GRACE IN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

The Furthering of Nature

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IT IS A FACT that Catholics and Protestants go about doing their theology in fundamentally different ways. In Catholic theology, grace responds to the problem of *nature*, as is apparent in Thomas Aquinas' axiom that grace presupposes nature and brings it to perfection (grace as elevating, as supernatural gift of union with God). In classical Protestant theology, on the other hand, grace responds to the problem of *sin*, as is evident in the fundamental doctrine of justification by faith alone (cf. Rom 3:21-26) and penal substitution theories (cf. 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13). Protestants tend to accuse Catholics of playing down the significance of sin and of being too optimistic in respect of the fallen nature of humanity, while Catholics tend to accuse Protestants of being too pessimistic about fallen humanity and too focused on the problem of sin. What we have are two different anthropologies and therefore two different ways of viewing the grace of redemption in Jesus Christ. There is a degree of overlap insofar as both talk of justification in and through the crucified and risen Christ, but the tone of theological discourse is simply not the same.

The aim of this short reflection is to consider this fundamental issue of grace from the perspective of evolution: What light does an evolutionary view of the world shed on this problematic? If God creates through the evolutionary process, then clearly the rethinking of the doctrine of creation will also inform a theology of grace. Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Denis Edwards, and George Coyne are examples of Catholic thinkers committed to doing theology in an evolutionary perspective by building on the concept of God's continuous creation (*creatio continua*) that belongs to the Catholic theological tradition. They draw upon scientific knowledge of our evolving world, but they approach the scientific data as theologians seeking greater understanding of the faith. This is to say that they do not substitute science for religious faith, but they do see a legitimate dialogue between the two disciplines, each of which has its own realm of applicability. And with regard to this dialogue we must keep in mind that just as scientific theories are always incomplete, our religious understanding of God is also always incomplete, as the *apophatic* tradition of theology, represented by Pseudo Dionysius, makes abundantly clear.

The Fertility of the Universe

Despite the concerted efforts of John Paul II and Benedict XVI in affirming that no incompatibility exists between the Church's teaching on God's purpose and design in creation and the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution, there remain those who are ill at ease with the official position of the Church. In an article by Cardinal Christoph Schönberg of Vienna, for example, which was published in the *New York Times* (7 July, 2005), this influential figure of the Church explicitly asserted that the two positions are incompatible. A process of random genetic mutations and natural selection cannot possibly be compatible with God's providential plan for creation. The fear that

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there is no room for the sovereignty of God in this process is groundless, however. This becomes apparent once we appreciate that there are three processes at work in the universe: chance, necessity and the fertility of the cosmos (Coyne 2005).

The meaning of chance and necessity is illuminated by the fertility of the cosmos. A simple example is two hydrogen atoms. By necessity (the laws of chemistry) they are destined to become a hydrogen molecule, but by chance they can only combine when the conditions of temperature and pressure are right. When hydrogen molecules are formed, many eventually combine with oxygen to form water, and so on. The upshot of this process is what scientists call chemical *complexification* (Coyne 2005), which has reached a high point with the emergence of the human brain: in the human being the evolving universe has become conscious of itself and reflects on its *why* (the question of meaning), *whence* (the question of origins), and *whither* (the question of destiny). The human is aware that the reason for its existence lies not within itself but beyond itself (it is referred to Absolute Mystery), and it knows that it does not come into the world ready made but must put its life together through free decisions and concrete actions directed toward constructive ends. With the emergence of the human, in other words, the process of complexification enters the phase of creating meaningful cultures that give expression to the spiritual nature of human existence: we freely seek to realize the good, the true, and the beautiful in our web of relationships to all-that-is.

In self-conscious human beings we can see the process of evolution at work. The human in a given situation is faced with various possibilities open to it, and it must select a direction which it believes is most useful for adapting it to its environment. The right decision is the one that gives the human the best chance of adapting effectively to its environment and attaining greater integration of the self in relation to the other. Both chance (exercise of freedom and the conditions of existence) and necessity (laws of morality operate—not all decisions lead to integration of self, for we can forsake virtue and depart from the good, or abide in virtue and realize the true nature of the human) are at play in the fertility of human life (seeking ontological fulfillment).We humans experience our nature as relational, as linked to everything else, but not according to a closed and determined system; rather, our nature is experienced as dynamic, organic, open-ended, and in quest of greater ontological reality by the wise use of freedom. Given that God's creative purposes are accomplished *through* the contingency of human freedom, this suggests the legitimacy of viewing God as working purposefully *through* the unpredictability and contingency of evolving nature (Edwards 1999, 53-54). We must not think, in other words, that God intervenes or operates alongside the interplay of chance and necessity in nature, but rather acts through this process to exert the maximum influence for good.

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From the perspective of the emergent properties (self-consciousness, freedom, capacity for personal relatedness, transcendence toward God) of human being, the process of evolving nature, since it involves a *qualitative* (not merely quantitative) increase of being proper to the previously existing reality, is to be thought of as a 'leap to a higher nature' (Rahner 1966, 164). The word 'leap' is significant in that it conveys the sense of 'discontinuity in continuity' (de Chardin 1959, 188), that is, of a change of state (the qualitatively new)

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within the single process of evolving nature. On this ecological view of the world, the explanation of things is given by the patterns of interconnectedness among events, so that as we move up the various levels of organization (electrons, atoms, molecules, cells, tissues, organs, etc.) the properties of each larger whole are accounted for not merely by the units of which it is composed 'but by the new relations between these units' (Birch 1990, 44). As we move from one level to a higher level in the process of evolution, the parts themselves are redefined and recreated in the new complex whole. Needless to say, this begs the question of the final state of the process of becoming, which Christians believe has taken place in Jesus Christ risen, the 'omega point,' in whom evolving nature has been raised to the sublime level of participation in the divine nature (cf. 2 Pet 1:4).

Evolving Nature and God's Immanence

Rahner (1969, 174-76) formulated the notion of 'active self-transcendence' to convey the sense of how matter develops in the direction of spirit (self-consciousness, knowledge, freedom, and transcendence toward God), and to emphasize that God's immanence in the world is not merely a conserving power but also a power of collaboration with matter. The process of becoming something qualitatively new is truly a *self*-transcendence, yet God, as the power of absolute being, is interior to this process, without, however, becoming a constituent element of the finite being itself. As interior to the process of evolution, God must be thought not merely as before or above creation, but truly *with* creation, leading the universe through the lure or persuasiveness of goodness and beauty (Whitehead 1929, 485-90), so as to produce that which is creatively novel and aesthetically satisfying. God's creative action, in other words, does not interrupt or interfere with the natural interplay of chance and necessity in nature, but it is a constant influence for good in respect of the potentialities and fertility of the universe (Edwards 1999, 51-52).

This understanding of God's immanence in the universe is clearly supported by the Christian understanding of the Spirit of the risen Christ as moving and inspiring the human spirit and indwelling our hearts so that we might become 'sons of God' (cf. Rom 8:14-16; Gal 4:6). The creative purpose of God is to bring into being a community united by freely chosen loving relationships where justice, peace, and joy reign in the Spirit (*i.e.* the transcendent reality of the 'kingdom of God' which is the goal of complexification). To achieve this ontological perfection, we must be able and willing to give ourselves away to the other in love (total dispossession of self), so as to attain the goal of personal, social, and cosmic integration (Novello 2009). God, who is love (1 Jn 4:8), respects our freedom, thus God does not intervene and overpower our freedom but works from within or through our freedom so that we might freely attain to love of God as our final end, a love that gives rise to new possibilities for personal being in the world. The interplay of the processes of chance and necessity in the universe, then, is best illustrated by reflecting upon the human being as emerging from this process of fertility, and how, in the human, the cosmos now enters a new phase of fertility through the exercise of freedom which is fundamentally the capacity for God, and is perfected in love of God who creates all things new.

Grace in an Evolving Universe

In light of the foregoing discussion of the fertility of the universe and God's collaboration with matter that develops in the direction of spirit, a number of significant points arise in respect of our understanding of grace, as follows.

(a) The immanence of God understood as a continuing collaboration with the process of evolving nature serves to posit *a truly sacramental idea of creation*. This is to say that

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the natural order, as a work of grace, actually participates in the divine and has a sacred quality about it. Hans Urs von Balthasar (1994, 327) makes a helpful suggestion in this regard when he says that we must think of creation as unfolding 'within' the Trinity. Nature, at least in Western theology, tends to be looked upon as something God acts upon from without, but the evolutionary perspective above presents us with a different picture: it is that through which God expresses the divine life from within. We see this above all in the event of the Incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ, who participated in human nature so that created reality might participate fully in the glory of the divine nature. Grace should not, then, be thought of as a superstructure and nature as a substructure, which would make grace extrinsic to nature; rather, grace is 'something magnificent which happens to nature. It is nature lit by a new light and fired with a new vision' (Daly 1988, 132). Grace, which in effect is simply God in relation to creation, should not be conceived as juxtaposing nature, but as suffusing nature.

(b) The world is not merely held in existence by grace and sustained by grace, but *nature is furthered by grace*. Nature is not a static and fixed entity, but a dynamic and organic entity that is fundamentally relational and directed toward transcendent reality. If nature were a fixed and closed entity, then neither grace nor sin could affect human nature. The fact that the human being has emerged from the process of evolving nature shows that nature does change, and our moral character, in conjunction with our historical experience of grace and sin in the world, confirms this fundamental point. The term 'nature,' then, must not be understood in the Aristotelian sense of essence or substance, although it is legitimate to speak of the 'essential' structure of the human being as image of God (*imago Dei*). The latter expresses the human's radical openness to God (*capax Dei*) as a self-conscious and self-transcending subject who is called to communion and union with the living God as its final end.

(c) The self-consciousness of the human includes the consciousness of guilt, so that grace as forgiving love is to be thought as having a redemptive quality. A theology of redemption, however, must be set within a theology of the grace of creation, since our being reconciled to God, and therefore to one another, is part and parcel of God's ongoing creative activity in establishing the kingdom of God in the order of creation. In Western theology, especially Protestant theology, the grace of redemption (soteriology) occupies so pivotal a position that creation merely serves as a preamble to the Fall and the need for redemption. What redemption brings about is the 'restoration' of an original state of justice that was lost by Adam. One looks back to the beginning where an ideal state of existence was lost due to sin. In an evolutionary perspective, by contrast, one looks more forward than backwards, by virtue of the property of self-consciousness that reveals the ideal of what ought to be, of a new emergent whole with an increase of being on the previously existing reality. On this view, *redemption is an integral part of God's activity in bringing about the fullness of creation*. What redemption involves, as the power of God's unconditional love for sinners, is transformation to a new-mode-of-being-in-the-world, understood as participation in the inner-trinitarian event of eternal love (doxology), which is the 'place' of creation.

(d) The river of grace flows everywhere from the beginning, so that we must not think that God is gracious in relation to the world only from the moment of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Since creation is through Christ and the Incarnation is part of God's one divine decree for creation, then *all grace is the grace of Christ or grace given in view of Christ* who is the Father's self-communication to the world, in the Spirit. A truly sacramental idea of creation goes hand in glove with the Incarnation of the eternal Son in Jesus Christ, which culminates in the paschal mystery of his cross

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and resurrection from the dead. In an evolutionary perspective, the resurrection of Christ reveals God's ultimate purpose for creation and how grace overcomes the obstacles of sin and death so as to produce a 'new emergent whole' (Novello 2004) or new creation (Rev 21). Even death, indeed, above all death, is an occasion for demonstrating the fertility of God who breathes new life (a qualitatively new mode-of-being-in-the-world) into the dead (cf. Rom 4:17), so that a hopeful view of death as transformation of the whole person into the likeness of God (*i.e.* the glorification of human nature) emerges.

(e) What is more, in this perspective of the risen Christ as the new emergent whole of evolving nature, 'heaven' should not be viewed as some pre-existing place where the righteous ones are destined to be with God in everlasting joy, but rather the '*new spatiality*' (Rahner 1961, 222) opened up or created by Christ's resurrection from the dead as an eschatological event. As this new spatiality, heaven is not to be thought of as above and disconnected from this universe, but as a more complex and evolved universe within this universe (discontinuity in continuity), an idea that serves to underline the validity of the notion of the 'communion of saints' in heaven and on earth. The divine plan for the 'fullness of time' (Eph 1:10), which is to finally unite all things in Jesus Christ risen, 'things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph 1:10), will be completely realized, though, when this universe is totally taken up into the new spatiality of heaven and the new creation is fully established, to the glory of God.

Conclusions

It is clear that an evolutionary view of the universe cannot limit grace to the problem of sin, and that a theology of grace that is formulated in response to the problem of nature as evolving represents a much richer picture of God's ongoing involvement and activity in the universe. The river of grace flows from the beginning of creation, and it flows not merely as a sustaining power but as the power of continuing creation, so that nature is actually furthered by grace as new complex systems emerge in time. The event of the Incarnation of the Son reveals God's eternal plan for the fullness of time, and how the grace of redemption is not so much 'restorative' as 'transformative' because oriented toward participation in the divine nature as the final end of the process of creative becoming. The reality of sin is a real problem that hinders the actualization of what ought to be (ontological perfection), but fallen humanity cannot lose the image of God; as self-transcending beings, we are always referred to God and capable of receiving the grace of God's forgiving love, which is offered at all times and in all places.

The Catholic (and Orthodox) tradition of doing theology in terms of the grace-nature relationship is certainly supported by evolutionary theory, although at the same time this tradition, rightly, is not too sanguine about the possibilities of fallen humanity forging a better and better world apart from the redemptive grace of Christ who is the way to the Father, in the Spirit. The human subject still needs the grace of Christ to realize its true end of fellowship or union with God, and it is this fundamental point that classical Protestant theology makes central to the development of its understanding of the Christian faith. The latter, however, tends to be too focused on soteriology, while Catholic theology, and especially Orthodox theology, gives greater weight to doxology in the understanding of the faith, since the essence of Christian life, and the direction of the movement of creation as a whole, is conceived as participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity. As we reflect upon the wonders of the universe and acknowledge the deep yearnings of the human spirit, it seems that grace intends to make us finite and mortal beings 'fully alive' by beholding the glory of God (Irenaeus).

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The renewed interest in the theology of the imago dei *which emerged at the Second Vatican Council is reflected in contemporary theology, where it is possible to note developments in several areas. In the first place, theologians are working to show how the theology of the* imago Dei *illumines the connections between anthropology and Christology. Without denying the unique grace which comes to the human race through the incarnation, theologians want to recognize the intrinsic value of the creation of man in God's image. The possibilities that Christ opens up for man do not involve the suppression of the human reality in its creatureliness but its transformation and realization according to the perfect image of the Son. In addition, with this renewed understanding of the link between Christology and anthropology comes a deeper understanding of the dynamic character of the* imago Dei. *Without denying the gift of man's original creation in the image of God, theologians want to acknowledge the truth that, in the light of human history and the evolution of human culture, the* imago Dei *can in a real sense be said to be still in the process of becoming. What is more, the theology of the* imago Dei *also links anthropology with moral theology by showing that, in his very being, man possesses a participation in the divine law. This natural law orients human persons to the pursuit of the good in their actions. It follows, finally, that the* imago Dei *has a teleological and eschatological dimension which defines man as* homo viator*, oriented to the* parousia *and to the consummation of the divine plan for the universe as it is realized in the history of grace in the life of each individual human being and in the history of the whole human race.*

—International Theological Commission, 2004: *Communion and Stewardship. Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, par. 24.:

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