

Ancestral Grace

Meeting God in Our Human Story

Diarmuid O'Murchu, MSC

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Chapter 1

By the Grace of God . . .

*I know nothing except what everyone knows —
if there when Grace dances, I should dance.*

— W. H. AUDEN

Grace is the secret essence of all eligible reality.

— KARL RAHNER

IN THE CHILDHOOD formation of my Christian faith, “grace” was an important word. It described the state of one’s soul, defining whether or not one was in a right relationship with God. One went to communion only if one’s soul was in a state of grace. When lost, it could be regained by going to confession. By God’s grace one avoided committing sin, and when one did, we prayed for the grace to be forgiven.

Affiliation to the church was crucial to all this. Yes, grace was a gift from God, but effectively it could be dispensed only through the church, especially by participation in the sacraments. And the dispenser was the priest, really the only one who could mediate grace on behalf of sinful humans. Ordinary people could grow more fully in grace by doing good works; the ability to do so was itself a benefit of God’s grace.

Dualistic Overtones

Dualistic overtones rumble in the background. The great perfect God and the flawed human are juxtaposed. How much of this belongs to God and how much is a human projection? There is no one word corresponding to grace in the Hebrew Scriptures. Two words tend to be

used: *chesed*, meaning loving-kindness, and *hanam*, best translated as the spontaneous gift of affection. The Greek word used in the New Testament is *charis*, which literally means gift. In all cases, grace is understood as an expression of divine graciousness (see Duffy 1993, 18ff.).

Eastern Christianity seems to be more faithful to the biblical foundations. Grace is associated with the divine energy, sustaining and empowering everything in being. It does not deny sin and fragility but it reconsiders them within a larger picture in which the relationship between God and creation (including humans) is fundamentally benign.

Western Christianity often fell foul of the dualistic divide between the divine and the human, grace and nature, salvation and sin, grace and good works.¹ The all-good God and the fundamentally flawed human were often portrayed in a struggle to regain a lost harmony. A language of “earned” and “unearned” grace begins to develop (grace and merit). Categories of “actual” and “sanctifying” grace were invoked, the former, a temporary enlightened state of mind or strength of will to remain sinless; the latter, the supernatural nature of grace infused by God into the soul enabling humans to serve God faithfully. The debate between Pelagius and St. Augustine is just one of several weighty diatribes that ensued (see Duffy 1993; Haight 1979).

As we sift our way through the theological complexities, a few basic elements can be identified:

1. Above all else grace denotes *giftedness*, a primary expression of divine *graciousness*, described many years ago by the late Karl Rahner (1966) as the nearness of the abiding mystery.
2. God’s gracious giftedness is expressed through everything in creation, especially the abundance with which God endows creation (see Dreyer 1990, 190–211).
3. Grace also denotes the sustaining energy with which God infuses the whole of creation. Some people identify this with the Holy Spirit (e.g., Wallace 2002; 2005).
4. Grace could be defined as God’s unconditional love for everything in creation — “...the grace of God plunges us into the world” (Johnson 2003, 110).

5. Grace also denotes a central element in the strategy whereby God rescues sinful humanity. Christianity states this explicitly; it is less explicit in the great Oriental religions.
6. “Rather than something that can be easily lost by sin and regained by repentance, grace remains as God’s permanent offer of love and thereby of salvation to the creature, an offer that cannot be extinguished by the grossest sin” (Johnson 2003, 109).

Grace and the Fundamental Flaw

Grace becomes problematic when we enter the human realm. In the great story of creation things seem fine with God until humanity comes along. Then things seem to fall into disarray, particularly in a catastrophe called “the Fall.”

The Christian version goes like this: There was a rebellion in the heavenly realm (above and beyond the earth) between two groups of warring angels, vying for power and domination, it seems. The losers were deemed to be evil and were expelled by God from paradise. They landed on planet earth and began to propagate through sexual reproduction. Thus the evil force that led to the rebellion in heaven is endemic to this species called humanity, and the evil is passed on primarily through sex. Moreover, everything affected by these sinful creatures, including the whole of creation, becomes contaminated. Consequently, everything in creation is now fundamentally flawed.

Humans are the culprits. They are the first to be fundamentally flawed, the first to fall foul of Original Sin. Everything else in creation suffers the negative fallout. In this scenario, we need to note that humans are considered superior to everything else in creation. And God is postulated as being concerned primarily with humans.

The breakthrough for humans is activated and facilitated through the salvation wrought by Jesus. This is the great rescue — not just for Christians but allegedly for all humans. Whether or not it is a rescue for the rest of creation has not preoccupied scholars down through the ages.

As people of faith, we are expected to believe this preposterous myth, because Christianity declares it to be revealed truth. It is the very truth of God himself, and in Christian theology, only the Christian church has full access to that truth. When we realize that historically the Christian church defined revelation exclusively within a male context — half of God’s creatures, namely, women, had no say whatever — then we begin to glimpse the shaky foundations on which the whole theory rests.

Beyond the specific domain of Christian theology, people argue that we need some theory to make sense of human waywardness. Ormerod (2007, 68–89) opts for the theory of an inherited “universal victimhood,” drawing on the social-psychological groundwork of theorists such as René Girard, Alice Miller, and Karen Horney. Obviously, we are not perfect, and history painfully reminds us of the consequences of our recklessness, violence, and immorality. Others go on to suggest that not only are we prone to evil, but in and of ourselves we seem unable to do anything much about it. Therefore, the theology of redemption makes enormous sense. Without belief in a rescuing God, we are all condemned to absolute meaninglessness and ultimate despair.²

Grace Revisited

It is against this perverse background that grace came to be understood as a supernatural power of rescue, and Jesus came to be understood as the great rescuer. We began to lose sight of the blessed, empowering love of God, which had flourished in creation for billions of years. Religious reductionism ossified an otherwise empowering and liberating endowment. But, as I shall attempt to illustrate in the present work, that is only a development of the past few thousand years. Grace has been triumphant throughout the billions of years of creation’s evolution and throughout the 7 million years of our great human story.

In the contemporary world, concepts like sin and grace have lost a great deal of meaning. And despite the horrendous suffering and injustices of our time, people are not convinced that this is a hopelessly flawed creation. In fact, more than ever before, people strive

to make the world a better place because innately and intuitively we know it can be better and should be better. What still haunts us in trying to achieve this noble goal is the same anthropocentrism that propagated the notion of a fundamental flaw in the first place.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, as we began to realize the precarious state of life on planet earth, numerous movements arose seeking to reclaim the sacredness of creation in relation to both the cosmic and earthly realms. A disturbing insight came to the fore: humans themselves have construed ways of dealing with creation that are no longer politically, economically, or culturally sustainable, and often the root causes of so much meaningless suffering seem to be fueled by *forms of religion that are inherently destructive* (see Harris 2005). In other words, it may be religion itself — or the inherited concept of civilization (see Crossan 2007) — rather than humanity or creation that is fundamentally flawed.

In reclaiming the great story of the cosmos and of planet earth, we have come to realize that our conventional human story has become grossly distorted by separating ourselves from the bigger story and, in recent millennia, setting ourselves over it. We construe our human narrative largely in terms of two thousand years and trace many central notions of what it means to be human to the Greek culture of twenty-five hundred years ago. We abort humanity from the womb to which it integrally belongs. Little wonder that we behave in such dysfunctional and destructive ways.

By resituating humanity within the larger cosmic and planetary context where we — like all other creatures — integrally and intimately belong we stand a much better chance of re-visioning the human enterprise with meaning and renewed hope. Then we can reclaim grace for what it foundationally means in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures: the great gifting power of God nourishing and sustaining everything in being, described by Miroslav Volf (1998) as the double movement of embrace and covenant. Redemptive rescuing makes sense no longer. Grace abounds, grace sustains, and grace enables us to live gracefully with the paradoxes that characterize creation's great story.

Our Graced Story

The present work does not begin with an angelic rebellion in the heavenly realm, a far-fetched myth that makes little sense to intelligent people of our time — even to children! My story strives to honor God’s starting-point. Where does God begin with humanity’s story, as we know the story today from history and science? And what might our story begin to look like when we honor more authentic origins?

If we assume that God is fully at work in creation at every stage — and I certainly do — then God was fully with us, in the power of unconditional grace, when we first evolved as a human species a few million years ago. There has never been a time in which our God was not fully present to us, nor has there ever been a time when God’s grace was not abundantly and generously bestowed upon us.

Endowed abundantly with such grace, which is also the grace-filled energy sustaining everything in creation, for most of our time on earth we responded well to God’s Grace. As intimated by W. H. Auden in the opening quotation: we did participate in the dance, even to the extent of dancing our religion long before we composed creeds or developed legally enforced religious dogmas.

Contrary to so many theories that problematize the human endeavor, the evidence of the larger story suggests that *we got it right for most of our time as an earth-based species*. We got it right because we lived in a close, convivial relationship with the earth in which our graced God has grounded us. Only when we began to distance ourselves from the earth, over the past few thousand years, have things got badly out of kilter.

The oft-quoted remark of the late Stephen J. Gould (2000, 51), “...any replay of the tape (of life) would lead evolution down a pathway radically different from the road actually taken,” has rightly been challenged by several other scholars, notably the Cambridge (UK) paleobiologist Simon Conway Morris (2004). Morris claims that convergence more than anything else characterizes organic and human evolution, suggesting that in all probability we would continue to evolve constructively and creatively on what we have already achieved throughout our long story. In other words, there is an

ancient and foundational “rightness” to who we are and to what we have been about in our evolutionary story. I wish to suggest that it is the theological concept of *grace*, more than anything else that enables us to grasp the deeper significance of this meaning-laden emergence.

The critical issue at stake here is the interpretative frame of reference we use. We tend to regard the academic sphere as the ultimate custodian of truth and meaning. And for most disciplines this means adopting the insights of classical Greek times as the basis for rational discourse and foundational truth. Anything predating twenty-five hundred years ago is considered suspect, unreliable, and not to be taken seriously.

The interpretative context is further trivialized by several unquestioned assumptions belonging to the cult(ure) of *patriarchy*. I use this term to denote the shadow side of the agricultural revolution, dating back some ten thousand years from the present time. Faced with a new social complexity arising from the development of agriculture, a predominantly male subgroup fragmented the land and sought to control both the land and its users with a firm hand, one that became progressively more domineering and violent. Validated by a self-created sky-God, the patriarchal system set out to conquer and control all before it. It prevails to the present time, although now facing decline and the ensuing disarray we notice in so many major institutions today.

The patriarchal value system has been the subject of much criticism in recent decades, and the more criticism is launched the more robust the defense even to the point of demonizing the critics. While I believe that the patriarchal system is running its course and is now a wearied force, I want to cherish its achievements while also acknowledging its serious limitations. Nor is it likely to have been the first time in human evolutionary history in which humanity opted for a cultural response with such a destructive vein to it.

Our Graced Orientation

In evolutionary terms we have never got it totally right; had we achieved that we would have been gods unto ourselves. Blessed as we

are with freedom and creativity, *we get it right most of the time* — in terms of the big story — and occasionally we get it badly wrong. Yet the evolutionary story, infused by the guiding grace of divine wisdom, tends to bring things back to a more wholesome way of living and behaving.

Our great mistake today is to judge our entire story by the standards of the past eight thousand years. Intellectually and spiritually we have been conditioned into thinking small. The figure of two thousand years has taken on an archetypal significance never intended by God. Its importance belongs to the patriarchal cult of minimalism; it is easier to exert control when we keep things small, and the control is powerfully enhanced when we can religiously validate the context.

But when we learn to embrace a bigger picture, we then find ourselves in the amazing and liberating quandary Philip Yancey must have been pondering when he wrote: “Grace makes its appearance in so many forms that I have trouble defining it” (1997, 70). Grace is our abundance, our blessedness, our most enduring survival skill. Gratitude is our default mode! “In grace we see ourselves as peers,” writes Elizabeth Dreyer (1990, 239), “not only with all peoples, but with the earth itself.” Deep inside we know this, and hopefully the reflections of this book will empower us to reclaim and honor that which we know at the heart of our being.

We begin these reflections with the challenge of honoring and adopting God’s time scale — which in human terms is 7 million years and not two thousand years. When we adopt the big picture, we stand a better chance of outgrowing the minimalism that is choking us to death. We stand a better chance of honoring God’s big story revealed in the whole of creation and in our own embodied existence. We begin to realize that beyond all our flaws, sins, and limitations we are first and foremost the beneficiaries of God’s unconditional love, a love that needs to be reclaimed in its rightful context, namely, the realm of *ancestral grace*.