

Encountering the Hidden God

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[Printed in AREOPAGUS- A Living Encounter with Today's Religious World, published by Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, Hong Kong, Pentecost 1993.]

It's easy to talk about God's grace, but what about his silence? Edward Schroeder argues that sharing the most painful side of faith can lead to a more honest and fruitful dialog.

Raimundo Pannikar was recently in my home town of St. Louis, USA, to give a lecture on Christophany. This is the name he gives to the manifestations of divine grace which he perceives occurring in all world religions. Christophanies, he says, are meeting points for Christian dialog with other religions.

It is safe to say that Pannikar's point of departure for interreligious dialog dominates the scene in Christian circles these days. That was evident at the August 1992 meeting of the International Association for Mission Studies (I.A.M.S.) in Hawaii. Whenever the discussion focused on other religions, "Pannikar's" model prevailed. Missiologists from the major streams of today's churches—Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelical/independents—used this "grace-for-grace" model.

Not until the last day's evaluation session did a colleague from Malaysia challenge this model. "I was a Buddhist for many years," he said. "I am now a Christian. I am deeply involved in Christian-Buddhist dialog. I know both religions from the inside. But my present faith in Christ is qualitatively different from my faith as a Buddhist." Another colleague supported him, suggesting that the next I.A.M.S. gathering focus directly on this issue, perhaps by asking the simple question: "Why Jesus?"

What does this "grace-for-grace" model look like? It begins with the premise that the God whom Christians worship is by definition gracious. Such grace has been, and continues to be, manifested in many and various ways to all people throughout the world, and not just to Christians. Thus, a common denominator already exists in humankind's common experience of a common grace from a common deity. And the faith-response to that grace by peoples of different religions is also at root a common faith of thanks, praise, and appreciation.

I wish to propose an alternate common ground, yes, even an antithetical one, for Christians to pursue in dialog with today's religions. It is consciously drawn from the theology of the sixteenth century Reformation. This theological model provides a sweeping alternative to the "common grace/common faith" paradigm that is today's vogue for interreligious dialog.

Let me begin with a bit of narrative history. A decade ago a seminary doctoral student made a discovery in a Reformation Theology seminar. We were reading the Defense of the Augsburg Confession (Article IV, "Justification") written in 1531 by Luther's colleague Philip Melancthon. He called our attention to a shift in

Melanchthon's terminology on the fundamental term "grace" as a synonym for the gospel, but before very long in this extended treatise he shifted to the terms "mercy" and "forgiveness" as his gospel synonyms, and seldom mentioned grace again.

The student suggested some possible reasons for Melanchthon's shift. "Grace" was a "hot potato" term in the debate between the German reformers and the Roman establishment. Scholastic theology had framed the term more and more abstractly as an idea, rather than relationally and personally, as the Reformers thought they had rediscovered in their Biblical exegesis. One of Luther's favorite renderings for that relational accent was to call grace *favor dei*, colloquially rendered as "God likes me." This stood in marked contrast to scholastic conceptions of grace as "a metaphysical medicine dispensed by the church through the channels of the sacraments to heal the damages of sin" (J. Pelikan).

Another possible reason is that long before 1531 Melanchthon had learned that "there is grace, and there is grace." The "grace" we encounter in our daily experience of God's creation is something other than the "grace" that comes in Jesus the Christ.

Melanchthon's biblical scholarship had taught him that the grace of creation, though freely bestowed without any prerequisites, is nevertheless a grace that obligates the receiver. The Reformers saw this documented in the opening chapters of Genesis. No doubt about it, the creation stories are grace narratives, but the tragedy of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 illumines what sort of grace the gifts of creation are. The courtroom finale with a judge, accusations, trial, defense, verdict and sentencing is a natural outcome of the grace bestowed upon the primeval parents. The gifts of creation are gifts that obligate us.

Even the grace of receiving the law, said the Reformers, was such a gift. No wonder it brought to the first hearers not joy and gladness, but terror (see Exodus 20). They must have heard the message of obligation in that contract—maybe even impossible demands—because the text reports: "When the people heard the thunder and the trumpet blast and saw the lightning and the smoking mountain, they trembled with fear and stood a long way off. They said to Moses, 'If you speak to us we will listen; but we are afraid that if God speaks to us, we will die.'"

Moses responded: "Don't be afraid; God has only come to test you and make you keep on obeying him, so that you will not sin" (TEV). But this did not cheer the newly covenanted people. And why is that so? Look at the text of the covenant in Exodus 20.5-6. Yahweh pledges something dreadful for commandment breakers, but "I show my love to thousands of generations of those who love me and obey my laws." The grace of Sinai is good news for non-sinners only.

Consequently, Luther called the Sinai event an encounter with "God hidden." What is hidden here is God's mercy and forgiveness for sinners. Forgiveness is grace with a qualitatively different character. It covers failed obligations. It does not impose them.

"God hidden" is not so hidden as to be imperceptible. On the contrary, "God hidden" is constantly perceptible in the routine of our daily lives, coming to us through our fellow creatures. These creatures serve as "masks," Luther claimed, behind which God is "hiding." But even with a merciful face "hiding," God is still personally encountering us and confronting us—relentlessly. God is the voice behind the masks addressing us and calling us for our response, calling us to give an account for our lives,

drumming into our ears that we are obligated for the lifetime of grace-gifts we have received.

In Luther's Large Catechism (1529) his exposition of the first article of the Apostles' Creed celebrates the "giftedness" of creation, but also draws the obligating consequence:

It inevitably follows that we are in duty bound to love, praise, and thank him without ceasing, and in short, to devote all these things to his service, as he has required and enjoined in the Ten Commandments.

Much more could be said if we were to describe in detail how few people believe this article. We all pass over it, hear it, and recite it, but we neither see nor consider what the words enjoin on us...

Therefore this article would humble and terrify us all if we believed it. For we sin daily with eyes and ears, hands, body and soul, money and property, and with all that we have.

Daily-life encounters with God throughout the creation are encounters with the Hidden God, repeat performances of the courtroom scene "in the cool of the day" in Genesis 3. Can you imagine Adam and Eve turning to each other at the end of that chapter and calling God's visit a "grace-encounter"? In the later language of Paul, what they experienced was "the wrath of God." The scriptural narratives are replete with similar episodes of sinners' personal encounters with God that are not grace-events at all, to say nothing of concluding with any sort of "happy end." In such episodes God "counts trespasses," to use another Pauline idiom, and no sinner facing God in such a transaction ever calls it "grace."

The Christian Gospel proposes an alternate way that God relates to sinners. By calling this alternate "forgiveness" or "mercy," the Gospel specifies a God encounter (in Christ, of course) that is entirely contrary to our experience of the Hidden God. Luther called this the encounter with "God revealed." What gets "revealed" (literally "veil taken away"), is the same God, but who is now incarnate in Jesus the Christ, who is—surprise, surprise!—merciful, forgiving, and favorable to sinners. The grace in this Good News does not obligate humans at all. It does not come with any hint of a reciprocity requirement. Even more, it actually liberates sinners from the obligations still unfulfilled in their earlier God-encounters.

Because the grace encountered in Christ is always in contrast to our day-in/day-out God experience, it will not be subsumed under some generic rubric of "grace." This is especially true if grace is understood as a universal, divine generosity present throughout the world in many and various ways. What God was doing in Christ does not fit into such generic "grace wineskins." To paraphrase Paul in Second Corinthians, chapter five, what God was doing in Christ was something God had never done before: "Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God" (TEV).

When a particular New Testament text nevertheless uses the term "grace" in articulating the Christian gospel, the reader does not have to wait long before the writer drops the Name that makes such grace distinctive. It is not just habit that prompts the

apostle Paul to conclude his epistles regularly with these words: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

Let us return now to Pannikar. Christians need to listen to their partners in religious dialog for information on these two aspects of their encountering “common” grace in daily lived experience. Is it grace that obligates, or grace that liberates the recipient? Where or how in their God-encounters are they called to give an account for the grace received?

In place of pursuing the “common grace” agenda what might we learn from beginning interreligious dialog with the daily lived experience of “God hidden”? How do encounters with the Hidden God appear in the experience and perception of people of other faiths? Where in their grace experiences do they find resources for coping with the obligatory aspect of common grace, and with the consequences of failed accountability for grace received?

Not until these conversations occur do Christians have grounds for probing whether the grace that their dialog partners have met in their religious world is of a piece with that manifest in Christ.

How do people of other faiths talk about their daily life encounters with the Hidden God? That is the question. For them, as well as for Christians, is this a common God-experience that is truly ecumenical?

What are the contours in other world religions for articulating encounters with God’s workings behind the masks? What about those God-encounters that press the issue of our worth and value, that weigh us and find us wanting: sickness, poverty, war, famine, failure, oppression, pain, death, catastrophe, guilt, shame, and despair? If interreligious dialog started with these God-experiences, we could then ask the question of Pannikar: How do the manifold “Christophanies” you have isolated in world religions meet these negative, but indisputably real, God-encounters in their own contexts?

This proposal draws on the sixteenth century Reformation, primarily Lutheran; it has some “Christian hunches” about the life experiences of people who confess other faiths; and it may all be summarized in the following points:

- 1) No one’s day-in/day-out religious experiences—whatever their religion—is grace alone.
- 2) To center interreligious dialog on how various religions articulate their grace-experiences (Christophanies) leaves vast areas of God-experience untouched, and almost guarantees that Christian grace, centered in the crucified and risen Christ, will be blurred.
- 3) The grace of God in Christ is not simply an unexpected and undeserved experience of goodness. It is rather a surprising word of mercy from a Creator we chronically distrust, and to whom we are unendingly in debt.
- 4) Might not this fact—Christians’ own chronic distrust of their creator, with all its consequences, and their willingness to confess it—serve as a leaven in the dialog? Even a leveler? Christians come with paradoxical God-experiences and paradoxical faith-admissions: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9.24). And Christians admit to being “simultaneously saint and sinner.”
- 5) Thus, Christians are no “better” in their moral life or the strength of their faith than their dialog partners. They might even be worse. Their claim is not about themselves, but about a Word they have heard that encourages them to live in hope before the face of God despite all evidence to the contrary.

6) Pannikar's concentration on Christophanies sidelines the negative God-experiences. Yet aren't these experiences what Christians genuinely have in common with their partners of other religions? Not until dialog has probed that antithetical agenda does the grace-agenda have real substance. To comprehend a thesis one needs to discern the antithesis. Just to talk about our Christian experience of grace without specifying the antithetical God-experience it overcomes is not to give our dialog partners a fair shake. Nor does it clarify what is Good and New in the so-called Good News of the crucified and risen Jesus.

7) When Christians do not hear from the dialog partners how they articulate their own negative daily life experiences of the divine, and how their encounters with grace bring them through their valleys of the shadow, the Christians are left impoverished, and the dialog is skewed.

It may sound negative to push religious dialog in the direction of humankind's common experience with the Hidden God, but it does bear promise. First, it ecumenizes the project to include the whole human race. Everyone has experience useful for the dialog. Everyone is a potential dialog partner. Interreligious dialog is not the preserve of the elite. Second, by beginning with the raw data of nitty-gritty daily experience, the venue for interreligious dialog moves away from the academy, with its potential ivory tower, and down into the real world we all live in.

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