, such a response would still be ‘unprovable’ and thus itself highly ‘questionable’, for the reasons Nietzsche wryly advances in *Twilight of the Idols*: ‘Judgements, value judgements concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true: they possess value only as symptoms, they come into consideration only as symptoms – in themselves such judgements are stupidities. One must reach out and try to grasp this astonishing *finesse*, that the value of life cannot be estimated. Not by a living man, because he is a party to the dispute, indeed its object, and not the judge of it; not by a dead one, for another reason’ (*Twilight of the Idols*, ‘The Problem of Socrates’, §2, tr. R.J. Hollingdale, 40).

<sup>15</sup> Sadness, being a passion, points beyond itself, as Cioran, for instance, noted: ‘Sadness is a gift, like rapture, faith, existence and everything that is great, painful and irresistible. The grace of sadness . . .’ (*Le crépuscule des pensées* [Paris: Herne, 1991], 222).

<sup>16</sup> From Aeschylus comes the expression: *pathei mathos* (learning by suffering), as Andrew Louth indicates (*Discerning the Mystery* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983], 37). The basically religious nature of this idea is stressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who sees it as teaching ‘insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine’ (*Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., tr. rev. by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall [New York, 1998], 357). Christianity claims, of course, that this barrier can be overcome from God’s side, as it were, through grace.



reaffirm, namely human nature itself. And even when suffering seems to have the last word, when it crushes those it afflicts and forces them to abandon all hope, the pathos of such defeat is still so potent that it places a lingering question mark, so to speak, over the ultimate reality of suffering's 'victory'.

This view of suffering is not so much a perspective Christianity imposes on human existence, it is rather a much older perspective on human life that Christianity endorsed (as the New Testament's wholesale borrowing from the relevant Old Testament material indicates) and developed in its own history. Hence, what is here being outlined is clearly nothing new, and in so far as it could be called an 'argument', might even appear to be 'circular', to the extent that a conclusion is reached (the value of reaching beyond suffering, a value 'underwritten' by grace) which is assumed from the outset to be valid anyway. In that sense, *fides quaerens intellectum* will always appear 'circular', though one hopes not too viciously so. Nevertheless, the response to suffering associated with Christianity is one that will probably only appeal, at most, to those who already accept belief in the fundamental goodness of the created order and in the benevolence of the Creator.

In short, what is being advanced at this point, as just intimated, is not, strictly speaking, an argument at all, but more an attempt to spell out how the interrelationship of 'human nature' and 'divine grace' might be understood by Christian faith. Such attempts can never be adequate, which is not to say that they are not necessary. But in an imperfect world, which Christianity takes the world of human history to be, it is only to be expected that all 'explanations' will also be imperfect. Why, after all, should the intellect be exempt from the general law of imperfection and incompleteness? For that very reason, more thought, not less, is demanded by Christian faith, in its never-ending task of trying to understand reality. Hence, nothing could be further from the truth than the suspicion that accepting Christianity demands some kind of *sacrificium intellectus*, for all that various strands of Christian belief itself have claimed precisely this over the centuries. If anything, it is the opposite that is the case. Faith's inner dynamism should in theory ensure that the doors of thought stay open, rather than closed, even if in practice this is often a tall order.

To sum up the case being made so far: for Christian faith, human life is incomplete, human nature is wounded, but it is also unquestionably valuable,

and capable of being healed. Suffering—humanity’s ‘exposed nerve’<sup>17</sup>—is accepted by Christian faith as both the infallible register of life’s ‘reality’, and also the greatest obstacle to belief in God. Christianity, however, also claims that God, in Jesus Christ, has been revealed as the personal reality who can absorb and overcome suffering and death, and thus offer humanity salvation. In this perspective, the history of grace can be viewed as the long, labyrinthine healing process which reconciles the human race with God, and justifies God’s risk in creating the world.

### **Alternatives to Christianity’s view of the divine**

By contrast, the gods one meets in Homer, to take the example of a well-known, extra-Biblical, Western religious tradition, have abilities and privileges not only not enjoyed by human beings but which actually detach the gods from the life of mankind. Humanity’s cares are not their cares, whereas for Christianity, God’s ‘strength’ is precisely that he has the ability to enter fully into the weakness of the human condition. Homer’s gods do not; and as a result do not have the same weight, or the same capacity to affect us, as does the life of the suffering heroes of the *Iliad*.<sup>18</sup> (One thinks, for example, of Achilles’ words to Priam when the latter comes to reclaim the body of his son, Hector, killed in combat by Achilles.<sup>19</sup>) Homer’s gods are immortal. Their quarrels, their passions have no serious or lethal consequences for the inhabitants of Olympus, whereas human quarrels and passions bring about, or can bring about, appalling suffering and death. Similarly, the heavenly beings mentioned in Hölderlin’s poem, ‘Hyperion’s Song of Fate’,<sup>20</sup> are of no concern to us, as they exist, unlike human beings, beyond suffering and death. Human destiny can thus move us in

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<sup>17</sup> The phrase is from ‘Arthur Koestler [who] said the Jews as a race were *the*—“exposed nerve of humanity”’ (M. Seymour-Smith, op. cit., 334).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Michael Silk, *Homer. The Iliad* (Cambridge, C.U.P., 1987), 82: ‘[The gods] are splendid, but also trivial, and we die lest we be trivial like them.’

<sup>19</sup> ‘We men are wretched things, and the gods, who have no cares themselves, have woven sorrow into the very pattern of our lives’ (*The Iliad*, Bk. XXIV, tr. E.V. Rieu [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977], 451). Cf. T. Finan, art. cit., 83.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Hyperions Schicksalslied’; for an English translation, see Friedrich Hölderlin, Eduard Mörike, *Selected Poems*, tr. and into. Christopher Middleton (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 5.

a way the gods in Homer or in Hölderlin's poem cannot, because human life is mortal and is lived with the consciousness of death.

In this context, it is interesting to recall that Heinrich Heine, despite his occasionally expressed, almost proto-Nietzschean regret that the joyful Greek gods were displaced by the gloom of Christianity ('the new, ruling, sad gods – malicious ones in the sheep's clothing of humility'), was nevertheless struck by Hegel's observation, in the *Philosophy of History*, 'that Christianity represents progress because it teaches the doctrine of a God who died; while heathen gods knew nothing of death.'<sup>21</sup> Heine, perhaps in this a late exponent of his ancestral Jewish faith, was to return in his last years, marked as they were by intense personal suffering, to the quintessential religious problem of God and suffering.<sup>22</sup> No theology that ignores this problem can be taken seriously, even though none can solve it. But figures like Heine are unerring prophets of the Western religious tradition to the extent that they are authoritative reminders of what the theological agenda actually is.

In the last century, which was marred by indescribable cruelty and suffering, transcending all understanding, it is a measure of the enormity of what occurred that one should find a poet turning towards traditional religious language, but brushing it against the grain, as it were, in a search for a mode of expression even remotely adequate to his subject. Paul Celan (1920–1970), a German-language poet from Romania, of Jewish origin, who eventually settled in Paris, the city in which he later committed suicide, reversed, shockingly, the usually unquestioned movement of prayer from man to God, when he wrote in the densely allusive poem, *Tenebrae*:

Pray, Lord,  
pray to us,  
we are near.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Joseph McCarney, *Hegel on History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), vi.

<sup>22</sup> See below, note 24.

<sup>23</sup> Bete, Herr,  
bete zu uns,  
wir sind nah.

(P. Celan, *Selected Poems*, tr. and intro. Michael Hamburger [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990], 112 [ET, 113]). — There is here perhaps a distraught echo of a biblical text such as Phil. 4. 5.

The Jewish tradition includes, of course, an attitude to prayer characterised occasionally by what might be called an intimately argumentative stance towards God. In the Bible, this attitude is most strikingly evinced by the Book of Job. The protagonist, Job, the quintessential symbol of innocent human suffering, on being pushed beyond the point of even despair, complains bitterly and aggressively to God about what has befallen him. Celan's poem reflects a much less predictable reaction to the reality of suffering in which the traditional roles of God and man are dramatically reversed, God being now urged, not as in Job 'merely' to respond to human complaints and entreaties, but himself to pray to history's helpless victims. To this 'blasphemously-religious'<sup>24</sup> evocation of the scandalous abyss of apparently divinely permitted human suffering, what rational response can there be?

Could one, nevertheless, tentatively suggest that Christianity does not see, even in the darkest human desolation, the last word or the last judgement spoken on humanity? This claim rests on the belief, common to Judaism and Christianity, that mankind is not in paradise, but in exile—for good, that is, for as long as history lasts. In such a perspective, historical desolation does not amount to the absolute end of the line for humanity, any more than the final desolation of Jesus meant for him, or for humanity, the complete and definitive end of his reality. In Jesus' desolation there is clearly the end of an historical human life, but Christianity does not see that desolation as, so to say, eschatological. The words that the evangelists, Matthew and Mark, put into the mouth of Jesus ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') are the opening words of Psalm 21 (22), a psalm which ends not in despair but with a song of praise to God. The desolation of the Cross is the hard and bloody road taken unconditionally and irrevocably by Jesus, the 'God of the victims: the God of the Gospels', to use René Girard's terminology,<sup>25</sup> or rather the 'God-Victim', but it is not, the Gospels claim, a road to nowhere. On the contrary, it is the way that leads through death to glory. The proximity and interconnectedness of man and God, who, for Christian faith, is incarnate in Jesus, is interpreted differently

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<sup>24</sup> The expression is from Heine, who used it to counter criticism of one of his own poems ('Laß die heil'gen Parabolen . . .') condemned as being 'atheistic' (see *Heines Werke in Fünf Bänden*, vol. 5, selected and intro. by Helmut Holzhauser [Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1976], 496).

<sup>25</sup> R. Girard, *La Route antique des hommes pervers*, (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 225, quoted by John Campbell, 'The God of *Athalie*', *French Studies*, 43 (1989) 404.

by Celan's *Tenebrae*, but common to both is the sense of danger and destructiveness that the Western tradition has always believed to be linked to the creative and redeeming power of God.<sup>26</sup> Since Jesus—in contrast to Job, whose very natural and understandable path he did not in fact take—refused to abandon his attachment to the One he called 'Father', despite being tempted to do so, since Jesus remained faithful to Him to the end, he thereby succeeded in revealing what the evangelist John refers to as the 'glory' of the supreme personal reality that transcends the world and all its powers.<sup>27</sup> 'And', as Pascal contends, 'even grace is only figurative of glory, for it is not the ultimate end'.<sup>28</sup>

But prior to the 'glory' of 'the ultimate end', that is, in history, it is grace that, in the midst of evil and suffering, can become palpable as the power which not only confers on history's victims a moral, indeed one might say an 'ontological', superiority over their torturers and executioners, but grace *is* that superiority itself. In so far as it is possible, every desolation, every humiliation is registered and respected by the eyes of faith, every sin is put in the balance and weighed—in short there is no 'turning a blind eye to', no trivialisation of, evil and suffering in Christianity. Faith, however, still claims that grace represents an even higher power, which is not only more extensive than evil, but in redeeming it can draw unimagined good from it, redemption being, in Christian understanding, a qualitatively profounder reality than even *creatio ex nihilo*. Yet no words, no theology can adequately represent what is ultimately involved here. And that is why only the 'witnesses' to Christian truth, only the 'martyrs', have the right to be heeded seriously on this question.

### **Limitations and necessity of a theology of grace**

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps Nietzsche's 'to *live dangerously*', is a distant shadow cast by this belief: 'For believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to *live dangerously!*' (*The Gay Science*, Bk. 4, §283, tr. W. Kaufmann [New York: Vintage Books, 1974], 228).

<sup>27</sup> A potentially unsettling question not dealt with here, and one that does not yet appear to have found any widely accepted answer, is that raised for the kinds of considerations advanced in this article by a critical reading of Scripture. Such a reading of Scripture was certainly known to the pagan world of late antiquity, but it has resurfaced within Christianity itself with new urgency since the Enlightenment. Put briefly, it is the question often referred to in theological parlance as that of the relationship between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith.

<sup>28</sup> *Pensées*, §275, tr. A.J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), 115.

An awareness of the inadequacy, even in a sense the inappropriateness, of all thought in the area of Christianity's ultimate and most inaccessible beliefs is perhaps reflected in Kierkegaard's savage indictment of theologians—as 'professors of the fact that Christ was crucified'. Some may be inclined to dismiss such utterances as simply the caustic, exasperated rhetoric of a latter-day Tertullian. None the less, in dealing with the question of suffering we find ourselves faced with 'an abyss on the verge of which human reason trembles in dismay'.<sup>29</sup> Kant employed this expression in relation only to 'the ultimate support and stay of all existing things'. But something more is at issue here. Human reason can, of course, at least tremble at the prospect of trying to plumb history's terrifying abyss of evil, suffering, and death, an abyss even more unfathomable, and much more menacing, than the facticity of existence itself, but it cannot do much more. It can, as it were, remove its shoes as it seeks to approach such realities, but it cannot – and perhaps should not – advance very far. 'Erasmus and his followers', writes Kolakowski, 'were never tired of asking: why are the Gospels so understandable to everybody except those whose minds have been corrupted by theological speculation?'<sup>30</sup> At the risk of betraying such theologically induced corruption, could one nevertheless ask whether it is possible to see in the Passion of Jesus the fullness of a truth prefigured in certain mythical and archaic cosmogonies? In some mythical accounts of creation, it is the dismembered body of a god or goddess which furnishes the material necessary for the creation of the world.<sup>31</sup> For Christianity, it is by Jesus' sacrifice, by the mystery of Redemption, that the sins of the world are removed, and that the world is *re-created* and redeemed.<sup>32</sup>

Redemption, so understood, contains Christianity's response to the ancient problem of belief in God's goodness, given the evidence of evil and suffering in the world. This is a problem that certainly requires a response, if

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<sup>29</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'Transcendental Dialectic', 2.3.5 (tr. N. Kemp Smith), 513.

<sup>30</sup> Kolakowski, *Religion*, 170.

<sup>31</sup> Cf., for example, Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis. The Story of Creation*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), where according to the *Enûma Elish* story, Marduk kills the goddess Ti'âmat, dismembers her body, and from it creates the world.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, 42.

belief in God *tout court* is to be possible. What is at stake is not the question of the existence of God, but the question of the nature of God. Is God good and thus worthy of belief? The Christian doctrine of grace is central to dealing with this question, as it stresses belief in the assured redemption of the world by God, whose nature, faith claims, is both benevolent and not to be confused with the reality of the world, his creation. Yet for many, of course, here lies precisely the problem. For, even if the hurdle of believing God to be significantly other than his creation, and untainted by its deficiencies—even if this hurdle could be overcome (by a leap of faith?<sup>33</sup>), a possibly more daunting one would still remain to be negotiated: How can the world give rise to such relentless suffering, if it is the sole creation of a good, transcendent God? Even making allowances for human freedom, even accepting that for Christianity the world is always, so to speak, more than the world, because it is to be redeemed by grace—even with these reservations, it can still scarcely be denied that the question of suffering remains a thorn in the flesh of faith. And so the further question – does one have the *right* to believe in grace, given the enormity of the problem of evil and suffering in the world? – does not lose its legitimacy, even *sub specie redemptionis*, even from the viewpoint of redemption.

Perhaps this question might best be tackled in a roundabout way, by looking at the implications of a negative answer. If, that is, we were ultimately to judge that we did *not* have the right to believe in grace, what value or reality would our refusal to accept the ‘rightness’ of evil and suffering in that case have? Where would the source of our protest against evil and suffering then lie? Might the weakness of Christianity (the problem of evil and suffering) not also be – to invoke an ancient Christian theme – its secret strength? Could our refusal to accept evil and suffering not be an enduring sign that there is more to reality than the world we experience? Could this refusal, on our part, not point to God,

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<sup>33</sup> Such as seems to be entailed by Les Murray’s short poem, *The Knockdown Question*, for example, a poem that also hints at the more-than-human dimensions of the problem of suffering and of any possible ‘solution’:

Why does God not spare the innocent?

The answer to that is not in  
the same world as the question  
so you would shrink from me  
in terror if I could answer it.

(From *Poems the Size of Photographs* [Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002], 67.)

the transcendent source of goodness guaranteeing within history the validity of our protest? If, nevertheless, we were to persist and judge finally that we did not have the right to believe in grace, would we not have to go a step further, and add: Even if God there be, he does not have the right either to create the world or to offer us his grace; and we do not have the right to believe that life is worth living. 'Existence' is then either a seemingly irremediable catastrophe, perpetrated by God, or else it is itself God—not so much 'prime mover' as 'prime mess': primordial, inescapable, irrefutable, eternal chaos? A certain grim satisfaction might be gained out of embracing such a conclusion in the name of human honesty, but who then would *we* be? On what ground would we then stand? How could we eliminate the impression of randomness and insubstantiality and 'wishful thinking' in regard to our own thoughts and convictions? Why bother taking them seriously? Small wonder that for a sceptical thinker like George Santayana the answer to the question of whether life was worth living or not, could not be found by reason alone, but had to be decided—or 'assumed', to use his term—by an underivable act of faith in life itself, a kind of human *creatio ex nihilo*: 'That life is worth living is the most necessary of assumptions, and, were it not assumed, the most impossible of conclusions.'<sup>34</sup>

### Concluding remarks

To sum up, the transfiguration of human suffering, what could be described as the 'meaning' or justification of human existence, is evidently not to be located within the limits of earthly life. All the more so can such meaning be found, if anywhere, only beyond those limits. In theological language, one might say that 'the gift *par excellence* of religion', is 'the world endowed with meaning',<sup>35</sup> or, in other words, that it is 'justifying grace', that is, the grace which 'justifies' God's risk in creating the world. For only such 'justifying grace' would truly endow the world with meaning, by saving it eternally from

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<sup>34</sup> G. Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense* (New York, 1911), 252 (quoted by Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, 506).

<sup>35</sup> Kolakowski, *Religion*, 159. See also C. Ernst, *The Theology of Grace*, ch. 3, where the idea of grace as 'meaning' is developed. Cf. Greshake, *Geschenkte Freiheit*, 16-17: 'The desire for salvation is . . . the desire for a life for everyone filled with meaning in a world filled with meaning.'



frustration. But the ‘meaning’ that is here in question comes to a world Christianity sees as ‘fallen’, and therefore in need of being ‘saved’ or ‘cured’ or ‘healed’ by a reality that is not ‘fallen’. The world, in other words, for Christianity, does not simply stand in need of being explained or understood, or even ethically ‘managed’ by human beings, but it stands in need of being redeemed by a reality beyond it.

One might, then, discern in the faith that keeps searching for the relief of a lasting and welcome meaning to human experience; in the hope that awaits such meaning in fullness only beyond history (since it shows no sign of being discovered within history itself); and finally in the willingness to take life seriously (though without idolising its contingency), in other words, to love rather than to hate or despise life and those in it (*pace* Pascal<sup>36</sup>), despite the omnipresent threat of evil and death that seems to infect everything with sadness and ultimate unreality—one might discern in such faith, hope, and love what could be designated under the term ‘grace’, the reality of God acting on and in our lives, the presence of ‘universal good’ which is, to agree this time with Pascal, ‘both ourselves and not ourselves’.<sup>37</sup>

The grace which redeems does not destroy or ignore, but builds on our capacity for being moved by the poignancy of human existence. It is in this capacity for being moved by suffering that our human dignity is most infallibly revealed, a dignity that effortlessly transcends the power of evil and death. Christian faith teaches us that it is above all in the miracle of compassion, or mercy, that God and man meet, and that this miracle, which became flesh in Jesus, is the only means of disclosing to us the true identity both of God and of his most problematic creation, man. It is in this grace of compassion that we can hear with least interference the divine melody which is, to quote Wallace Stevens:

A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

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Of things exactly as they are.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> ‘The true and only virtue is therefore to hate ourselves, for our concupiscence makes us hateful . . .’, *Pensées*, § 564, 222.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Cited by C. Ernst, *op. cit.*, 93.