

Ocean of Mercy:

A Three Dimensional View of Divine Grace in the Gaudiya Vaishnava Tradition

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Introduction

The John Templeton Foundation, a philanthropic institution that funds “interdisciplinary research about human purpose and ultimate reality” [wikipedia], has made this attempt to define grace: “Grace, understood theologically, is an experience of capabilities that seem to exceed those endowed by ordinary human experience.” This might strike any practitioner of either Christian or Vaishnava faith as a rather bland and indeed quite *non*-theological definition. Surely we could do better than this, if only minimally by including God in the picture.

To stipulate the source of grace as God brings us into the sphere of theology, where the nature of divine grace has exercised both Christians and Vaishnavas for centuries. And yet we may presume that there are deep human impulses for understanding that impel such theological reflections, and perhaps the term “wonder” could serve as a broad indicator for this impulse.

To speak of divine grace in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, the notion of wonder is not far in the background; and I call attention to this because, as Michelle Voss Roberts argues in her book *Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion*, the aesthetic experience of wonder, *adbhuta-rasa*, offers great promise for enriching the interreligious dialogical enterprise. Put simply, we are invited to experience the wonder of encounter with another faith tradition, as an expression and manifestation of God’s grace.

I will come back to this point, but for now I wish to briefly expound what I’m calling a “three dimensional view” of divine grace in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition. My hope is that this may contribute to our dialogue by showing the Gaudiya way that the broad notion “divine grace” may be specified (following R. C. Neville et al). In the broadest sense, I want to approach the project of articulating the notion “God’s grace” as a sort of perpetual work in progress, for myself at least, and possibly for humanity as a whole.

Gaudiya Vaishnava Three-Dimensional Grace

A core theological understanding in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, as in Vaishnava traditions generally, is that God, as the supreme being, is the supreme sentient and cognizant person. Identified more specifically as Vishnu and even more particularly as Krishna, what makes his personhood meaningful is relationality—the existence-in-relation of God’s infinite creatures, each bearing sentience and cognizance given by God. This bestowal of existence-knowledge-bliss in minute portion to each of God’s creatures we may regard as the first dimension of God’s grace. Technically, this sense of dependence and relationality with God is referred to as *sambandha-jñāna*, “cognizant inherence.” Arising from such cognizance—through divine grace—is the impulse, indeed the sense

of imperative, to serve God. The essential idea is expressed in this strophe of the Caitanya-caritāmṛta, an important Gaudiya text,

*jīvera 'svarūpa' haya kṛṣṇera 'nitya-dāsa'
kṛṣṇera 'tatasthā-śakti', 'bhedābheda-prakāśa'*

“The inherent form of the living being is to be the eternal servant of Krishna. The living being is situated in the Lord’s “marginal energy”, being a manifestation that is different yet non-different (from the Lord).” (CC Madhya 20.108)

Such identity—as eternal servant, both different and non-different from the Lord—is one cause for wonder. How to comprehend the reality of our intimate relationship with the Lord being such that it is expressed in such a way as “different yet non-different”? The tradition concludes: This is *acintya*—inconceivable by the conceptual powers of our minds. And yet, whether we know it or not, this is our eternal position in relation to God. This is a great wonder.

Vaishnavas then raise the question: having such a relation with God, how can creatures of this world who, despite this relationship, suffer seemingly endless alienation and waywardness from God, meaningfully serve him such that he, the Lord, is not merely satisfied, but genuinely delighted? How do we turn to God in a practical way?

Gaudiya Vaishnavas see the path of grace to reconnection with God as something that can be revealed only by the grace of the guru—the spiritual preceptor. Thus the guru is seen as an essential embodiment of divine grace. As such, the guru shows the shishya—the disciple—the path of bhakti—service and sharing—of giving him or herself fully to the Lord. This is technically called *abhidheya*—process—the means of becoming spiritually reformed, sensitized and submissive to divine guidance. This second dimension of divine grace is the dimension of practice, in the sense of becoming a practitioner of *bhakti*, consciously, conscientiously, and progressively opening oneself to become a worthy recipient of divine grace, all the while feeling oneself to be most unworthy of such grace.

With such an attitude, the aspiring Vaishnava comes to feel, as Bhaktivinoda Thakura, a 19th century Gaudiya preceptor expressed in one of his songs, addressing his own preceptor, “Your mercy is all that I am made of.” This sense of being infused with divine grace such that one’s inherent nature to serve becomes activated is also a cause for great wonder. And this wonder opens one to a profound hope and anticipation to eventually receive the full grace of the Lord. A celebrated prayer in the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (10.14.8) nicely expresses this anticipation:

My dear Lord, one who earnestly waits for You to bestow Your causeless mercy upon him, all the while patiently suffering the reactions of his past misdeeds and offering You respectful obeisances with his heart, words and body, is surely eligible for liberation, for it has become his rightful claim. (BBT translation, 2011).

And with such a feeling of anticipation and wonder, the Krishna-*bhakta* becomes ripe to enter the third dimension of divine grace, technically known as *prayojana*—the goal, or the necessity—the revelatory experience of fully blossomed love for God, Krishna-*prema*. In this state, ironically, a person feels that she or he has no love for God. And yet the tradition tells us that such persons become immersed in an “ocean of the nectar of devotion,” where they experience (as Śrī Yāmunācārya has written) *nava-nava-rasa*—ever new aesthetic relish of loving exchange with the Lord in one’s particular, indeed unique, relationship with him. In this third dimension of divine grace, the sense of wonder can become so intense that a person becomes stunned, with joyful tears and trembling voice, such that the boundary between oneself and the Lord, and between self and other, become blurred as the heart softens, opening to the reality that is one’s true, dynamic relationship of service to the Lord.

Divine Grace in Person: Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu

Thus far I have sketched in abstract terms the notion of divine grace in Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. And yet Gaudiyas regard divine grace as anything but abstract. Indeed, in their emphasis on the personal nature of God, they affirm and celebrate his infinite capacity to reach out to the creatures of this world, in his embodied descents or *avatāras*. Gaudiya Vaishnavas in particular celebrate as a full manifestation of divine grace the person of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1534), as having advented in recent times, in response to a crying need of the age for widespread recovery of humanity’s religious compass.

Śrī Caitanya’s life is regarded by his followers as the full enactment of love of God, with two aspects—one “internal” and the other “external.”

Internally, Śrī Caitanya was found by his close associates to be intensely, day after day and often through the night, absorbed in devotionally rapturous memory of Krishna as his beloved, in which he, Caitanya, identified himself as Rādhā, the feminine principle and counterpart of the divine masculine Krishna and embodiment of what is called the *hlādinī-śakti*—the “joy power”—of the Lord. By all accounts, Caitanya’s raptures were at times so intense that he would endanger his own life as he would dive into the river Yamunā in Vrindavan or, in later years, into the sea at Puri, in his frantic longing to be with his beloved Lord. For Caitanya’s followers, the wonder is that he unveiled such an intensity of Krishna-*prema*—love for Krishna—in what is called *viraha-bhāva*—the rapturous mood of separation, whereby the sense of divine absence reaches such a pitch that it becomes inverted into a sense of sublime divine presence. Such a phenomenon is indeed “an experience of capabilities that seem to exceed those endowed by ordinary human experience” (as the Templeton Foundation puts it). Here, divine grace takes the form of divine intimacy, in which God becomes God’s *bhakta*—devotee—to show the world what we might call a fourth dimension of grace. In this fourth dimension, divinity and humanity become interwoven in a borderless tapestry of ever-expanding wonder.

Externally, Śrī Caitanya gave himself fully and profoundly to sharing and teaching a simple practice (*abhidheya*) for awakening the dormant love of God that all beings have in the core of their hearts or consciousness (*citta*). This is the culture of praising

God, especially by the singing of divine names, *kīrtana* or *samkīrtana*. Here, the wonder is that what may be called recognized or acknowledged names of God are regarded as “nondifferent” from God, hence possessive of the power of God to purify the heart of all pernicious tendencies. The names of God that were especially dear to Śrī Caitanya—Hari, Krishna, and Rāma—are combined in the well-known *mahāmantra* (great chant): *hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa, kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare / hare rāma hare rāma, rāma rāma hare hare*.

Integral to the wonder of God’s names is the recognition that no living beings, in whatever form they may be, are excluded from the grace of hearing and singing the these names. Thus Śrī Caitanya is also celebrated for his reaching out and embracing social so-called “outcastes.” Indeed, one of his dearest friends, known as Haridas Thakur, was considered to have been from a Muslim background and therefore considered untouchable in orthodox brahmanical society. Yet when Haridas died—in the presence of Caitanya—the latter personally lifted up Haridas’ body and danced with it in *kīrtana*; then he led Haridas’ funeral procedures and organized a memorial feast in his honor.

Reflections on Divine Grace for Dialogue

The funerary episode of the Muslim-born ascetic Haridas and the brahmanical Hindu-born Caitanya points toward the subject of interreligious reflection on divine grace. To conclude, therefore, I want to very briefly offer three of my own reflections on possible avenues to explore for relating Christian and Vaishnava understandings of divine grace.

1. The Divine Feminine

As I have noted, Śrī Caitanya is seen by Gaudiya Vaishnavas as an embodiment of divine grace in particular due to his identification with the divine feminine, Krishna’s *śakti* counterpart Rādhā. In Vaishnava theology, the energy, or *śakti* of Bhagavān is inseparable and yet distinct from Bhagavān, or God, and it is particularly through his energy (which is equally personal as is God) that God’s grace unfolds.

What I wonder is whether and how this might be related with Mariology in Christian traditions, whereby, as I understand, she is considered to be a special carrier of divine grace, as the “mother of God.” Clearly there are important differences to be acknowledged and celebrated. And yet perhaps there is a significant connecting thread that would be promising to explore.

2. Grace as God’s Generosity

Some of the linguistic imagery expressing divine grace in the Gaudiya tradition has to do with the water element and liquidity. Grace “rains” down or “flows” to the recipient, who is a “vessel” (*patra*) who is then empowered to nourish his or her own and others’ “garden” of devotion or “creeper” of devotion. Conceiving of grace as “flowing” suggests God’s magnanimity, his “overflowing” fullness that constitutes sharing (which is the basic notion in the root of the word *bhakti*, **bhaj*). From the perspective of creatures, grace seems to be closely associated in both traditions with the notion of sacrifice, which the Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr calls “winning by losing.” Can we

make a fair comparison of Christ and Caitanya in terms of self-giving, as models of sacrifice, each demonstrating different features or characteristics (or “flavors”—*rasas*) of divine grace?

3. Wonder as a Vehicle of Grace

I recall what Raimundo Panikkar once wrote, that “In point of fact, both Hinduism and Christianity are two abstract labels. Hinduism does not exist; there are only living and separated traditions, *sampradayas* and such. Christianity also is non-existent; there are thousands of churches, doctrines, and groups that, seen from the outside, appear as baroque and overwhelming as Hinduism may appear to the outsider. There is not one Hindu-Christian dialogue. There are scores of them...” Awareness of this variety, of an “inexhaustibly rich divine depth that underlies religious diversity” as Voss Roberts puts it (pp. 184-185) can be a source of wonder, which can be an inkling of grace.

Again, drawing from Voss Roberts, wonder can be appreciated as “a reaction to the opportunity to witness divine, heavenly, or exalted phenomena,” and therefore is related to the central moment of devotional worship, the moment of seeing and beings seen (*darśana*). (Robert C. Fuller 2006, p. 10, quoted by Voss Roberts, p 182). Can such reaction of wonder permit us to perceive and participate in divine grace as expressed in the “showings” (thinking of Julian of Norwich) that are found in the other faith tradition?

And finally, with regard to wonder, it may be experienced as a response of openness, hence vulnerability, but also empowerment to see opportunities for acknowledging complementarity. As Francis Clooney suggests (Voss Roberts’ paraphrase, p. 185): “Christian contemplation can be enhanced by the peace of Hindu wisdom traditions, Hindu devotion can be inspired by the love of Christ, dominant traditions can be urged to justice by subaltern fury, and so on.”

Thus, by grace, one may become a “sympathetic spectator” (*sahṛdaya*) of other traditions that celebrate God’s grace. Can it not be that by skilled and attentive viewing (of other traditions), a successful “performance” occurs such that true *rasa* arises, through divine grace (Voss Roberts, p. 189)?

Concluding Thoughts

We tend to think of the English word “grace,” in the phrase “God’s grace” or “divine grace,” as a noun. And yet, perhaps more importantly, the word also has verbal usage, especially as indicating God’s causality. Thus, “May God grace us...”. As a verb, grace has the sense of movement, and indeed, returning to the linguistic imagery of water and liquidity, we may think of fluidity and flux. I mentioned initially that I consider my own reflection on divine grace as a “work in progress,” and I would like to suggest that the dynamic nature of God’s grace may allow us to see our own and others’ faith traditions as dynamic, changing, and thus living. We look back on our own tradition of the past always in order to then examine the present and anticipate the future. My experience is that Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, especially as it enters a geographically much wider field than it held in earlier centuries, is very much in transition. My hope is that, by God’s grace—by Krishna’s grace—this transition and development can be such that it

serves as an enrichment for persons of all faith traditions, and that similarly Gaudiya Vaishnavas may be enriched by encounter with persons of all other faith traditions. May all our hearts become transformed and true to our potential sacred being by the grace of the Lord!

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