

Lines of Grace

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Outside St Paul and the Acts the term *charis*—whence our ‘grace’—is rather rare in the New Testament, but the idea, as Dr Ryder Smith has said, ‘is everywhere.’¹ Common alike in secular Greek and the Septuagint, *charis* was a wonderfully apt term for Christian uses. In the Septuagint it renders the Hebrew *chen*, meaning favour or goodwill freely bestowed and presupposing the idea of love and of a love active and generous. Again *charis*, as derived from *chairein*, ‘to be glad,’ carried a sense of joy—joy on both sides for the gift bestowed, both in the giver and in the receiver, or more precisely in the relation arising between the two as a result of the gift. Thus it could denote a state of being in communion or fellowship, and in the New Testament (especially in St Paul, but cf. John 1, 14–16) it became the chief term signifying the specifically Christian situation of being loved by God, in Christ, and of returning this love, in Christ—or simply of being ‘in Christ.’ Certainly the Church was fortunate in having to hand a word so flexible and beautiful.

Around *charis* gathered the other Christian words, faith, love, peace, etc., as well as, in St Paul particularly, the contrast-term ‘law’ and the term for grace’s antagonist, ‘sin’. In time these words came to be defined more precisely, and as each one became more precise all the rest were affected too. The Church could not understand ‘love’ or ‘faith’ except in the context of grace, and in particular, and more quickly, she found she could not understand grace except in relation to sin and vice versa. Augustine led the way in exploring St Paul’s division of all mankind into two states only, of sin and of grace (Romans 3, 23–4), and this exploration naturally opened up questions about the nature of man and free will. Thus the original Christian experience led on to theology and the elaboration of a Christian theory of man.

Underlying all these terms is the idea common to the whole Bible of the basic difference between God the creator and man his creature, and so the presupposition that no communication from God to man is owed, any more than creation itself was owed, but can be only God’s free initiative. Human nature as such has no ‘divinity’, in the sense of

¹*The Bible Doctrine of Grace*, p. 59

any share in the life proper to God. And this 'apartness' of God from man has nothing in principle to do with man's being in fact in a state of sin. It is part of the God-creature relationship, which is prior to the God-sinner relationship. This idea is partly obscured in the New Testament by the great Pauline stress on man's apartness as *sinful* and on grace as the remedy for sin. But even in the New Testament there are texts that indicate grace as the raising of man's *nature* towards God, apart from any direct reference to salvation from sin. So St John tells us that the result of faith in the Incarnation is a new divine birth which does not arise from human nature (1, 13; cf. 1 Peter 1, 23); and in John 1, 18 (cf. 1 Cor. 2, 10-11; Gal. 1, 11-12) we learn of a new *knowledge* of God now made possible through Christ, where the contrast seems to be with the knowledge accessible to human nature as such, quite apart from man's 'fallen' condition.

It is not surprising then that Christian thinking about grace went on to develop in a two-fold way according to whether the stress was put on one or other of the two chief terms that contrast with grace: nature and sin. The Greek Fathers tended to see grace as a share in 'divinity', received by human nature as a result of the Incarnation. They used the Greek ideas of participation (*methexis*) and divinization (*theopoiesis*) and looked into human nature to find some pre-existing capacity for this divinization.² Thinking of grace in the Johannine terms of light and life rather than in the Pauline terms of justification, they tended to take the cause of grace back to the Incarnation itself rather than to concentrate on the redemptive Passion. This was only a difference of emphasis within the general doctrinal field, but it sufficed to distinguish a 'Greek' approach to grace-theology that was more ontological than ethical. Perhaps its chief value for theology has been to keep the graced humanity itself of Christ, 'of whose fullness we have all received' (John 1, 16), in the centre of the picture, and thus to contribute to the full Catholic doctrine of grace as an *intrinsic* transformation of human nature—the point which especially had to be defined, against the Protestants, at the Council of Trent. As a motto, so to say, for this line of development one might take the phrase *gratia elevans*, although this only appears rather late in the Church's official teaching, at the Council of Vienne in 1311-12.

The other line runs from St Paul through Augustine to the first

²This capacity came to be identified with the image of God 'to which' man was originally created. St Thomas will refer to this imagehood as the reason for holding that grace is not, strictly speaking, 'miraculous', 1a 2ae, 113, 10.

official ecclesiastical definitions of grace made at the Councils of Carthage (418) and Orange (529). Here grace is understood chiefly as the healing and rectification of the sinful human will, as *gratia sanans*. Historically its starting point was St Paul's break with Judaism and so with the Law, the traditional Jewish way by which man might come into harmony with God. St Paul rejected the Law in this sense. For him there was no difference, in point of sinfulness, between Jew and Gentile, 'for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3.23). And there was no remedy or redemption except in faith in the atoning sacrifice of the Cross. Owing to St Paul this aspect of grace visibly predominates in the New Testament teaching; and it led, far sooner than the other, to ecclesiastical definitions. That it did so was due above all to St Augustine. Augustine's refutation of Pelagianism is St Paul's refutation of Judaism over again, but aimed against the self-directing stoic free will instead of against the Jews' legal righteousness; and conducted of course in a different cultural setting and with a far more refined and abundant dialectic. It has had an absolutely decisive effect on Catholicism. It settled once and for all two basic points: (a) that man without grace (God's help) is necessarily a sinner, and (b) that man can never take the initiative in his liberation from sin, the first move being always with God. And grace when it does come, insists Augustine (who loves to quote Romans 5.5), is a power infused from the Holy Spirit enabling the soul to live according to Christ's law of charity. Clearly, this is a predominantly moral conception of grace, focusing directly on the human will's relation to God, and only indirectly and in a secondary way touching the status of human nature as such in relation to grace. The ontological issue is left comparatively in the shade.

And so, broadly speaking, it remained, in the West at least, until the Aristotelians of the thirteenth century drew out a clear and distinct idea of nature from the newly translated works of the Philosopher, the so-called *libri naturales* (in which term were comprised the *Metaphysics* and the *De Anima* as well as the *Physics* and the zoological treatises etc.). Along with this new idea of nature as a relatively autonomous system with its own intrinsic structures and finalities there arose also, quite naturally, the idea of a strictly and specifically human knowledge, bounded by the range of reason and caused by the light of reason playing on sense experience. Thus for the first time in the Christian West philosophy appeared as a discipline distinct from theology. But how did these two new factors, the Aristotelian idea of nature and the idea of a strictly philosophical speculation independent of faith, affect Christian thought

about grace?

They seem to have affected it in broadly two contrasting ways: as contributing to the progress of theology and at the same time as posing difficulties and favouring the growth of a non-Christian mentality in Europe. In one way the Greek idea of nature as a self-coherent and intrinsically intelligible structure of being and activity was a positive boon to St Thomas, and this even—and indeed, very decidedly—in the context of grace-theology. For an Aristotelian to think of a thing's activity is to think of its being (*actus sequitur esse*); nor has 'virtue' any meaning except as measured by and relative to a presupposed 'nature'. This idea was one that St Thomas could easily appropriate and use in his demonstration of the interior, immanent character of sanctifying grace as something really existing in the soul. As the natural virtues presuppose human nature, so the supernatural virtues, the specifically Christian activities that lead to eternal life, presuppose a new supernatural nature, so to say, a radical 'divinization' of the soul's essence. The *fact* may remain mysterious, but the coherence of being and activity requires that it be asserted. It is remarkable how St Thomas, in the *Summa* Ia. 2ae, 110, 3-4, has recourse to Aristotle in order to refute his own theological text-book, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, and so find a rational justification of the New Testament teaching on the New Birth and the New Creation. The thing is done so easily that one may miss the audacity of this particular Christian appropriation of a 'pagan' notion of nature. And it is still a stumbling block for Protestants.³

The difficulties referred to above were of two kinds. First, in moral philosophy the Aristotelian movement led to a new sort of Pelagianism, to the emergence in the late thirteenth century and on into the fourteenth of a type of naturalistic ethic. In the Arts faculties of the Universities men began to elaborate theories of the moral life, based on the Nicomachean Ethics, which were as far removed as possible from Augustine and so, in effect, from both the New Testament and the defined doctrine of the Church. The natural virtues they taught, were perfectly within the reach of the humanly wise man. Grace they implied, was not necessary within the natural order—now thought of in an excessively abstract way as something separate and autonomous—for

³P. Tillich, e.g., likes to speak of grace as 'the New Being,' but hastens to add that this does not contradict 'the message' of the Reformers, *Theology of Culture*, p.209. It is not clear however how, on his terms, he avoids a contradiction here.

the enlightened élite who live *secundum ordinem naturalem*.⁴ A trace of this heresy appears in Dante's Limbo (it is the poet's only notable unorthodoxy), and it probably helped to provoke, in a rather confused way, Petrarch's cry of 'Back to Augustine' a generation later. So far however as a rational ethic could be assimilated into Christian theology, St Thomas had assimilated it, in his *Secunda pars*, by showing, on the one hand, the natural psycho-physical ground of the four cardinal virtues—regarded as the rational nature in action—while indicating, on the other hand, how these natural virtues may be quickened and enlarged under the influence of the Holy Spirit (the 'Gifts'). Grace remains for Aquinas as necessary as it was for Augustine, both to heal our wounded nature and to bring it to eternal life; but he brings out far more clearly than Augustine had the natural moral structure that grace informs and renews.

The other difficulty arising from the revival of philosophy in the thirteenth century concerned the intellect rather than moral virtue. An intense intellectualism was a feature of the thought of that period; it appeared not only in an extraordinary confidence in deductive reasoning but also—which is more to the point here—in a certain tendency to *dehumanize* the speculative intellect by regarding it as really only extrinsically and apparently human, but intrinsically and essentially of a higher order altogether. This trend derived from the Arabs rather than from Aristotle, and in its logically coherent form it became the Averroistic 'monopsychism' (the doctrine that there is but one intellect, eternal, uncreated and incorruptible, for the human race) with which St Thomas was wrestling at the end of his life. But Averroism was only the systematic expression of a widespread tendency to place the term of our intellectual activity in a union with, or absorption into, some super-human Mind. In strict Averroism this absorption was not into God but into one of God's emanations; hence, from this point of view, Averroism, though in conflict with Christianity in other ways, did not directly contradict the Christian view that the beatific vision of God, eternal life, was a gift of grace and not a natural destiny. But the notion of a *natural destiny* of the human mind to union with some higher mind, whether

⁴Boethius of Dacia *De summo bono* (text in Grabmann *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben II*, pp. 200-24). This Boethius, an M.A. at Paris, was involved with Siger of Brabant in the great condemnation of Averroism in that university in 1277. The naturalism he represented spread to Bologna about the same time, as appears from the *Quaestio de felicitate* of James of Pistoia, dedicated to Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti; see *Medioevo e rinascimento, Studi in onore di B. Nardi II*, pp. 427-63.

angelic or strictly divine, was certainly very much in the air at that time; and if one of its formulations was Averroistic rationalism another would seem to have been the intellectualist mysticism of Eckhart. Whether this great Dominican was personally a heretic or not (probably not; he was certainly no Averroist) the plain literal sense of some of his *dicta*, condemned in 1329, is that the intellectual soul is radically and essentially one thing with God.⁵ Grace is logically, if not verbally, excluded. It had been even verbally excluded, in respect of the beatific vision, by another current of intellectualist mysticism condemned a little earlier, at the Council of Vienne (1311-12). At this Council for the first time (if I am not mistaken) the term *lumen gloriae* was officially used by the Church to name the grace that makes the final vision of God simply possible for any creature whatsoever.⁶ And on this point Dante, writing his *Paradiso* during the following decade, is absolutely orthodox.

Thus the great naturalistic and intellectualist upsurge of the thirteenth century was both accepted and opposed by the Church—accepted so far as it could contribute to the elaboration of a rational theology of the New Man, the New Creation; opposed by a refusal to allow that any created intellect can be naturally destined to the immediate vision of God. And these two acts, so to call them, of the medieval Church ruled out in advance a certain Protestantism and a certain pantheistic mysticism—both of which are still very much with us to-day. Nor can there be any going back on these positions reached long ago by the Church and confirmed by subsequent defined teaching. But we cannot, of course, rest content with dogmas as mere *rulings*; we have to try to realize, ever more vividly, the reality that those rulings safeguard: the reality of Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. Grace in one sense, even the grace that is (please God) in us, is beyond our perceiving;⁷ but its effects should not be. It was surely in the perceptible effects of grace that the first Christians found that joy which breathes through the New Testament. 'If anyone is in Christ', says St Paul, 'he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new is come!' The new creation; what is this but the divinized humanity of Christ and his grace-influence in us? Grace is rooted in the Incarnation; the new life is a communion of our nature with Emmanuel. And of *all* our nature, with nothing left out. Neither sex nor reason can give, now, the controlling measure, the law for our living; but grace alone, the

⁵Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, nos. 501-29.

⁶*ibid.*, no. 475.

⁷1a 2ae, 112.5; confirmed by Trent, Denzinger, nos. 802, 825-6.

communion with Emmanuel, which brings both sex and reason into the flow of charity, purifying, harmonizing, elevating all that is in us. Christians are too diffident, too distrustful; if we believed more in grace we should experience its effects more fully. Such is the lesson of every page of the Gospels.

Christianity and Sex: Orientations¹

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'It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. And here lies the vast importance of the novel, properly handled. It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead. Therefore, the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life: for it is in the *passional* secret places of life, above all, that the tide of sensitive awareness needs to ebb and flow, cleansing and refreshing'.

This eminently quotable and much quoted passage from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* allows us to indicate the purpose and scope of the reflections which follow. It is certainly an exploration of consciousness (and conscience) that we propose to make, but neither as novelist nor as saint, concerned to illuminate and purify the secret springs of life, so far as these are accessible to the intelligence of feeling and sympathy; it is rather from the viewpoint of the Christian theologian that an attempt will be made here to explore consciousness and conscience, to analyse its ingredients, to take stock: an exercise of intelligence sensitive enough, it is hoped, to avoid the crudities of brute imperatives, but none the less conceptual and discursively rational, while at the same time resorting to those privileged sources of insight available to the Catholic in divine revelation.

'Christianity and sex,' it is clear, is as much a disjunction as a conjunction: the 'and' separates as much as it combines. For the Catholic

¹The substance of one of the Dominican lectures given at Cambridge in March 1961.