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Contemporary Man and Religious Experience: Life and Grace

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CONTEMPORARY MAN AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

LIFE AND GRACE. By James P. Mackey. Dublin: Gill and Son, 1966. 192 pp.

Many atheists of our day, while rejecting God, testify, nevertheless, to man's ineradicable desire for the absolute. Camus has shown how purely human efforts to satisfy this desire are not only doomed to failure, but frequently lead to great injustice, resulting from excessive zeal to bring about a utopia of man's own making.

If the cause of this desire is an awareness of God's existence and of the possibility of a personal union with him, then, Father Mackey asks, what has gone wrong with the image of God among men that he is judged to be unacceptable by the very ones who give evidence of man's need of him? The book attempts to answer this question, as it re-examines such religious themes as grace, morality, tradition, and the Fall, in order to reveal some apparently inadequate formulations of these concepts during recent centuries, and to propose a new understanding of them that will make more evident to modern man how the Christian ideal is capable both of realizing his highest personal values, and of satisfying his need for community.

The renewal of these basic religious concepts is fostered, in good part, by recent developments in philosophy. The existentialist definition of man proposed by Emil Brunner, for example, offers a better understanding of grace, in terms of personal categories, as both a free gift of God and an element intrinsic to human nature, than does the explanation of it as a quality inherent in the soul, realized by God's activity. Brunner goes beyond Aristotle's definition of man, as a substance specified by rational powers and activity, to include also as part of that definition, what this rational nature is, or may become, in the environment in which it finds itself. Of primary importance in this becoming of man is the influence of other persons who, freely revealing their inner selves to him in self-communication, invite his response, and thereby bring to reality the mutual knowledge and love which alone make man fully human.

Since a special self-revelation of himself by God forms an actual part of man's environment, Brunner holds that grace is an element intrinsic to the existentialist definition of man. In the concrete conditions of his existence man is fully personal and fully responsible only when he is attuned to the gracious self-revelation made to him by God, and personally responds, thereby knowing and loving God as God does himself. It is what we can make of ourselves in our actual historical conditions, that determines what we are. God's self-communication, enabling us to form a true personal union with him,

makes our human nature a graceful human nature. Grace is the definitive element in the existentialist definition of man.

In the Christian view of life, this relationship with God to which man is called, grows or declines according to the moral worth of each individual as he determines it by his behavior. Love finds its expression in moral conduct. To love another means, first of all, to further his well-being and self-fulfillment. It means also, less obviously perhaps, that I offer him the best that I can bring about in my own life, namely, moral goodness. I strive to make the gift of myself, as good a gift as possible. Immoral behavior is a denial of love, and the full meaning of sin is comprehended only when one realizes the harm it does to this personal relationship. Personal love, giving unity and direction to all of life's activity, and conferring on it the unselfish quality that characterizes moral activity at its best, engages the fully free commitment of man. In his love for God, the Christian possesses the supreme motive for moral development.

Man's existence in a personal relationship with God also has its communal aspect which can be understood only in the light of tradition, the transmission of a set of beliefs and attitudes, a process that both serves to form a community and, in turn, is formed by it. Karl Jaspers has shown that the level at which a community best achieves unity is not that of man's biological needs, nor that of technological development, but that in which there is shared a common philosophy of life. It is above all the answers a man discovers for such ultimate questions as those of the meaning of human existence, and of his destiny, that make him what he is, provide direction to his developing life, and form the attitudes which he communicates to others. A true community can be formed, in the opinion of Jaspers, only when men are "companions in fate, lovingly seeking the truth," and by truth he means the knowledge and love of God.

Human tradition, being also a sacred tradition, has been tenaciously preserved by the human community. God wills all men to be saved, and the first book of the Bible records the special self-revelation graciously made by God to the first members of the human race, manifesting his intention to save all men, an intention that received its definitive expression in the Incarnation. Man has the natural tendency to preserve, interpret, record, and pass on to others, the details of those events which appear to him of primary importance. Because God does not reveal directly to every human being his saving intention, this grace can come down to each individual only through a tradition originating from those to whom he spoke directly. Such a transmission of God's word is vital, for, should the memory of it fade, it could not be rediscovered by human efforts, as could a philosophical truth or a technological invention. Over the course of the centuries, therefore, human beings carry on a ministry of grace to one another,

and by a continuing reflection on these sacred events coupled with a growing understanding of human relationships, contribute to an ever deepening insight into the meaning of God's saving Word, that we call the development of dogma.

Every man is born in a state of original sin. Mackey believes that this religious truth is best explained in terms of an ambivalent tradition. Instead of passing on to their descendents the personal knowledge of God which they had received, devotion to the pursuit of a personal union with him to which they were called, and a set of moral values appreciated and cherished because of their relation to this destiny, the first human beings refused to aim so high, failed to accept the invitation, and transmitted to succeeding generations a tradition, not of faithful response to the favor of God, but of disloyalty and alienation from him. In the wake of this deterioration of the relationship of man to God, occurring at the dawn of history, man's vision of his destiny is obscured, the ideal of union with God is replaced by idols, and a consequent waywardness characterizes his moral behavior. All these become part and parcel of the ethico-religious situation into which every man is born, and which he himself voluntarily accepts.

It is especially on this matter of explaining the transmission of original sin that theologians, I believe, take issue with the contents of this book. Nowhere does the author make any mention of the Church's teaching that from the first moment of her conception Our Lady was preserved free from the taint of original sin. This doctrine would seem to imply that original sin is transmitted by generation, and not through the ethico-religious situation into which we are born.

This book is very well-written and shows a remarkable unity. It serves to justify the remark of the author that clarity in the understanding of any of the four basic themes he discusses, lends greater intelligibility to each of the others. One sees at the end how closely interrelated they are.

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AMERICAN CATHOLICISM AND AMERICAN COLONIAL POLICIES

CATHOLIC INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN COLONIAL POLICIES, 1898-1904. By Frank T. Reuter. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1967. xiii, 185 pp.

When the United States began its career as a colonial power with the Spanish-American War in 1898, it found itself in possession of