GRACE AND THE EXERCISES

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IN THE COURSE OF THE HISTORY of the theology of grace theologians have raised issues that determine the shape of Christian self-understanding. Such questions are these: How does God relate to us? A response to this question decides one's conception of who God is. How do we stand in relation to God? The ability to propose an answer to this question presupposes or defines a Christian anthropology. A third question combines the issues in the first two: how do God and human beings interact? How should the dynamic interchange between God and human beings be conceived and to what end? Since Augustine in his crusade against Pelagius raised the question of grace into an explicit topic for theological reflection these deep issues have lain below the myriad surface issues and distinctions that have arisen in the history of the theology of grace. A fundamental vantage point on Christianity as a whole can be at stake in a theology of grace.

Although theologies of grace define a Christian anthropology, they are also themselves shaped and defined by the broader cultural presuppositions that obtain in any given era and culture. One must expect then that there will be something of a difference between the theology of grace in sixteenth-century Catholic Europe and western culture at the end of the twentieth century. The pages which follow will reflect on one aspect of this difference and how consciousness of it might allow a reinterpretation of the Exercises that will influence how they are given today. The thesis will unfold in four steps: the first isolates the notion of freedom as a point at which there is great divergence between the theology of grace in the Exercises and a present-day conception of human existence; the second alludes to how the shift occurred; the third recalls the tradition of co-operative grace that can bridge the gap; the fourth shows why our notion of grace today forces a rereading of the Exercises.

Human freedom

I begin by presenting a thesis of Juan Luis Segundo, the Uruguayan Jesuit theologian, concerning the Exercises of St Ignatius.[1] His appraisal is structured by a distinction between two theologies of human existence

or, reductively, of freedom. The one views human existence as a test, or a trial, or a proof (*une épreuve*) which human beings must pass; the other views human existence as a project, a plan that is to be accomplished by human freedom (*un projet*). With this distinction as his guide, Segundo analyses many of the texts of the Exercises and finds that by and large the Christology, or the theology of salvation and grace, and the anthropology, of Ignatius, the author of the Exercises, is what Segundo calls a theology of a test.[2] Human existence is freedom on trial; at stake is salvation or eternal loss. Behind this view is a conception of freedom in which freedom is conceived as an ability to choose. Balanced between good and evil, the purpose of human existence is ultimately to pass the test by resisting evil and choosing the good, namely, God and final salvation. Also involved is a conception of the end-time which is exclusively the work of God and in which human freedom plays no role. The kingdom of God is completely God's doing. In sum, the key to understanding the Exercises in terms of these categories is that they represent a spirituality of freedom as choice on trial; at stake is a kingdom of God in heaven which is already prepared.

The meaning of this spirituality of being tested really appears by contrast with what Segundo calls the theology of project. A project is a task that human freedom is to perform. The outcome of the project is a function of human creativity; it is something to be fashioned by human imagination and decision. The key to this conception is the insight that, if one does not see how a certain action makes a difference and counts, then there is no reason to act at all. When this reflection is applied to life itself relative to the final kingdom of God, one has a profound shift from the former concept. In this view 'God is passionately interested in what kinds of love, what kinds of justice and human solidarity, the freedom of human beings can create, in a world that is still under construction; this is a world where God has decided to need the creative freedom of God's children'.[3] 'In other words, in a theology of project, the finality of the created universe is that human beings are the creators.'[4]

Behind this view, too, there are many attendant suppositions and corollaries. Segundo presumes an evolutionary universe; he is Teilhardian in his conception of the rise of the human species and its assuming responsibility for history. But unlike the optimism of liberal Protestant thought of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he does not see this movement in smooth, organic, developmentalist terms. On the one hand, the human acts of love that build the kingdom of God do not appear as such in history; history does not get better and better; goodness does not accumulate in history. On the other hand, in the end-

time, which is co-created by human beings, God will not make up for the missed opportunities of human freedom. Thus what human beings do in history really counts ultimately, for what is done in love causes, contributes to, and even constitutes the kingdom of God.[5]

In all of this one should not be surprised that in the terms of these categories the Exercises fall within the framework of a theology of human freedom on trial. This is the tradition in which they were written and of subsequent interpretation.[6] In a way it is unimaginable that it would be otherwise. Thus, this analysis does not involve a negative judgement on Ignatius, as though he should have known better. What Segundo offers is really no more than a characterization of the theology of Ignatius' time, one that only becomes apparent from our standpoint. In what follows I will briefly indicate some of the factors that make our situation different from that of Ignatius and thus requiring reinterpretation of the Exercises. This will position us to retrieve some traditional concepts of grace into our new situation and, on the basis of them, to read the Exercises with new eyes.

The present situation

It is important, I think, not only to presuppose the distance between the world of Ignatius and our own, but also to make it explicit, to refer to some of the factors that define the difference. I shall do no more here than make some of the obvious references.

The watershed between our western culture today and the time of Ignatius is the Enlightenment. Only then did human beings generally begin to become aware of their autonomy in reason and technology and consciously seek a corresponding emancipation. Beyond this the nineteenth century witnesses to a growth of an historical consciousness that saw the difference between human groups across history and thus the degree to which human conditions are a function of freedom's arbitrariness. Ernst Troeltsch defines historical consciousness as resting on the insight that all ideas and values are particular; they do not really transcend their time and place. When this experience was inserted into an evolutionary view of things, the rigid patterns of nature were broken open into a clear field for human options. Since then no one has discovered any law or pattern governing human history. But a deep humanistic faith was still in place: the spirit at the end of the nineteenth century was positive: education, civilization and hard work were thought to constitute the agency of an organic development that would progressively make human history materially and morally better.

If anything, the twentieth century has destroyed that idea and convinced us of the amount of destruction that human freedom can

accomplish. Beyond the global wars, the vicious regional conflicts, and the local killing through systematic oppression, we are now worried about the future of the planet itself. There is no clearer proof that human history is in human hands. In very simple terms, it was not so in Ignatius' time.

One of the things that has changed in all of this is our self-understanding in terms of freedom. In the tradition of western thought up to the changes ushered in with modernity, human freedom did not characterize the essence of the human, reason did. Human distinctiveness lay in the power of knowledge and reflection; to know reflectively was the characteristic human act, and knowledge was power. Freedom was the consequent ability to choose; freedom was free choice, to do either this or that. By contrast, the defining characteristic of the human today lies in freedom. In an historicist framework we are on the move and the direction is constantly being set and reset by human freedom. This freedom has become creativity; human beings are creating genuinely new things that did not exist before; we are making anew our world, ourselves and our future; or we are destroying them. The question that lies before each young person as he or she grows into our complex technological societies is 'What shall I make of myself? To what shall I dedicate my freedom? What is worthy of my commitment? Is there anything in the world that has an absolute value to which I can dedicate my creative energies while in this life?'

Given this present-day conception of human existence and freedom, we must now retrieve from the theological tradition conceptions about grace that connect with this anthropological horizon. We find such a conception within the framework of the category of co-operative grace.

Co-operative grace

When Augustine took up the topic of God's saving grace, Pelagius had already set up the context of the discussion as the power of human nature understood in terms of freedom. In Augustine's view, given the datum of human sinfulness, and that it required the very incarnation of God for our salvation, it could not be said that human freedom had within itself the power to make its way back to God. Augustine, then, was pre-eminently a theologian of grace. But in the tension between grace and human freedom, in the question of the priority of one in relation to the other in his conception of the dynamics of human nature, Augustine tried to accommodate human freedom and responsibility with his distinction between operative and co-operative grace.

Operative grace is what God does to and for us 'without' us, that is, prior to any action at all on our part; co-operative grace is what God

does 'with' us as the same grace sustains our response and action. 'God operates . . . without us, in order that we may will [love]; but when we will [love], and so will [love] that we may act, God co-operates with us.'[7] This defines, as it were, the classical view of human existence and grace in Western Christianity: human beings cannot transcend themselves and turn to God's values without God's initial and prevenient grace. Today the same premise holds when it is said that, whenever human beings transcend themselves and turn towards God, even anonymously, it is by the impulse of God as Spirit. Moreover, this initiating grace continues to sustain our freedom and action in its movement toward God. All movement toward God is sustained by God's grace.

Bernard of Clairvaux took up this same idea of Augustine and penned this description of a free human action performed under the influence of grace:

> What was begun by grace alone, is completed by grace and free choice together, in such a way that they contribute to each new achievement not singly but jointly; not by turns, but simultaneously. It is not as if grace did one half the work and free choice the other; but each does the whole work, according to its own peculiar contribution. Grace does the whole work, and so does free choice—with this one qualification: that whereas the whole is done in free choice, so the whole is done of grace.[8]

It is clear, however, in reading Bernard and Augustine that the basal notion of freedom in their thinking refers to the power of free choice. Freedom means the ability and the act of choosing this or that thing. Before grace human freedom is free to choose this or that, but unfree in desiring the things of God. Presupposing sin, a fundamental orientation towards the good and finally God can only be accomplished by grace. Within the impulse of grace freedom remains free choice, but it takes on the character of consent, a going along with, a non-refusal, and a saying yes to the movement of God as Spirit. We are still far from a world view in which freedom is the creation of new reality and this responsible power to channel history in new directions forms the horizon of thought.

One post-Enlightenment Catholic thinker who took up the categories of co-operative grace at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century was Maurice Blondel. Blondel was an existentialist philosopher and theologian, very attuned to Augustine's experiential mode of thinking, who quoted more than once the words of Bernard just cited. Blondel viewed human existence in terms of action: human being is freedom and it is always in act. To capture the dynamism and process of existence, he would say that all being is a form of action; to be is to act

and human being is free action. As a theologian, however, to be and to act in relation to God involves co-operative grace. Blondel conceived of God's grace or God as Spirit as spread universally abroad so that even beyond the boundaries of historical Christianity one could find 'theandric' activity in which God and human freedom co-operated.[9]

It is a short step from Blondel to the world that Segundo calls to our attention. Human action is now set in an evolutionary framework; the process of nature achieves a new character with human freedom and decision-making; historical consciousness and a review of history informs us of how utterly open the future of this world is; it is a project. In this context people should know their role, the part that they are to play in this historical drama. There is also an inner need, if this life is to be intrinsically meaningful, that what we do counts, that what we create adds up to something definitively real.

A theology of project presupposes and rests upon a concept of co-operative grace. But this grace is as significantly different from co-operative grace in pre-modern times as the notion of freedom that it informs. From Augustine onward one frequently finds a tacit presupposition that God's grace and human freedom are in competition with each other. Such a view has terrible consequences. It means that every exaltation of God implies simultaneously a debunking of the human. In a strange way, when culture became anthropocentric, this new premise made God into something demonic, that is, against the fulfilment of the human. When human beings resist God's presence and love, when they choose their own interests against God's values or the well-being of the neighbour, then human freedom challenges and competes with God and God's grace. But when God's grace is responded to positively, grace enhances and fulfils human freedom. 'Nearness to God and genuine human autonomy grow in direct and not inverse proportion.'[10] Nor should the mode of this co-operation be thought of in competitive terms as though God's action and human action unfold on the same level such that they could compete. God does not act overtly in the world as a this-worldly finite cause. God's gratuitous presence as creative power and the source and goal of all love is no rival for what human beings accomplish with their freedom.

Co-operative grace, then, is not an idea that gives us new knowledge. It does not add more information about the world and human action in it. Rather it reflects an experience of God as the source of all that exists, the sustaining ground of its existing right now, and the end of all that matters; God will gather back into God's self that which is done by human freedom in love, that is, that which is created by human beings

within the context of the impulse of God's Spirit of love. In this context, the words of Bernard take on a new rich and full meaning. They describe 'theanthropic' action, human action sustained, moved and drawn by God's power and love, creating new acts of love or patterns or institutions that in their turn promote relationships of mutual human concern. God's impulse and human freedom contribute to the project of the kingdom of God 'not singly but jointly; not by turns, but simultaneously'. It is not as though the work was done half by grace and half by human freedom. 'Grace does the whole work, and so does free choice [that is, freedom].' In this context one can talk of the absolute value of human freedom and action, because the products of love constitute the kingdom of God.[11]

Interpreting the Exercises

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius are a classic text. This means that this manual has communicated to people in different circumstances over the past four hundred and fifty years. But this communication always involves interpretation. To put it in terms of the theatre, the Exercises are always performed in modern dress. Those who 'receive' the Exercises do this spontaneously; those who 'give' them, the directors and spiritual guides, continually reinterpret Ignatius' words in a more deliberate fashion. In this concluding section I wish simply to describe the premises by which one can consciously overcome the rather major differences in the theology of saving grace between Ignatius' text and our own situation.

Three insights form the basis of the hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur which explains how texts reflecting a different cultural situation than our own can be read faithfully and yet meaningfully. The first is that the meaning of a classic text or work cannot be reduced to the mind of its author. If its meaning could be so contained or defined it would, by definition, be so narrowed in its temporal specificity and particularity as to be irrelevant to others. The meaning of a classic must transcend the limited horizon and situation of its author. The Exercises mean more than Ignatius meant by them. Their meaning is something of an ideal that is concretized in the text and thus released from his specific intention to be opened up to others in every new situation.[12]

Second, when texts deal with the deep dimensions of human life and with transcendent religious matters they become in the same measure symbolic. A symbol here means something that mediates a conscious awareness of something other than itself; and a religious symbol, such as a text about or relationship with God, mediates a reality that cannot be

circumscribed by language or concepts. What is referred to by religious texts reflect and appeal to regions of human experience that are prior to and transcend talk about them.[13] For this reason, texts like *The Exercises* transcend themselves. They guide experience towards a mode of experience and existence that must be confirmed in the situation of each age, culture and society.

Third, appropriation refers to the making of one's own that which is communicated by a text. For example, reading is appropriation: it is being influenced by new ideas that open up a new way of looking at reality. Appropriation then is a form of revelation and disclosure. The considerations of the Exercises shape our consciousness in such a way that we see our world, our own reality and the possibilities for our life into the future in a different and new way. Appropriation is the final act of interpretation.[14] But one should be attentive to what is really going on in this process. It is not so much that the goal of interpretation is to understand Ignatius better; that is the task of the historian and the biographer. Nor is it strictly to understand his text better; that is the task of the historian and the literary critic. The goal of interpretation is to understand reality, and the Exercises are a means or a vehicle for this task. The Exercises provide media or symbols in order that we may understand ourselves in our world and the possibilities for concrete living. These are the questions mentioned earlier: what project is worthy of my commitment?

This hermeneutical view confirms in theory what happens in fact. It also provides a framework for what should become a conscious process in reading and mediating to others the Exercises of Ignatius. That Ignatius did not have a project theology of grace or anthropology in the terms in which this must be understood today is certain; such was not possible before the modern period. I will leave to the historian to decide the measure in which his theology of grace is accurately described by Segundo's concept of 'salvation by being tested', or the degree to which Ignatius' conceptions changed in virtue of his assuming practical responsibility for the rapidly expanding apostolate of the young Jesuit order. But insofar as the Exercises are to have meaning for us today, they can and must be interpreted. The necessity and legitimacy of this interpretation rests on the premises just described. The way it actually unfolds, if it is to be conscious and deliberate, involves steps such as these.

The Exercises are meant to illumine our reality. We should have an initial conception of what our reality is. We should be aware of the situation and horizon in which people today live. By this I do not mean

the people in front of me here and now, although this, as Ignatius insisted, should not be overlooked. I mean more pointedly the social and cultural ideas that define our language, our thinking and our world for us. Insofar as the notion of freedom and the corresponding view of grace reflect our culture's vision of reality today, this becomes the context within which the Exercises must be appropriated. Interpretation then consists in drawing the various considerations of the Exercises, from the Principle and Foundation onwards, into our horizon of consciousness. In this coming together of two worlds there will be a correspondence of ideas, or a confrontation of values, or an analogous appropriation of new understandings.[15] I would maintain that the Exercises can open up a new understanding of the project of human freedom today in every one of its meditations. But the premise of this conviction is that the differences between the two theologies of grace, of the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries and their corresponding anthropologies be clearly appreciated. When the differences are clear, a learning from the past can begin because, in recognizing the differences, one has in that very act clarified one's own situation and the demands it makes on our spirituality today.

NOTES

[1] This thesis is presented in Segundo, Juan Luis: *The Christ of the Ignatian Exercises* (Maryknoll NY, 1987), pp 41–114 (original, 1982), and again in 'Ignace de Loyola: épreuve ou projet?', *Recherche de Science Religieuse* vol 79, no 4 (1991), pp 507–533.

[2] Segundo hypothesizes that Ignatius shows signs of transcending this position in his role as head of the newly founded Jesuit order. This later Ignatius is much more pragmatic and oriented toward accomplishing things in history.

[3] Segundo, 'Ignace de Loyola: épreuve ou projet?', p 525.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] See Segundo, Juan Luis: *The humanist Christology of Paul* (Maryknoll NY, 1985), pp 123–5, 157.

[6] Segundo, 'Ignace de Loyola: épreuve ou projet?', p 511.

[7] Augustine: 'On grace and free will', chap 33 in *Basic writings of Saint Augustine*, I (New York, 1948), p 761.

[8] Bernard of Clairvaux: 'On grace and free choice', chap 47 in *Treatises III* (Kalamazoo MI, 1977), p 106.

[9] For Blondel's conception of human existence in terms of action see his doctoral thesis entitled *Action (1893): essay on a critique of life and a science of practice* (Notre Dame IN, 1984). This work is seminal for his subsequent thinking.

[10] Karl Rahner, as cited by Johnson, Elizabeth A.: *Consider Jesus: waves of renewal in Christology* (New York, 1990), p 29.

[11] Stefano, Frances: *The absolute value of human action in the theology of Juan Luis Segundo* (Lanham MD, 1992) develops this theme which is foundational in Segundo's theology.

[12] Ricoeur, Paul: *Interpretation theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning* (Fort Worth, 1976), pp 25–44.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp 45–69.

[14] See Ricoeur, Paul: *Hermeneutics and the human sciences* (Cambridge, 1981), pp 190–93.

[15] Tracy, David, in Grant, Robert: *A short history of the interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia, 1984), p 171.