

## Chapter 10: What Difference Does Grace Make? An Exploration of the Concept of Grace in the Theological Anthropology of Karl Rahner

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### Abstract

It is typical of much theology in the Catholic tradition to frame an understanding of humanity, and of the human being's relationship to both the world and God, with the help of categories of nature and grace. While in Protestant thought, grace is characteristically conceived as a response to sin, in Catholic thought it is more fundamentally understood as an 'elevation' of nature. How more precisely to understand the relationship of grace to nature, however, has itself been a point of contestation within Catholic theology, especially in the last century. This chapter will present the understanding of grace of one particular Catholic thinker, Karl Rahner (1904–1984), setting his understanding of grace both against the background of earlier Catholic positions, and within the context of his broader theological anthropology. Rahner's theology makes clear how *difficult* it is to find in a specifically theological concept of grace something that might be fruitful in empirical work – difficult, but perhaps not quite impossible.

Is grace a concept that can be put to use in a dialogue between evolutionary anthropology and theology?<sup>1</sup> Consideration of the theology of grace brings us right to the edge, we would suggest, of the possibility of a useful dialogue. The aim of this chapter is to think a little about the nature of this edge. After a brief and schematic survey of the place of grace in western Christian theology in general, we will test the limits of interdisciplinary dialogue by introducing, and reflecting on, the theology of grace of one particular thinker, Karl Rahner (1904–1984), one of the major Catholic theologians of the twentieth century.

Grace plays an important role in all Christian theology.<sup>2</sup> It is understood as a gift of God, freely given, undeserved. And it is fairly universally held to be bound up with salvation: salvation can be understood in various ways,<sup>3</sup> but *however* it is understood, it is almost always held to be only possible through God's grace.

But though grace is important across the board in Christian thought, it plays a slightly different role in Catholic theology than it does in classical Protestant thinking. Grace is almost always construed *contrastively*. Grace is thought to confer a 'more', but then it matters a great deal how you answer the question: 'more with regard to what?' A great deal of Protestant thought is shaped by paring grace with *sin*: sin is the problem to which grace is the solution. So a Protestant 'anthropology', a Protestant way

of thinking about human beings, very often envisages the person as centrally a dialectic between sin and grace – it uses these two contrasting categories as key in interpreting our experience. (This is the pattern structuring the familiar ‘Amazing Grace’ hymn.) In Catholic thought, on the other hand, grace is typically paired not with sin but with *nature*.

‘Nature’, however, it must be added, is a term of art in theology. It does not in this context signify the (non-human) natural world, but rather the *whole* world the way God created it – or, since most theologians do not limit the concept of creation to something that happened at a particular moment, it would be better to say that nature signifies the world the way God creates and holds it in being in an ongoing way. It is worth noticing that in this usage nature actually *includes* culture rather than standing in contrast to it – part of what God creates is human beings, and human beings are (presumably) animals who create cultures.

Whereas the typical Protestant contrast of grace with sin is a contrast, one might say, of good with bad, the typical Catholic contrast of nature with grace is a contrast of good with better. Sin, or more generally the sense that things are not as they should be, still plays a certain role, but it is less central. Nature is ‘wounded’, one would say in traditional Catholic theology, by sin, but it is not destroyed; though flawed, it remains – since created by God – good. And, most significantly, even if nature were *not* wounded, there would still be a role for grace. Grace is a further gift, taking nature in some sense *beyond* itself; and even given the presence of sin, grace heals nature by ‘elevating’ it and not simply by returning it to a state without sin.

This, then, is the *general* pattern common to a lot of Catholic theology. But Catholic theology is not a united and monolithic affair, and so a more helpful way to put it might be to say that this is the framework within which Catholic theologians engage in debate with one another. Everyone agrees that nature is good, and that grace ‘does not destroy nature but perfects it’,<sup>4</sup> but then they disagree about how beyond this to imagine the nature/grace relationship.

The field within which these disagreements have been played out for the past few centuries within Catholic theology was mapped by the Catholic definition of the role of grace given at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) in response to the Protestant reformers.<sup>5</sup> Three principles of this mapping are important for our purposes. First, Trent confirmed the assertion noted above, that human nature, while wounded by sin, is still whole and good. Nature is still capable of exercising its basic powers and activities (including those moral and intellectual acts that are involved in being a Christian), even though this exercise will be impeded to some degree by the presence of sin. Second, it asserted that grace is not ‘owed’ to the creature by God (something with which Protestants would agree); it is an unowed further gift, subsequent to, but distinguishable from, the gift of being created at all. Third, the bishops and

theologians at Trent took aim at what they took to be the Protestant position that a part of the gift of faith is a firm conviction that one is saved now (which is to say, that one can have some experiential confirmation that one is within the ambit of grace). Against this, Trent did agree that the gift of faith (itself a grace) brings the conviction that *in general* the grace of God, merited by Christ's sacrifice, is more than sufficient to heal sin and elevate human nature to beatitude. However, in each *particular* case, all that one can expect is to be able to *hope* that this is true for oneself. One needs therefore to work out, 'in fear and trembling' during this life, one's salvation, by overcoming one's sinful habits and performing works of love and service towards one another, which (always assisted by grace) will merit beatitude in the next life.<sup>6</sup>

Karl Rahner's theology, particularly on the difference grace makes in human experience and action, was shaped in reaction against one particular way of heeding these three principles. This was the way taken by Neo-Scholasticism, a general approach to theology dominant in the Catholic world between the first and the second Vatican Councils – so, more or less between 1870 and 1965.<sup>7</sup> It imagined nature and grace to operate in two different domains that are cleanly distinguished from one another, so much so that the effects of grace do not really register within the domain of nature. To see why Neo-Scholasticism saw this position to be the theological articulation of Trent's definitions, a slight detour into the Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophical anthropology that undergirds it is necessary. In broad strokes, for Aristotle (and for Thomas, who drew on him) a living being is 'happy', that is, experiences a satisfying sense of fulfilment, when it successfully exercises those powers that are essential to it. 'Successful', in this context, means in accordance with the end or purpose that a given power naturally intends. Birds are happy when they fly; fish are happy when they swim, and so on. Human beings are happy when they exercise those powers distinctive to their common human nature. For Aristotle and for Thomas, these are the powers of reason and free will. Human beings, then, are happy (or fulfilled) when they use their reason to understand the world correctly and when they use their freedom (will) to act in accordance with the rational structure of the world.

For the Neo-Scholastic theology of grace this meant the following. If human nature is still essentially intact despite the presence of sin (that is, the first of the three Tridentine principles we identified above) then it can still exercise those powers essential to it, and can still experience the happiness that this exercise brings. To be sure, grace is necessary to assist nature in performing virtuous actions more consistently than it would otherwise be able to do given the wounds of sin.<sup>8</sup> What is crucial, for our purposes, however, is that on this account, grace would not make a difference in how the act itself was experienced, or for the happiness that arose out of doing it. To claim that it *did* make a difference, the Neo-Scholastics argued, would imply that there was something deficient in the natural act for which grace was making up. This would mean, in turn, that there was something deficient about nature, as God created it (and which had not been destroyed, but only weakened, by sin). Yet if this were so, God

really would 'owe' the creature this grace. If I give my daughter a smart phone that is a good thing; but if I do not also give a data plan, the phone is deficient. If I were subsequently to give her a data plan, this would not be an unowed gift; rather, I would be giving something that I owed as part of the original gift. So too, if nature requires something additional to function fully, then a good God would *owe* the creature this addendum. To provide it would not be a gift; it would not be grace, as Trent had defined, following the second of the principles summarized above. Moreover, if one could identify in one's experience the presence of grace because the act 'felt different', to put it rather crudely, then one would have grounds for a confidence that one is on the road to salvation, i.e. a confidence that Trent had ruled out with its proscription of 'the vain confidence of the heretics'.

Grace *did* have an effect, to be sure: the most important effect of all, since it makes our final salvation possible. Grace allows the human act to achieve a purpose far beyond its own reach: beatitude; union with God in the next life. But this achievement is not 'felt' in the natural act per se. The technical language for this was that a graced act had a 'dual finality'. It realized two outcomes: first, the natural goal proper to the act, and with it the happiness and fulfilment that comes when any creature exercises its natural powers successfully; and second, merit which a just God would reward with eternal life.<sup>9</sup> But these two outcomes, or finalities, were strictly separate. In short, if someone tells the truth under the impulse of grace, it would 'feel' no different than if that person had done so without grace. Both acts, as natural, would be experienced in the same way. The difference is not a difference that shows up in experience.

The importance of this theology of grace for our theme is that grace is not, on this view, a part of human experience. It does not leave any traces in our experience of the world and, *a fortiori*, in the responses to that experience which, in some cases, are left behind as artefacts for anthropologists to study. If this be the case, the question of whether grace might function as a locus of dialogue between theology and anthropology is settled quite definitely – and in the negative. There would be nothing that could be adduced in human experience, past or present, which could *both* be recognized by the theologian as indicating the presence of grace *and also* leave a trace in experience, or in human activity, which could be studied by the anthropologist.

Rahner, however, *rejected* this theology of grace, particularly on the question of whether there can be an 'experience of grace'. He argued that this theology did not adequately attend to Scripture, and that it did not really correspond (as the Neo-Scholastics claimed) to the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Moreover, he found it unsatisfactory because it could not do justice to the experience of discernment, as described by Ignatius of Loyola (Ignatius founded the religious order – the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the 'Jesuits' – to which Rahner belonged). Ignatius assumed (as did most traditions in Christian spirituality) that God's presence in grace could be discerned by careful attention to

experience, and that in so discerning one could make decisions and order one's life in order to cooperate with that presence.<sup>10</sup> For these and other reasons, Rahner laboured to work out a position in which grace does affect experience, and profoundly.<sup>11</sup> In fact, for him the offer of grace, at least, is universal, and for those who respond, grace becomes ingredient to *all* experience. This might seem promising for the dialogue we consider here. Yet, in rejecting the Neo-Scholastic formulation of the theology of grace, he did not reject the concerns of remaining faithful to the Catholic tradition – Trent in particular – that led Neo-Scholasticism so to formulate it. As a result, as we shall see, the advances in possibilities for a dialogue between theology and anthropology regarding grace may not be as productive as might first be hoped. Before turning to assess how, and to what degree, Rahner's theology of grace might offer an advance, it will be worth getting a clearer sense of Rahner's counterproposal to the Neo-Scholastic system by situating his concept of grace within his broader 'theological anthropology'.

## **God and Humanity**

As will become clear, it is an abstraction to talk about human nature while bracketing the reality of grace.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a dialogue with anthropology requires an account of human experience as transformed by grace. Nonetheless, it can be helpful to start with a discussion of human nature without this further elevation.

Being related to God is absolutely fundamental, on Rahner's account, to who and what we are. It is not just that God, 'in the beginning', created us, or even that God constantly sustains us, together with the rest of creation, in being. On Rahner's account we are, whether we realize it or not, always *already* related to God in a further way, and this relatedness is absolutely essential to us. It is so deeply built into us, so critical in making us what we are, that nothing we do would be possible without it. The relationship to God is so much a part of our structure, if Rahner is to be believed, that it is not possible properly to describe what it is to love, or what it is to will or even to think, in the perfectly ordinary, human way, without bringing God into the description.<sup>13</sup>

Rahner develops this claim in the most detail in connection with knowing. He begins with what he takes to be the most basic and simple kind of knowing, when a person recognizes something for what it is and forms a judgment such as, 'this is a chair.' In every such basic intellectual act, Rahner maintains, in every act of knowing a particular, limited object in the world, the knower also has a certain awareness of the unlimited, of 'infinite Being', and at the same time, of God.

The easiest way to get a sense for what Rahner means by this slightly startling claim is to attend to the various images he relies on, images of how this awareness (or whatever it is) of God is related to our knowing of particular items in the world. He sometimes, first of all, uses an image of movement. Rahner describes the mind as *reaching out* beyond any given object, any particular item in the world – a chair

or a table – towards infinite being and therefore God. Furthermore, he says, it is only in the process of this reaching out that the particular object can be grasped in the first place. The mind has a *dynamism*, a fundamental drive, beyond any and every finite object, and even beyond the entire collection of finite objects, which we call the cosmos, towards the infinity of being and God, and this dynamism is a ‘condition of the possibility’ of knowledge – without such a drive towards the infinite the finite could not be known.<sup>14</sup>

To get some purchase on these images of movement and dynamism, it might be helpful to consider the process of climbing a mountain. Imagine Edmund Hillary working his way up Mount Everest. On the one hand, Hillary moves towards the peak; on the other hand, he takes individual steps. The two things are of course inseparable: Hillary takes steps because of the desire to get to the top, and the movement towards the summit happens only *in* his steps. Now suppose that Mount Everest is in fact *infinitely* high, so that though each step is a movement towards the peak, nevertheless with each step Hillary remains at the same infinite distance from it. Then it would be possible to say something similar to what Rahner wants to say: in every finite act, with every step, there is a dynamism, a fundamental drive, *towards* the infinite goal, and on the other hand, it is only *because* of the infinite goal, only because Hillary’s eyes are set on the top, that the finite acts, the individual steps, can take place. Just as moving towards the mountain’s peak is not something that occurs *in addition* to putting one foot in front of the other, so the mind’s dynamism towards infinite being and God always takes place *in* the act of knowing particular objects in the world. And just as it is the basic desire to get to the top that makes the climber take individual steps, so it is that Rahner says that the mind’s basic dynamism towards God is what makes possible its knowledge of finite objects.

At certain points this analogy breaks down. Climbers are usually set on getting to the top in a very *explicit*, fully conscious way. If you had asked Edmund Hillary what he was doing, he would have told you in no uncertain terms. The same cannot be said of the dynamism towards God: this takes place on such a deep level, by Rahner’s account, that though it shapes and indeed makes possible all that we do, a person may not be explicitly conscious of it. In fact, it is impossible ever to be fully reflectively aware of it.

Another problem with the analogy is that it suggests a kind of *progress* – step by step the climber moves ever higher – and this is not part of what Rahner is trying to put across with his talk of movement and dynamism. He is describing what he takes to be the basic structure of *any* of our acts, not something that accumulates over a lifetime.

A second, more straightforward image that Rahner sometimes uses to point to the relationship between our awareness of God and our knowledge of everyday things is that of light. We need light to see, and

when we look at a book, say, we also at the same time have a certain awareness of the light, which allows us to see it. Our awareness of infinite being and of God can be thought of along the lines of a light which, in illuminating particular objects, makes them knowable. As light enables us to see, so the awareness of God, the mind's reaching out towards God, enables us to know. And just as we do not see the light in the same way as we see the book – the book is what we see, the light is that *by which* we see – so though we have a kind of awareness of God, we never have a knowledge of God akin to our knowledge of objects.

Rahner's favourite image, the one to which he returns most frequently, is that of a horizon. We typically orient ourselves with respect to specific objects (where they are; how far away they are; their relative positions with respect to one another) because they show up against the horizon. One reason for disorientation or vertigo in space is that there is no horizon.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the horizon is an essential element of experience, although we seldom advert to it as such. Rahner presses the analogy that we always know particular objects against and within the infinite horizon of Being and therefore of God. One might equally use the language of foreground and background here. Particular finite objects, chairs and tables and eggs, are in the foreground of our knowing, but in the background, the background which can itself never *become* the foreground, is our awareness of infinite Being and of God.

In one sense, then, Rahner's basic picture of the human being looks to be quite an optimistic one, theologically speaking: everyone is at all times having to do with God, tacitly aware of God. But in another way the picture is not quite so positive, since it is also true that no one ever experiences God, or is aware of God in the way in which we experience or are aware of anything or anyone else.

This is a point on which Rahner insists again and again: God is never known in the way that objects are known. The infinity towards which the mind moves is never grasped in the same way as are the objects which become knowable in this movement. The light is never known directly, but only *in* its illumination of particular, concrete objects. The light is only known *as* that which lights up what we see before us. The ever-present mystery of our existence can never be penetrated and grasped; it can never be *solved*, so that it ceases to be a mystery. The horizon is never known itself as an object, for every knowing of an object occurs against the background of the horizon. The horizon, as Rahner sometimes puts it, always recedes – if we try to grasp it, to talk about it, to think about it directly, we are necessarily using words and concepts which are really only appropriate for objects. If we try to grasp the horizon, if we try to speak of it or to focus our vision on it, we find that what we have in fact got is again an object, something that is itself only known against a horizon that has escaped our articulation. The horizon of our knowing cannot itself become an object *within* the horizon. God, in short, is never known as one thing among others. God cannot ever be for us 'a member of the larger household of all reality'. Rahner suggests indeed that atheists are perfectly right in denying the existence of God if it is this sort

of God, a God who can exist side by side with the things in the world, that they think they are denying.<sup>16</sup>

So, there is a sense in which what Rahner gives with one hand he takes away with the other. In one sense we always have God, in another sense we never do. God is always present but never grasped, always there but never as something we can get into focus, always experienced but never pinned down.

## **Grace**<sup>17</sup>

Rahner understands grace to be, most fundamentally, God's self-communication;<sup>18</sup> he thinks it is encountered on the same level of our existence as the apprehension of God just described; and he thinks it is encountered universally. We will briefly expand on each of these points in turn.

First of all, according to Rahner grace is, most fundamentally, God's 'self-communication'. What he intends by this can most easily be seen by way of contrast. Often believers use the word 'grace' in connection with some particular help or particular gift from God. With the help of God's grace, someone might say, I was able to give up this or that bad habit. One may hope that if a difficult situation arises one will be given the grace to know how to respond properly. One may hope that God will be gracious and forgive one's sins. Rahner would say that all these are legitimate ways to speak about grace, but that they all stem from something more basic and more profound. The most important thing that God gives in grace is not this or that particular gift, but God's very *self*, and Rahner terms this God's 'self-communication'. From this one central gift flow the other more particular things which can also, in a secondary sense, be described by the word grace. A result of the fact that God gives God's self to people and dwells in them, in other words, is that they are gradually transformed.

To return to the comparison with Neo-Scholasticism, with his insistence on the centrality of the notion of self-communication Rahner wants to reverse the way of thinking which prevailed in that theology. As we saw above, Neo-Scholastic theology grouped graces that help us by healing the wounds of sin and enabling us to perform good works under the category of 'created grace'. It is true that the ultimate aim of a graced life is what was often called the beatific vision, which is an intimate vision of God that, in fact, is tantamount to a sharing in God's own Trinitarian life. This reality, just as much a gift and a grace, was named 'uncreated grace'. But, with some variation, Neo-Scholastics in the main understood 'created grace' as essential aids to perform actions and become the kinds of persons who merit uncreated grace in the next life. That is, the actions performed under the influence of created grace, and the changes they bring about in us, gradually transform us into the kinds of people for whom it is fitting to be given the beatific vision (that is, "uncreated grace"). Rahner disagrees. On his view, the more biblical view is that created grace flows from uncreated grace.<sup>19</sup> The spirit of God dwells in a person, and as a result, 'as a consequence and a manifestation' of this divine self-communication, she is transformed concretely and in particular ways.<sup>20</sup> God transforms a person by giving himself to her, rather than giving



himself to her *because* he has transformed her.

This difference in ordering corresponds to a difference in emphasis. The tendency of Neo-Scholastic theology was to see uncreated grace, God's communication of himself to the soul, as secondary, at least when it comes to our earthly existence, and so to concentrate its attention almost exclusively on created grace. To reverse the ordering is, by contrast, to place uncreated grace, God's self-communication, at the centre of the picture from the very outset. What is new, then, is not the distinction between particular (created) gifts and God's giving of God's self, but the *centrality* which Rahner gives to the latter. And he would say that even this is not in fact new, but a return to something closer to the outlook of biblical and early Christian thinkers.

A second distinctive feature of Rahner's understanding of grace has to do with where he *locates* grace, with where he understands grace to be offered and perhaps received. God's self-communication occurs most fundamentally, Rahner thinks, on the level of transcendental experience. That is to say, in that region of our experience where we always go beyond, transcend, all particular finite objects, on that level where we always have, whether we realize it or not, an awareness of God, there grace is offered and either accepted or rejected. Rahner is led to this position by the two elements of his response to Neo-Scholasticism that we have already considered: on the one hand, he wants to say that grace is *experienced*, and on the other hand, to be true to the second and third principles of a Tridentine theology of grace given above, he needs to say that by its nature grace cannot be experienced as one experience among others.

First, then, it is important for Rahner to be able to insist that grace actually is *experienced*. As we have seen, he was unhappy with the understanding prevalent in the regnant Neo-Scholastic theology of the first half of the twentieth century, according to which grace occurred, one might say, behind the believer's back. With the assertion of a dual finality of a graced act – one finality that is experienced (the natural) and the other (graced) achieving its purpose outside of human experience – the crucial importance of grace (which, after all, any theologian must maintain) too easily became a very theoretical matter, something which in the day-to-day living of life made no impact.

So grace must be able to be experienced – it must really affect people in the here and now. On the other hand, by shifting the priority to 'uncreated grace', according to which grace is actually God's giving of God's *self*, Rahner is able to assert that grace cannot be experienced as one thing among many others, as a particular experience we might have amongst, and on the same level as, all our other experiences, for God is not one object among others, not a 'member of the larger household of all reality'. So grace must enter into our experience, but it cannot do so as one experience on a par with others. The only alternative, as Rahner saw it, is that it must be experienced on the transcendental level, never directly

but always in and through all our other experiences, always in the background, always part of the general texture of our experience rather than one of the outstanding features of it.

How, then, might this work? How exactly can grace be experienced on a transcendental level? As we have seen, on Rahner's account it is part of our basic structure always to be related to God in all our dealings with the things of the world. This basic structure cannot itself be described as grace, for this is built into our very nature as human beings, and grace must be a gift, something which is not owed to human beings, something which goes *beyond* their basic nature. So Rahner describes grace as a kind of change in our transcendence '~~modification of our transcendence~~': even without grace we would have been aware of God, but not in the same way. God's self-communication to us has the effect of altering our relationship to our horizon, to the 'mystery' which surrounds us. *How* precisely is it altered? Here Rahner becomes elusive, and his language a little slippery: God becomes for us, he says, not just the infinitely distant goal of all our striving, but the goal which draws near, which gives itself. Whatever drawing near and self-giving may mean, they do *not*, Rahner insists, mean that God becomes another object in the world which we can control. The God who gives himself in grace remains a mystery: grace is 'the grace of the *nearness* of the abiding mystery: it makes God accessible in the form of the holy mystery and presents him thus as the incomprehensible'.<sup>21</sup> Without ceasing to be God, in other words, and therefore ungraspable and incomprehensible, God somehow draws near and offers himself to us.

We might get a little bit more purchase on what Rahner means by observing that he often talks about the experience of grace using the notion of 'formal object', drawn from scholastic (and even Neo-Scholastic) epistemology. We can distinguish our experience of different objects (these are called 'material objects') from the way we experience them. We experience objects in different modalities. As an example, take colour. We do not experience 'colour' per se, as an object. Neither do we experience a particular colour, say 'red', as an object. We experience red sweaters: or sweaters (material object) as coloured (formal object). 'Colour' characterizes a feature of our experience which can only be thematized by reflection on our experience of specific objects. It is, in a sense, in the background. Following the analogy, Rahner will assert that with God's gift of God's very self to us, our experience changes, it gains a new formal object. We are now able to experience the world (including ourselves) as charged with God's presence, as infinitely loved by God. Yet this is not the experience of a particular object, or region of objects in the world. It is still the experience of the same world, but 'in colour' rather than in 'black and white'. Here the metaphor limps. Perhaps it was Gerard Manley Hopkins, the poet and fellow Jesuit, who captured this as only a poet could: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'.<sup>22</sup>

Grace, then, is to be understood most fundamentally as God's self-communication to us, and as such it is to be understood as occurring at the level of our transcendental experience, and even there as a 'formal

object' of that experience. The third important feature of Rahner's account of grace is its *universality*. According to Rahner, grace is not offered to some of us some of the time, but to all of us all of the time. The alteration in our relationship to our horizon, the drawing near of the goal of all our striving, is not something that flickers in and out, so that on good days God draws near and on others remains aloof. And it is not something which is given to some and withheld from others. It is a constant feature of all human beings' experience, though it is a feature which can be resisted: 'grace . . . always surrounds man, even the sinner and the unbeliever, as the inescapable setting of his existence'.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction, then, between what we are like by nature and what we are like by grace turns out to be only a theoretical one, for one never finds a human being in a state of pure nature.<sup>24</sup> Our experience is always already, on Rahner's account, affected by grace. We have a tendency to assume that to be a real gift, grace must somehow also be limited – its 'gift character' or un-owedness is shown in that some are given it; others not. But Rahner thinks there is no really good reason for this assumption:

. . . it is quite conceivable that the whole spiritual life of man is constantly affected by grace. It is not a rare and sporadic event just because grace is unmerited. Theology has been too long and too often bedevilled by the unavowed supposition that grace would be no longer grace if it were too generously distributed by the love of God!<sup>25</sup>

Grace, then, always surrounds people and always affects them. But this is not to say that all stand in exactly the same situation with regard to grace, for there remains the question of the response one makes to the offer of grace. We have a fundamental freedom either to accept God's self-communication or to reject it. If we reject it, however, we do not make it go away, but instead we live in permanent contradiction with it. Our experience is always modulated by the offer of grace, which gives us a new formal object, a new horizon, whether we accept that offer or not. We are all always surrounded by grace, then, but we may not all be equally in what is traditionally called a 'state of grace'.

To say it again, 'pure nature' is only an abstraction. There are not some people who operate according to the economy of human nature, and who experience the world and their actions in it in one way, and another group of people who are incorporated into the economy of grace, and experience and act in the world in a different way. Besides other reasons for adopting it, this position can help Rahner avoid the accusation that if he describes grace as modulating our 'natural' experience to the better, then it becomes something owed us rather than a gift (the worry that led some Neo-Scholastics to remove grace from human experience altogether). On his account, we simply do not know what purely natural experience might be, to which we might then make a comparison of graced experience and find that it is 'better', 'more fulfilled'. *All* human experience is graced. While we can, and must, imagine the possibility of a world in which human nature operated without grace, and we must assert that it would be self-sufficient and 'happy' by the measure of that nature, we have no real way of describing what they would be like,

since we live in a world that was from the very beginning shaped by the freely willed intention of God's part to give himself into the world.

To sum up, then, the response to grace, the acceptance or rejection of it, is something that goes on at a very deep level. It is, empirically, if not logically inherent to every natural act we perform. It is not one deliberate decision to be made among others, but the most fundamental decision that shapes all that a person does. And it is a decision that the person may be unaware of, and that one may make without even having heard of the concept of grace.

So far we have been describing grace from the perspective of individuals, but it is also possible to articulate the meaning of grace, on Rahner's view, from the point of view of the divine self-communication to the world as a whole. One can think of all this, that is to say, as a single decision to communicate God's self to the world, which is worked out through the human race as a whole and each individual separately. If grace is seen in this context, it begins to become possible to set out how Rahner understands Christ to come into the picture. But that is an aspect of Rahner's thought that is probably not necessary to go into for our purposes here.

### **Grace, the Saints, and the Anthropologists**

A key thing to notice about grace, on the account we have just outlined, is that it is not *one element* in a human life amongst others. God does not drop by on particular days in our life, or zap us with some special thing at special times. *All* human experience is graced, or at least marked by the offer of grace.

But this means, it would seem, that grace is not the sort of thing which one could spot, empirically. It would not seem to mark one kind of human activity as distinguished from another. Even in some alternate universe where we had lots and lots of detailed empirical data about our evolutionary ancestors, and other hominid species who may have lived alongside them, we would not be able to say, 'Oh, there is where you can see that grace is at work'.<sup>26</sup> Just as most theologians have for some time rejected an appeal to the 'God of the gaps', God whose existence can be proven and whose nature can be understood by reference to holes in current scientific knowledge, so it seems we cannot (if we follow Rahner's view at least) think in terms of a 'grace of the gaps' – we will never be able to make the case for the impossibility of some particular human development if it were not for the presence of grace.

Have we then, really, advanced far beyond the Neo-Scholastic position? Must we end on such a negative note? Are we, perhaps, setting the bar for the (anthropological) usefulness of a theological concept too high by supposing that it would need to be translatable in a precise way into something empirically and concretely recognizable? Perhaps there is yet a little bit more to be said.

One feature of Rahner's understanding of grace is that while he supposes grace is always present as *offer*, he does not presume either that it is always accepted, or that, even if it is accepted on some fundamental level, it is always equally *visible* in its presence, or visible in the same way for every individual. Those who follow Rahner's theology of grace might, then, in spite of the commitment to the universal presence of the offer of grace, nevertheless point to *specific* moments in their experience, or in what they observe of others – to *particular* choices, actions, or reactions – and think '*there* the grace of God was at work'.<sup>27</sup> How might we think about this? Rahner gives some clues in various essays on the experience of grace, of the Holy Spirit, or of God. In these essays he will often point to experiences in which the transcendental element is so close to the surface, so close to capturing our attention, over and against the concrete, empirical content (or material object) of the experience, that we have grounds to say that we can discern that grace is indeed at work. Think back to the notion of formal object. While we never experience 'colour', per se, there are certain experiences in which the compelling power or attractiveness of being-coloured is so present to us that we almost forget that we are looking at coloured objects and are taken simply with the reality of colour. A beautiful sunset, an image of a nebula from the Hubble Telescope, or a painting (Jackson Pollock's 'Number 8', for instance, but one might also think of the remarkable use of colour and light in Rembrandt's paintings) may bring us very close to grasping what the experience of colour itself might be, or certainly help us attend to the way our experience of objects is deeply shaped by the formal object of 'colour' even if we never experience it in itself.

Might the same be said of certain human experiences when it comes to 'grace' as a formal object of all our experience? Rahner suggested it could be, in an early essay entitled 'Reflections on the Experience of Grace':

Have we ever kept quiet, even though we wanted to defend ourselves when we had been unfairly treated? Have we ever forgiven someone even though we got no thanks for it and our silent forgiveness was taken for granted? Have we ever obeyed, not because we had to and because otherwise things would have become unpleasant for us, but simply on account of that mysterious, silent, incomprehensible being we call God and his will? Have we ever sacrificed something without receiving any thanks or recognition for it, and even without a feeling of inner satisfaction? Have we ever been absolutely lonely? Have we ever decided on some course of action purely by the innermost judgement of our conscience, deep down where one can no longer tell or explain it to anyone, where one is quite alone and knows that one is taking a decision which no one else can take in one's place and for which one will have to answer for all eternity?<sup>28</sup>

In the light of the foregoing discussion we suggest that these kinds of experience are ones in which the ‘natural foreground’ of desires, aversions, and other motivations seem so inadequate for explaining our conviction and sense of fulfilment in embracing this experience or action, that explaining this conviction and fulfilment requires appeal to that further, transformed horizon of our transcendentality, to the difference made by virtue of a newly possible formal object of our experience, by our being taken up in God’s own life. Rahner’s list is, to be sure, a bit on the depressing side; and he certainly does not mean by it that experiences of deep joy are not also experiences of grace. It is just that in the latter it is more difficult to attend to the element of grace.

Yet for some people, Rahner suggests, this element of experience becomes palpable in *all* experiences, the most joyful and the most humdrum and banal, or even the most painful and shattering.<sup>29</sup> These people, according to Rahner, are the saints. In the way an experienced wine connoisseur can access dimensions of the experience of tasting wine lost on most of us, the saints have ‘got the taste of the spirit’. He goes on:

While ordinary men regard such experiences merely as disagreeable although not quite unavoidable interruptions of their normal life – in which the spirit is merely the seasoning and garnish of a different life, but not real life itself – the man of the spirit and saint have got the taste of the pure spirit. The spirit is, as it were, drunk by them pure. This also explains their strange life, their poverty, their desire for humiliations, their yearning for death, their readiness to suffer, their secret desire for martyrdom . . . Not as if they did not know that grace can also sanctify everyday and reasonable activities and transform them into a step towards God . . . But they really know that man as spirit – precisely in real existence and not merely in theory – should really live on the border between God and the world, time and eternity, and they always try to make sure that they are really doing this . . .<sup>30</sup>

So, Rahner suggests, it is in the saint (and he would not deny that there are saints, in this sense, outside of Christianity) that the tacit awareness of grace has come closest to becoming an experience of grace *per se*. As the experience of lit objects can come close to being an experience of light, as the experience of objects figured against a horizon can come close to being an experience of that vast horizon itself, and as the experience of coloured objects can come very close to being an experience of colour, so too graced experience (in which, in principle the graced and natural can never be crisply distinguished) can come close to being an experience of grace – and it is the saint who is most able to approach (perhaps only asymptotically), regularly and consistently this eruption of the experience of grace from out of graced experience.<sup>31</sup>

Even here, though, it is not as if this delivers to us a domain of experience that can be precisely delineated – ‘this is grace and that is not’. And of course it will be possible for psychologists to exercise a sort of methodological atheism, to reject the appeal to anything transcendent or supernatural, to treat saints as objects for empirical investigation and explanation like any other. Nevertheless, perhaps here, with the saints, the ‘religious geniuses’, we draw near to something in human culture which raises questions about that which is beyond nature – something that could at least call forth different hypotheses for explaining what makes their life at once the most inexplicable, while also, in so many cases, the most everyday and ordinary. These different approaches and hypotheses could ground a further dialogue between theologians and anthropologists. This approach might offer us a broader paradigm within which to think about human life and behaviour, whereby there is both a sense of that which is ‘natural’ to the species, and then moments of transcendence, moments where the natural is exceeded or broken through.<sup>32</sup>

One might of course reach for the more familiar language of statistics here and simply think of a distribution of behaviours and its ‘outliers’. But nothing commits us *a priori* to giving ultimate status to the thought patterns of statistics, useful though they are in some contexts. The theologian might argue that something in our own experience is better captured by the notion that we live with a sense of the ordinary, the natural, but also, often within those very experience, discern some more, as of a free gift, as of grace, when we or others somehow go beyond our nature. And if something like this nature/grace pattern illuminates our current experience better than concepts of statistical distribution, one might argue, should there be any reason to rule it out when framing our reconstruction of the pre-historical?

## **Glossary**

beatitude/beatific vision: the direct communication of God to an individual, typically understood as the eternal state of those saved.

created grace: gifts from God that elevate human nature toward salvation.

formal object: in Scholastic epistemology, an aspect of an object perceived along with the object, but distinguishable from it. For example, the colour of a sweater.

material object: in Scholastic epistemology, the thing perceived, i.e. a sweater (of any colour).

Neo-Scholasticism: general approach to theology dominant in Catholicism between the first and second Vatican councils, roughly 1870–1965. Characterized by a strong emphasis on the theology and philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and the tradition of his interpretation.

theological anthropology: a theological understanding of what it means to be human.

Tridentine: theology associated with the Council of Trent (1545–1563), convened in response to the Protestant Reformation.

uncreated grace: the gift of God's own presence, God's self.



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<sup>2</sup> What follows is not a sociological exploration of how average Christians – or Catholics or Protestants – tend to see grace, but an attempt to lay out how grace is understood in formal theological work within these traditions. The two things are of course connected, but in complex ways that are beyond the scope of this paper to consider.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the contenders are 'liberation', 'the beatific vision', 'ultimate union with God', 'complete human fulfilment', or simply 'whatever it is that is our final goal'.

<sup>4</sup> This is a phrase Thomas Aquinas uses quite frequently. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.8; 1.62.5.

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive and readable recent account of Trent, see John O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013). The relevant decrees are the Decree Concerning Original Sin (1546) and the Decree Concerning Justification (1547). For a translation of these decrees from the Latin, see John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 405–424.

<sup>6</sup> In language typical of the polemical spirit of the age, this chapter of Trent was entitled, 'Against the vain confidence of the heretics.' See Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 413.

<sup>7</sup> We take this account of the Neo-Scholastic position on grace from Gerald A. McCool, *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 7f., 196–201. See also Gerald A. McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 200–208. For Rahner's specific reaction against the Neo-Scholastic theology of grace, which he learned in his theology studies, see Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35–41.

<sup>8</sup> These little graced 'pushes' were grouped under the category of 'created grace' (for instance, the created grace of an inspiring poem or of a challenging homily), a category to which we will return shortly.

<sup>9</sup> Even though, as Trent insisted, we can only have hope in the face of this justice of God's because of God's gift of grace, and not because of our own exercise of our powers.

<sup>10</sup> For this reason, as Philip Endean correctly notes, Rahner's theology of grace is closely linked to his theology of spiritual (or mystical) experience. See Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*.

<sup>11</sup> He lists some of the reasons for which he believes that the 'run of the mill' Neo-Scholastic approach can and should be revisited in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4. 169–174.

<sup>12</sup> This section draws heavily on Karen Kilby, *The SPCK Introduction to Karl Rahner* (London: SPCK, 1997), ch. 1.

<sup>13</sup> One might ask how widely 'humanity' is meant here, and in what follows. Rahner's position suggests that if we suppose a hominid such as *Homo naledi* to have been self-conscious (which the *H. naledi* burial methods tend to suggest) then all the following analysis would apply to them. For him, the key feature of being human is self-transcendence that brings a certain reflexivity and self-consciousness (as will be described momentarily). See his brief remarks in Karl Rahner, *Hominisation: The Evolutionary Origin of Man as a Theological Problem* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 102–109.

<sup>14</sup> Readers may hear the overtones of Immanuel Kant in this language of 'the condition of the possibility'. Rahner's relationship to Kant is interesting, in that he borrows some of the apparatus of Kant's thought, but turns it towards quite different conclusions than those at which Kant arrives. For Kant, when we attend to the conditions of the possibility of experience, we realize that God is in principle not something we could experience and are forced into a kind of agnosticism; for Rahner, when we turn our attention in the same direction, we realize that experience itself would not be available without a prior orientation to God.

<sup>15</sup> Anyone who watched Alfonso Cuarón's film, *Gravity* (Warner Brothers, 2013), about the misadventures of two astronauts cast adrift by the destruction of their space station, will have been able to experience at one remove what it is like to experience reality 'without a horizon'.

<sup>16</sup> For a similar argument, developed more fully, see Denys Turner, 'How to Be an Atheist', *New Blackfriars* 83, no. 977–978 (July/August 2002): 317–335.

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<sup>17</sup> Portions of this section are drawn from Kilby, Introduction to Rahner, ch. 2.

<sup>18</sup> His views change over time; this is the mature version.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Paul's description in Romans 5:5: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us'. It is God that is given to us in grace.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol. 1, translated with an introduction by Cornelius Ernst (New York: Crossroad 1982), 322.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, translated by Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 56.

<sup>22</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, edited by Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128.

<sup>23</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, 181.

<sup>24</sup> It is, to be sure, an important one, once again because of Trent, and the second of the three principles above in particular. We must distinguish between a gift-character that comes from being created and a further gift-character of being the potential recipients of God's self-communication. One might say that empirically all of us are given both gifts; but logically, the one is distinct from the other.

<sup>25</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, 180.

<sup>26</sup> This is why, in the essay on hominisation mentioned earlier, Rahner contends that the transition from an animal, or group of animals, not characterized by (graced) transcendence to one that is, is not within the realm of empirical detection or verification. See Rahner, *Hominisation*, 106–107. Even in an imaginary universe in which God decided to create (itself, a great gift), without giving the further gift of God's own self-communication, the transition to transcendence would not be empirically detectable.

<sup>27</sup> For a careful exploration of the particular kinds of experience in which Rahner thought the working of grace could be detected, see Shannon Craigo-Snell, *Silence, Love, and Death: Saying Yes to God in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, translated by Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 87.

<sup>29</sup> In this, Rahner was working out his way of talking of 'finding God in all things', and 'being a contemplative in action', which were spiritual mottos of his religious order.

<sup>30</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, 88. When Rahner writes 'man of spirit' in this essay, by spirit he really just means what we described earlier as the human dynamism evident in every act of knowing and choosing, human transcendental, as it were.

<sup>31</sup> If there were space for a fuller discussion of Rahner's understanding of the saints, it would be important to explore his interest, in other writings, on the role of *joy* in the lives of the saints.

<sup>32</sup> Though this patterning of the relationship of grace to nature may remind readers of recent discussions of 'emergence', it does not, I think, quite map onto them. Exploring the difference, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.