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THE PRIVILEGE OF GRACE

Roland E. Miller

Grace is a privilege. Like so much in life, however, we tend to take this privilege for granted. We recognize the truth that God is gracious. But we are so accustomed to it that even as we lustily sing "Amazing Grace," we have a hard time reviving the sense of wonder that this enormous truth should arouse in us. To help renew your sense of privilege -- and by privilege I mean the fact that you are so blessed as to know the grace of God in Christ and to believe it -- I want to take you for a brief journey into the Muslim and Hindu ideas of grace.

It is unfortunate that so very few of us are in the position to accrue a depth knowledge of the religious life and experience of peoples of other faiths. The misfortune is not only related to the fact that good understanding is important for communicating the Gospel. There is another reason. A great painting depends heavily on the contrasts of light and shadow in the background to highlight the meaning that the artist wishes to convey. Similarly, the meaning of the Christian faith comes to life for us against the contrasts and the parallels to be found in the great religions of mankind. The experience of the missionary church in this connection is therefore helpful, and useful to be shared. Again and again this experience renews the conviction that the Christian message of the God of grace is as unique as it is salvific.

On this little journey I am able only to sketch a few major points. There is the risk that the sketch may be so sketchy that it is neither respectful of the positions

represented, nor helpful in anything but a superficial way. But it's a risk that must be taken.

We may be accustomed to thinking that grace as a concept or an idea is uniquely Christian. That is not so. Muslims speak of the grace of God. Hindus speak of the grace of God. Thus, there are a huge number of people in the world who are, in some sense, "grace of God" people. What do Muslims and Hindus mean when they speak of the grace of God? They mean quite different things -- different from each other, and different from what Christians intend.

THE MUSLIM IDEA OF THE GRACE OF GOD

The word "Islam" gives the key to the primary teaching of this religion. "Islam" signifies "submission," and the adjective "Muslim" means "one who submits." Who submits to whom? Man submits to God. He humbles himself before God who is the almighty and sovereign Lord. The fundamental fact of Islam is its overwhelming sense of God; man in turn must recognize his true creaturely position as the servant of God.¹

Thus Muslims have a very exalted idea of God. But what specifically can one say about the most high God, other than the fact that He is most high? There is the problem for Muslims. You can say -- indeed you must say -- that He is One. "There is no god but God" is the first part of the simple Muslim creed. God is one and alone. Muslims have always identified *tawhid*, the doctrine of the unity of God, as the fundamental idea of Islam, and conversely, the greatest sin is *shirk*, the association of any other thing with God, or beside God.

But there are also two other essential ideas in the Muslim doctrine of God. One is that God is the Almighty. *Allahu akbar!* -- "God is most great!" is the most common exclamation in Islam. Five times a day from the tower of the mosque there comes the call to prayer: "Allah is great, Allah is great, come to salvation, come to prayer, Allah is great." Hearing the call, the faithful Muslim responds with prayer, which is really a liturgical glorifying of the Almighty. The central act of the prayer comes when he touches his forehead to the ground in absolute submission before Him who is most great, and who is powerful over all.

The emphasis on the greatness of God and His power, leads to the third essential doctrine, namely, that God's will is sovereign, in all things. He is God and He can do what He wants. His will is not conditioned by any other factor. If He wishes, He can do good; if He wishes He can do evil. If He wishes, He can fill heaven with men; if He wishes, He can fill hell with men. None can deny His authority. He is totally unlimited and totally free. Not only that, His will is totally irresistible. It is expressed by His command; His command in turn is a creative act which produces what He wills. The absolute sovereignty of God's will and His exclusive authority in the area

1. Although Muslims use the term Allah for God, I am using our word "God" because "Allah" literally means THE GOD, beside whom there is no other and can be no other. The same word "Allah" is used by Arab Christians for God, and it is the common term for God in the Arabic translation of the New Testament.

of creation combine in theory, so that Islam maintains that everything in the world, all that is and all that happens, is the result of God's eternal decree and act.

Where does the grace of God come into the picture? There is no room for grace in the Christian sense of the word, i.e., redemptive concern and action that find their root in the steadfast love of God. Why is that? Because grace is a limiting factor. If God is grace, it means that He will never be graceless but will ever be gracious. Stated in another way, if God is love, He cannot be unloving; His love qualifies His power and His will. He does not use His power for purposes that are not loving. His power and His will are in harmony with His grace; in a sense, we may even dare to say that they are the servants of His grace. This is the Christian point of view; for the Muslim it cannot be the correct one. For if God is God, nothing can limit Him; His grace and mercy must be regarded as the servants of His hidden, absolute and all-powerful will.

Against this background, then, we must understand the many Islamic references to the grace and mercy of God. The Muslim obtains his teaching from his sacred book, the Holy Quran, which he regards as the inspired and infallible Word of God. At the head of every chapter in the Quran except one we find the words: "In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate." Very often God is referred to as the Forgiver and the Highly Forgiving One. Traditional Islam has 99 names for God, which are called "the beautiful names." A devoted Muslim will frequently have a rosary; as he fingers its beads he remembers and meditates on each of these names, and hopes that the Almighty God will be merciful to him.

However, not even the most pious and devoted Muslim can be certain that God will be gracious to him on the fearful Day of Judgement. All he can do -- all he dare do -- is to hope for that with all his heart. The usage of the term "grace" in the Holy Quran underlines why this is so. "Grace" does not refer to the inner nature of God, which cannot be known. Rather, it is used most often in connection with the created blessings that divine goodness bestows in this life and the next; it really means superabundance. The Quran is full of very lyrical descriptions of God's gracious bounty in nature. The grace of God in the Holy Quran, however, has a specially close connection with the giving of the Quran itself as a guidance for mankind. "God hath sent down on thee the book and the wisdom and taught thee what thou dost know, for God's grace was mighty on thee" (4,113). The Quran is the true miracle of God's grace. There, in the sending of a book, rather than in a self-sending, Islam locates the supreme act of the grace of God.

Beyond these concrete expressions of the grace of God in creation and in scripture, the grace of God is regarded as a continuing factor in all the areas of Muslim life. You can strive for it. Frequently grace is represented as a reward for faith and obedience: "And whosoever shall obey God and the Apostle, these shall be those to whom God has been gracious" (4, 71). You can strive to earn it and hope to receive it; but you cannot depend on grace. The Islamic idea turns it into an occasional policy of an unknowable and arbitrary Lord. As the Holy Quran says (6, 12): "Allah hath *prescribed* mercy for Himself, that He may bring you all together to a Day wherof there is no doubt." God wills and acts, and among the things that He purposes and does are those things which may be described as compassionate and merciful. But he is not mercy; grace does not compel Him. As the great Muslim theologian Al-Ghazali, and many others, have stated: "Not a single act is

incumbent upon Him.” “It is not incumbent upon God to that which is best for His creatures.”

Although the grace of God is so uncertain and seemingly capricious, Muslims long for it, and have expressed their longings in their prayers and literature. Here are some of the prayers of praise that are spoken in the fasting month of Ramadan:

Praise be to God: he has no competitor to equal him and no peer to compare with him, and no helper to aid him. With his might he subdues the mighty and by his greatness the great are humbled. Whatever he wills by his power he attains.

Praise be to God, sovereign Lord, Author of the universe, who raises the winds and orders the morning, worshipped in religion and the Lord of the worlds. Praise be to God for his forbearance when he knows all. Praise be to God for his pardon, though he is All-powerful. Praise be to God for his long-suffering in displeasure, though he is well able to do what he chooses.

Praise be to God who hearkens to me when I call upon him, covers my unworthiness when I have been rebellious and magnifies his grace upon me. I will not more transgress. I will sing to his praise and make mention of him in thanksgiving.²

And here is a sample of a common type of prayer:

My God, if we consider Thy generosity, the marvel is that any perish. If we consider Thy justice, the marvel is that any are saved. My God if it is Thy generosity that calls us to account we shall attain to Thy good pleasure. If it be Thy justice that calls us to account we shall not attain even to Thy forgiveness. My God, how can I hope in Thee, I being I? And how can I help hoping in thee, Thou being Thou? If we are powerless to avoid a sin which Thou hast written down for us, Thou art powerful to forgive us for it. (Yahya b. Ma'adh ar-Rasi)³

I hope that you are forming a picture. I hope that you are sensing a contrast. The Christian idea of grace is that it defines the heart of God. God does have an inner incumbency that evolves into as “must,” it is the uncumbency of grace. Because of it, “He must go unto Jerusalem.” For our salvation and for our comfort a stupendous truth -- the truth that self-giving grace is ruling the universe -- is now revealed to us through Jesus Christ. In Him, the full-of-grace-and-truth one, we see the Father. By His death and resurrection He has revealed to us that the eternal nature of God’s sovereignty is that it is the “throne of grace” (Heb. 4, 16). He has revealed the fatherly and active goodness of God toward mankind, that is best summed up by the overwhelming words: “grace upon grace.”

THE HINDU IDEA OF THE GRACE OF GOD

In Hinduism we enter another world. It is a farther world than Islam, a world that is full of alien concepts and wondrous thoughts. It is a world that I cannot effectively

2. Kenneth Cragg, *Alive to God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 65.

3. Constance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London: S.P.C.K., 1961), p. 202.

communicate to you in this brief space.

It is a world that we cannot on any account confuse with Islam. We have a habit of looking at and thinking of all non-Christians in the same way. While there is an obvious reason for that, we must strive to overcome the habit. Hindus and Muslims stand at the extreme and opposite ends of the religious spectrum. From the point of view of religious expression, if we would picture the three religions as a line, Christians would be situated somewhere between Hindus and Muslims; Hindus and Muslims would be far apart.

Hinduism is a family of religions, rather than a single religion. It comprises a vast array of religious expressions and philosophies. They range through animism, polytheism, pantheism, monism, henotheism, and even atheism, with many shades between. The basic principle of Hinduism is the principle of inclusiveness. This principle of inclusiveness and religious toleration is based on another concept, i.e., that there is a proper religious stage for every person. Within that stage a person's experience of reality and truth is as valid as that of any other. If it is true for the person, it is true; no other person can deny the right to or the validity of the truth held. On the other hand, neither can one ascribe falseness or wrongness to another person's religious experience.

In one's spiritual journey a person may pass through various stages. But there is a single final goal for all the stages. That goal is expressed by the word *moksha*, which means "liberation." What must be liberated from what? The human soul must escape from the prison of matter to become one with God, with the Soul of the universe, which is its true destiny. For the human soul is caught in the bondage of the material world, in the bondage of the law of *karma*, which is the inexorable law of cause and effect; in bondage to an endless cycle of reincarnation; in bondage to ignorance and desire, to sorrow and to suffering; in bondage to an interminable wandering through aeons of time and space in search of its true resting-place in God. There are differing interpretations as to how a person is saved or how the soul finally obtains its release from its bondage.

On our subject of grace the problem of Hinduism is not the same, therefore, as the problem of Islam; it is not the problem of one dominant idea out of which all other truths emerge. In contrast to Islam, where all other ideas have to conform to the one dominant principle of All-Powerful Will, in Hinduism there is the problem of too many ideas. These vary from one school of thought to another and from one individual to another; none of them emerges dominantly. This diversity, which to us is a problem, is seen by Hindus as the glory of their faith.

Instead of forcing all religious souls to move through the same religious groove, Hinduism lays down different paths for different men, according to their abilities and aptitudes. At the same time, it recognizes the essential unity of different religions as being but so many approaches to the same goal, freedom from sin and misery.⁴

Thus, grace is only one of the many religious ideas within Hinduism -- but it is there. In Hinduism there are primarily three interacting paths that may be followed toward the goal of salvation. The first path is salvation through works, i.e.,

4. Satis Chatterji, in K.W. Morgan, *The Religion of the Hindus* (New York: Ronald Press, 1953), p. 261.

knowing and carrying out the various ethical and ceremonial requirements dictated by an individual's stage and position in life. The second path is salvation through knowledge, i.e., by overcoming ignorance, by discovering the correct relation between the divine soul and the human soul, and by intuitively experiencing that knowledge. The third way is salvation through devotion to your god, i.e., by the power of your devotion "compelling" your Lord to help you with His grace.

It is in connection with this third way of salvation, the way of devotion (called *bhakti yoga*), that grace becomes a factor of importance. For, as one Hindu who operates on this level has written:

Knowledge of the truth about God and the self is not, however, a sufficient condition of salvation. There can be no liberation for man without the grace of the Lord. What is therefore more important than knowledge is man's sincere devotion to and pure love of the Lord. To develop and maintain this essential religious attitude, a man ought to keep himself constantly engaged in the service and worship of God. He should devote his body and mind, his thought and speech to the cause of goodness and truth, and to the study of the holy scriptures. All this pleases God most, for God Himself is truth and goodness. Being thus pleased God gives His grace to the man who loves Him as his dearest.⁵

The deity, whose grace is thus provoked by devotion, is the god of your conviction and choice. You must love that god, give yourself entirely to him, and he will help you. Let us see how this process works in the case of one of the Hindu deities, Lord Vishnu. Vishnu is now one of the three main gods of popular Hinduism. Hindus regard Vishnu as the Preserver of the world and as the Helper of mankind. He helps man by becoming incarnate from time to time in the forms that are necessary. His greatest incarnation took place when he descended and entered into the world of man as Lord Krishna. Krishna is the subject of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the practical "Bible" of modern Hindus. In it Lord Krishna, who is worshipped by millions of Hindus as the Saviour, says these words to his devotees:

But those who, laying all actions upon Me, intent on Me, meditate on Me, revere Me with utterly unswerving devotion, for them I speedily become the Saviour from the ocean of the round of rebirths and deaths, because their thoughts are fixed on me (12, 6-7).

The *Gita* declares that grace will come to those who perform their religious duties in the right spirit and take refuge in Krishna. By the power of that grace, in turn, the effects of karma will be overcome and the devotee will attain to his true and undying place. "Yes," the Lord says, "Thinking on Me, by My grace, thou shalt cross over all difficulties" (18, 56-59).

To this promise of grace -- grace that is called forth by fervent devotion, grace that will bring a divine intervention, grace that will in some way cancel the laws of nature, grace that will bring some form of salvation -- many Hindus have responded with great passion. Always emotionally, sometimes with heart-rending cries for deliverance, and sometimes in erotic terms, the desire for the grace of God

5. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

and for union with God has been expressed. Here are some examples of these expressions:

What is the use of pedigree, conduct, learning, nay even the life of those who have no devotion toward their Lord, the creator of the Universe? (Brahma Purana, 49)

Wealth, men, women, poetry -- none of these, O Lord of the universe, do I desire; in every birth of mine, may there be unmotivated devotion to You, the Lord. (Chaianya, Siksastaka)⁶

May that Supreme Lord who, devoid of name, form, or end, yet took -- for blessing those who adored his feet -- names and forms through incarnations and exploits, be gracious unto me. (Bhagavata Purana, 11.4.33)⁷

I ask not kin, nor name, nor place
Nor learned men's society.
Men's lore for me no value has;
Kuttalam's lord, I come to Thee.
Wilt thou one boon on me bestow,
A heart to melt in longing sweet,
As yearns o'er new-born calf the cow,
In yearning for Thy sacred feet?

I had no virtue, penance, knowledge, self-control.
A doll to turn
At others' will I danced, whirled, fell. But me He filled
in every limb
With love's mad longing, and that I might climb there
whence is no return,
He shewed His beauty, made me His. Ah me, when shall I
go to Him?

If once Thy gracious face I look upon,
The world's enticement then is past and gone . . .
Within the shadow of Thy grace,
Ah hide me, Tuka says.⁸

In the Hindu idea, then, desire for grace is inspired by the beauty of the Lord. This desire can be fulfilled by seeking after and winning the grace through devotion. Once it is won, the grace of God works in some way to bring the devotee's soul into union with the divine. Hindus have argued whether the working of grace can best be described by the image of a cat or that of a monkey.⁹ But there is no

6. Wm. de Bary, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 341.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 344.

8. Louis Renou, *Hinduism* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1961), p. 212.

9. In terms of the first image, grace bears the devotee without his aid as a cat carries its kitten without any aid from the kitten. In terms of the second image, the devotee must do something to share in the active process of salvation as a baby monkey clings to its mother.

argument about the origin of grace -- it follows on devotion, either the passive devotion of meekness and love of God, or the active devotion of worship and piety.

Grace must be sought after and won. I hope you are forming a picture. I hope you are sensing a contrast. "For God commends His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5, 18). God, in the Christian understanding did not wait for desire to form in man; nor did He wait for desire to produce the devotion that would unlock the door of grace. He Himself opened the door from within and came to us. He came to us in Jesus Christ in a decisive way that makes it unnecessary for gods to descend to man or for man to ascend to gods. He came all the way, did all that was necessary, and did it once and for all. Now we do not have to strive to see His face, for He has revealed His heart. Neither do we have to strive to unite ourselves with God, for God unites Himself to us. As Martin Luther says:

In giving us the gifts He gives but what is His, but in His grace and His regard of us, He gives His very self. In the gifts we touch His hand, but in His gracious regard, we receive His heart, spirit, mind, and will.¹⁰

And thus, in with and under the grace of God in Jesus Christ we are joined with God forever.

OUR RESPONSE TO THE PRIVILEGE OF GRACE

The grace of God in Jesus Christ is a privilege. It is a privilege to know that grace is not dependent on what I do, but on what God is and does. That is a privilege Hindus do not have. A Hindu saint cries:

When shall I look upon my Lord?
When shall I see Him come?
Of all the passing days and hours,
I count the heavy sum.¹¹

It is a privilege to know that grace is the eternal nature of God. That is a privilege that Muslims do not have. A Muslim saint laments:

My God, wilt thou burn with Thy fire my face which
used to pray to Thee?
My God, wilt thou burn with Thy fire my eyes which
used to weep with fear of Thee?
My God, wilt thou burn with Thy fire my tongue which
used to recite the Quran?
My God, wilt thou burn with Thy fire my heart which
was loving towards Thee?
My God, wilt thou burn with Thy Fire my body which
was humbled before Thee?
My God, wilt thou burn with thy fire my limbs
which used to bow and postrate themselves before Thee?¹²

10. W.M.L. III. 159, quoted in Philip Watson, *Let God Be God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949), p. 68.

11. Tukaram, in Renou, *Hinduism*, p. 211.

12. Constance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, p. 283.

But to you, my friends, comes the assurance: "Grace be unto you and peace!" (Rev. 1, 4) What a privilege is grace!

What do you do with this privilege? What do you do with this totally undeserved privilege that God has given to you? First of all, you recognize it as such. What I have been trying to do here is to help you recognize it for the rare knowledge and precious gift it is. Secondly, believe it. For, the one true response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ is faith. "He has brought us by faith into this experience of God's grace" (Rom. 5, 2 and repeatedly in St. Paul). And believing it means clinging to it. The third thing is to praise God for it and to rejoice in it. "Let us praise God for His glorious grace, for the free gift (of grace) He gave us in His dear Son. For by the death of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God which He gave us in such large measure (Eph. 1, 6-8). It is not right for the *sola gratia* people of God to be a dour and dismal folk.

The fourth response to the privilege of grace is to give thanks for it. It is a fascinating and pregnant fact that the New Testament word for grace, *charis*, is also the word used for "thank you." Sometimes I detect a little tinge of regret in commentators that a word which describes the inner being and majesty of the Almighty God should also be the word used for an ordinary human "thank you." But we ought to get the message, not resist it. The message is there even in the English word "gratitude." It too comes directly from *gratia* (grace). The message is this: After the grace of God is given to us, it is returned to God. When we give thanks, we are returning to God the first fruits of His grace in us, returning grace for grace, being gracious to God who was gracious to us. And so from the bottom of our hearts we cry with St. Paul:

"*Charis*, thanks, be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15, 57).

And finally, as we respond to the privilege of grace, we offer to God our obedience, obedience reflected in the life of grace, grace towards each other and grace towards the world. "You were chosen according to the purpose of God the Father and were made a holy people by His Spirit . . . May grace and peace be yours" (1 Peter 1, 2)

As every privilege involves a responsibility, so the privilege of grace involves the Lutheran Church in serious responsibility. For the purpose of God is not fulfilled by our personal enjoyment of the privilege of grace. It is fulfilled as we respond to the pressure of grace towards mission and unity.