

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 2 – 2009

**Grace or morals:
What Ultimately Determines our Destinies?
An African Reflection**

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Introduction

This essay attempts to address the paramount question of what ultimately determines our destinies, that is, our individual and corporate human destinies, between two ethical-sociological variables namely: “grace” or “morals”. First and foremost, the essay will attempt to define, describe and explain what “grace” and “morals” are. Second, the essay will seek to situate these ethical-sociological variables within the argument of human destiny. Third, out of that situated argument, the essay will seek to infer on the question of what ultimately determines our destinies, “grace” or “morals” or both or none? The author engages the subject from an African cosmological framework, anchored on the Zambian traditional experience, the Bemba cosmology in particular, which sees life as an ontological, co-existential quest for a harmonious and unbroken relationship between

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the Supreme Being, ancestors and human beings.³ In such a scenario, the philosophy of life is that the sacred life of God⁴ is a never-ending cyclic movement of life, from the cradle to the grave, beyond the grave into the cosmology of ancestors, and from the cosmology of ancestors back into the cosmology of the living and so on - ever transforming into beautiful and awesome expressions of authentic cosmological life and godliness, as God intended.

Allow me now to handle my assignment as introduced above.

A. Grace and Morals: Definitions, Descriptions and Historical Explanations

Etymologically, the term “grace” means God’s help or favor (from Old French *grace*), pleasing quality, good will, attitude (from Latin *gratia*), favor, divine gift (from the Greek *kharisma*) and grace, beauty, kindness (from the Greek *charis*).⁵ In current English usage, it means beauty, kindness, mercy, reprieve, pardon, prayer, and blessing.⁶

In popular Christian usage, “grace” has come to mean the sovereign favor of God for humankind.⁷ Or put differently, “grace” in Christianity means: “the free and unmerited assistance or favor or energy or saving presence of God in his (her) dealings with humanity” “Glossary of Religious Terms” in *Babylon*).

This popular Christian usage is similar to the Zambian tradition where among the Bembas “grace” is rendered as *icikuku* or *icikuku cakwa Lesa*, meaning “grace” or “God’s grace”, except that this is mediated grace. For example, when a person is confronted by a lion, he or she would normally cry out “Mutule!” (a Bemba word which means a cry for help or deliverance) and this cry would normally be

³ Spirit beings who are occupy the number two position and who control certain areas of natural life are part of this relationship. See *Bemba Religion* in <http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/sub/bemba.html>.

⁴ In Bemba tradition, all life, including human life, comes from God. We may never fathom life because it is a mystery of God. However, God has given us a measure of understanding to acknowledge that human life does not end with death, but that life continues beyond death and there is an unbreakable sweet communion and link between the living dead and the living. As such, forms or aspects of life are made manifest in the concrete world of the living, for example, the manifestation of behavioral traits of the departed ancestor in a child when this child is named after this departed ancestor. How this happens is a mystery!

⁵ *Online Etymological Dictionary* at www.etymonline.com.

⁶ *Babylon* at www.Babylon.com.

⁷ *Babylon* at www.Babylon.com.

directed to the Supreme Being mediated through ancestors, who would raise people to rise to the occasion and help or cause a situation in the natural world to happen in order to deliver this human being from a dire situation. The favor or act of God to help or deliver someone from danger would be considered as God's grace in this context. In fact, the Bemba word *icikuku* is inextricably linked to the notion of salvation where salvation among the Bembas was and is seen as a present reality!

Although "grace" is a term that can be used to generally describe the pleasing quality in a human being, as noted etymologically, it is usually seen in African traditional religions, including the Zambian traditional heritage, and the Judeo-Christian tradition as an exclusive attribute of the Supreme Being.

One sees gracious acts of God in nature and in recorded sacred scriptures like the Hebrew Bible which is inextricably linked to the history of salvation and the Christian tradition. The theme is well-echoed in the New Testament, especially in Pauline literature where the benedictory phrase "the grace of God" is commonplace. Beyond the Apostolic epoch, one sees the resounding of the term in Patristic ancients, Scholastic and Humanistic thinkers who belabored over the centuries past, to define, describe and explain what "grace" is all about. It is probably in Augustine of Hippo in North Africa, a 4th/5th Century foremost Christian statesman, leader and greatest theologian of all time, where the issue of "grace" appears prominently, especially in his notion of "prevenient grace." The theme of "grace" in Augustine, in the author's view came alive especially when Augustine was confronted with the Pelagian argument which emphasized human effort at the expense of "grace" when it comes to the salvation of human beings. The conclusion of Augustine of Hippo was that what is paramount and ultimate when it comes to the salvation of human beings is the "grace" of God. In pure Augustinian thought, human beings can do no other apart from relying on "God's grace" to save them from the harmful effects of sin on their mortal bodies in this life and in the world to come!

The 16th century German Reformer Martin Luther took up this theme of "grace" vis-à-vis the law and came to the conclusion that we are saved by "grace" alone through faith alone (*sola gratia, sola fidei*). His article on the "Babylonian Captivity of the Human will"

makes this primacy of “grace” very clear.⁸ In many respects, his thought on “grace” is fundamentally Augustinian.⁹

Jean Calvin of Geneva, another 16th Century Swiss-French Reformer, made the theme of “grace” a cornerstone of his doctrine of pre-destination, premised on election¹⁰ and irresistible “grace.” Through his mastery of reformed orthodoxy, and his systematic and refined articulation of Christian doctrine, Jean Calvin helped the Protestant movement (Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Anglicans and Reformed church people) and to some extent, Christian independents, Evangelicals (Fundamentalists, Charismatics and Pentecostals) and like-minded people, to spread the good news of God’s salvation and redemption based on the “unmerited grace” of God to the whole world,¹¹ way into the last century until now!

As for the Roman Catholic Church, one begins to notice that they were equally encouraged to begin to be missiological in the wake of the 18th century European revivalist movement and the formation of Protestant missions, and the need to find new areas untainted by liberalism.¹² Most important, while one sees the consolidation of Catholic orthodoxy and conservatism in the counter-reformation period, in the period between the 16th and 19th centuries, one begins to notice Catholic openness in Vatican II, 1962-1965. Here, one begins to see the “blowing of fresh air” not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but in all Christendom. In Vatican II, called by Pope John the 23rd, one notes grand themes of “grace” and the liberative and redemptive action of the Spirit in the world, in all and for all.

⁸ However, Luther’s idea that the human will can be captivated to the extent that a human being cannot exercise their God-given power of self-will is very controversial. In that, it makes a human being to appear like a robot without any free will, to chart their destiny whatsoever!

⁹ Both Augustine and Luther, separated by almost ten centuries, had personal human struggles in attempting to reach the ideal standards of God. Both came to conclude that it is solely ‘God’s grace’ that saved them and made them whole.

¹⁰ Jean Calvin was rebuffed by the Arminians who argued that salvation is not an exclusive preserve of the elect, but it should be open to all humans and not only for the so-called elect. This is the basic thrust of the doctrine of salvation which is embraced by the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant churches and to some degree a good number of churches in the Evangelical tradition.

¹¹ As noted above, most of them did not agree with him on his exclusivist idea of election which was linked to ‘irresistible grace’, but somehow picked his notion of ‘unmerited grace’ for all.

¹² European liberalism with its trilogy of liberty, equality and fraternity, emanating from the French revolution of 1789, was seen by the Roman Catholic Church as a movement bent on promoting the quest for individual rights and freedoms, disobedience and disloyalty to the establishment. As such, it was natural to find new mission areas such as Africa, which were not yet ‘corrupted’ by liberal ideas and were more readily inclined to be obedient and loyal to the papacy.

The point is, in both Protestant and Roman Catholic thought, and in Eastern Orthodox traditions,¹³ and to some extent, in Evangelical traditions, one begins to see an emphasis on the efficacy of “grace” to holistically save and redeem all humanity in the now and the hereafter.

The overarching theme, in modern Christian religious thought insofar as salvation and redemptive history is concerned, arguably, is “grace,” that is, the “grace of God” for the salvation and redemption of all humanity and the entire universe. In this regard, “grace” is something of God (of the being of God), that is, the ontological essence of God, who is identified in mainline Christian thought as one essence, *ousia* (Greek) or one substance, *substantia* (Latin), but three persons, *hypostases* (Greek) or *personae* (Latin), namely: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Further, “grace” comes from God (that which comes out of the ontological essence of God, that is, the divine ontological function for the world), with the power to save and redeem humanity and our world in the now and then. And this is not restricted to human souls, but extended to every condition in which humanity finds itself wanting and in need of liberation, peace and fulfillment.

In the light of the foregoing, a concise definition of “grace”, the “grace of God”, is a state or condition of receiving or being surrounded or accompanied by something we do not deserve or merit from God. In this regard, our salvation, our possession of anything in life, our station in life, our achievement in life, our future prospects do not depend on who we are (our ontological identity) or what we have done (our ontological function), but on who God is (divine ontological identity) and on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ (divine ontological function). And the essential characteristic of this “grace” is an outpouring of Godly attributes of compassion, love, forgiveness, friendship and unexplainable awesomeness, through the

¹³ This does not mean that there has been total agreement between Protestants, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Churches on major issues such as baptism, eucharist and ministry, let alone with Evangelicals.

¹⁴ This apologetic and complex way of thinking has brought about sharp criticisms from the main monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, which accuse the Christian religion of believing in three Gods.

Spiritus Sanctus (Latin for the Holy Spirit) who breathes on all God's creatures and on all creation !

Sociologically, a gracious person, one who is full of “grace”, is one who embraces, loves and shows the greatest empathy, good will, good attitude and sacrifice for others in community, irrespective of creed, gender or race – a godly character¹⁵ indeed! In this regard, “grace” becomes a gift from God to humanity and a shared life experience (co-existential reality) of human beings for sanctity, wholeness and harmony among humans and for the world!

As for “morals”, etymologically, the term means customs or manners (from the Latin *mores*, plural).¹⁶ In current English usage, it has come to mean standards of conduct as to what is right or wrong (*Babylon*). In popular and broad Christian usage, the term has come to mean standards of moral behavior according to the revelation of God in scripture and in Jesus Christ. In Zambian tradition, the term is similar to the popular Christian usage, rendered among the Bembas for example, as *imibele* (the expected standards of moral behavior). For example, *imibele* includes acceptable attitudes towards the treatment of the elderly. If a person treats the elderly badly, such a person would be considered as one without “morals”.

The term “morals” has been at the heart of ancient philosophy and religion towards the quest for well-being and peace in relation to oneself, others, the world and the divine. One sees this in Greek philosophy, the most influential philosophical orientation in human society, especially in the ideologies of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and other Greek thinkers, who critically reflected on what it meant to be moral or to be good or simply to be a good person. What they reflected on was an ontological (oriented to their state of being and identity) co-existential (oriented to mutual existence) issue: how could they as humans, in relation to others, attain the perfect qualities of the unseen world as they lived in this seemingly imperfect visible world and become like the divine, and thus co-exist with the divine and become immortalized? This process involved the revelation of

¹⁵ In Jesus, a person full of ‘grace’, we see the very character of God witnessed to by the gospel according John.

¹⁶ *Online Etymological Dictionary*.

standards from the invisible world to the visible world of the living, which would help them attain such a condition.

This quest for morality or a moral life and the perfect, a demonstration of obedience and royalty to the divine, was also reflected in ancient religions. Closer to Christian religious thought and praxis is the ancient Judeo religion, Judaism, as seen and exemplified in the Torah,¹⁷ especially the Decalogue.¹⁸ A good life or moral life meant to follow the precepts of God and undivided loyalty to YHWH¹⁹ the God of Israel. Disobedience of legal provisions and disloyalty to YHWH meant punishment by the divine and an alteration or delaying of the fulfillment of the Jewish people's destiny.²⁰ One sees moral punishment in the Torah, history books, prophetic and poetic books of the Hebrew Bible, mediated through direct divine feats, invader forces, prophetic interventions, national rebellions, tribal displacements, monarchical dethronements and other means. In most cases, the Jewish people, individually or corporately, are "pushed back into line" whenever they disobey the precepts or standards of God.

In the New Testament, one sees that there is a sizeable body of literature, from the gospels to apocalyptic literature which is dedicated to morality, that is, the condition of being moral or having acceptable manners, according to the revealed word of God in Jesus Christ. In fact, entry into the new kingdom of God is premised on a moral life. Those who lead a moral life are expected to take their place in and occupy the new order, that is, the new heaven and new earth where all human suffering and pain will be expected to be non-existent. In such a world, men, women, children, and the cosmos will be expected to be in harmony and at peace with God. The immoral, those considered not to be loyal and who break God's standards will be condemned to a place of suffering and pain in a designated area called "hell," where fires burn without end!

¹⁷ The first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁸ The ten commandments from the book of Exodus.

¹⁹ YHWH is generally accepted in Judeo-Christian thought as the name of God among the Jewish people. This term is sometimes written as Yahweh or LORD.

²⁰ In Pauline thought, in spite of all they have done and of all what has happened, Jewish people are covenant people of God for ever. See Romans chapters 9 – 11. In conformity with this view, although Jews are punished by the divine at various times in their history for moral infractions, their destiny to land and posterity is not completely altered or delayed. They somehow reach their destiny.

This eschatological end to cosmological existence under the old order, with utter celebration for “the moral” and total sorrow and agony for “the immoral,” permeated Christian doctrine from the apostolic age, to the patristic age, right to this day. However, this way of thinking has come under attack in certain Christian circles because of its escapist orientation to the abstract world to come and its lack of impetus for responsibility and involvement in the present concrete corrective and transformative events in human history. Further, critics say, it limits the “grace of God” for all humanity in life, in death and beyond death: Can the loving and compassionate heavenly Parent allow creatures to suffer for ever and ever without reprieve? This is one of the questions at the heart of the *eschaton* (the last thing in Greek) in Christian theology which should not be brushed aside!

Getting back to the argument, “morals”, in the light of the above, have everything to do with making humans move towards character and develop character. By definition, from a Christian religious standpoint, morals are those cherished manners such as love, justice and respect for others, which help humans to live in peace and harmony with themselves, others, the natural world and the divine. Morals become an ontological gift to humanity from God, the platform of all morals (to use the father of liberal orthodoxy German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s language) which are expected to grow out within our conscience or intrinsic inner voice, take residence in our human ontology and expected to be nurtured by our immediate social surrounding and be shared in a communal ontological co-existential set up. Thus, a moral people move their societies to moral communities, and moral communities are those communities which reflect the very character of God – an awesome ontological and co-existential responsibility!

B. Situating Grace and Morals in Human Destinies

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that “grace” and “morals” come from God and are meant to be imparted and nurtured in us through appropriate socialization, with the sole purpose of making us mortal humans more gracious and moral in our lives today and in the time to come. In fact, “morals” in and among humanity reflect something of the essential gracious nature of God. But the critical question is: do they, separately or together, determine our destinies (those things which are firmly established for us, from the Latin

destinare – to make firm or establish; fate, fortune, something which is to happen to a person, future course of events, in current English usage (*Babylon*)?²¹

This question is rightly located in the doctrine of the providence of God in which God is seen as creator, governor and preserver of all things in creation, with sovereign power and authority. This is how I see things as a Zambian African who recognizes the supremacy of God. If God is such, do we chart our human destiny or do we leave it up to God to do it for us? In a Zambian cosmology, humans are seen to be creatures of God. In life and beyond life, they are expected to live in community and harmony with other humans, other spiritual realities such as ancestors. In fact, who they are in terms of their ontology, character (moral disposition) and their function, is the responsibility of the community within which they live. The community will carve a moral path for them in order to form moral character in them and help them to exhibit the gracious attributes of the Supreme Being and their ancestors. To a Zambian community which is enlightened in the ways of Christianity, Jesus, due to his heroic deeds for his community and the world, though located far away from Africa, is welcome and as such, becomes part and parcel of such a cosmology. He is recognized as an elder brother, healer, priest, prophet, king and great ancestor who, after resurrection and ascension takes his rightful position in the place of God. Together with the company of ancestors, he intercedes for each soul as they live in this world with all its co-existential challenges. But most important, their survival in this life will depend on the “grace” of their elders, *ba Lesa wacibili* (a Bemba phrase which denotes that parents or simply elders of one’s society act like God, but as number two; as such, they are given certain powers to bless or curse on behalf of *Lesa Mukulu*, Bemba name for Great God).

The elders are representatives of ancestors, the great ancestor (Jesus Christ) and of the Supreme Being who guide society towards what is good. What children of this society will end up to do or be or occupy or achieve will largely depend on the Supreme Being and ancestral choice or “grace.” However, their individuality does not die out. They continue to preserve their unique characteristics represented

²¹ *Online Etymological Dictionary.*

and signified by their ancestral names, through the power of the great pure Spirit of the Supreme Being (*Spiritus Sanctus* in mainline Christian thought). Their task in life is to live in harmony and peace with all creatures of the Creator Supreme Being and all creation, and once they have fulfilled their earthly functions and responsibilities, they take their place in the world of ancestors, with full ancestral benefits such as re-incarnation into the world of the living. In such a scenario, life is not fixed. In stead, it is a corporation between humans, ancestors and the divine – a co-existential reality. Humans learn the acceptable ways of ancestors, the great ancestor and the Supreme Being. They are accompanied by ancestors, the great ancestor and the Supreme Being, together with the great Spirit of God, through gracious acts, until their destinies (firmly established paths or future course of events) are charted, lived out and fulfilled. This view recognizes the direct will of God in which God does things as God wills, beyond human power and comprehension. But at the same time, God accepts humanity and permits the will of humanity to prevail, that is, to do as humanity likes without divine blockages. God further allows other things and beings (ontologies) to exist (co-existential) and to happen, even when we are displeased with them. This is the essence of the permissive will of God vis-à-vis the direct will of God.

The result is that humanity is allowed to exercise self will under the shadow of the supremacy or sovereignty of God. Even when humanity strays, the grace of God accompanies humanity and leads humanity to what is moral, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly. Destiny does not just become a cooperation with God, in full obedience of God's standards or full loyalty to God, but it is an act of God because of who God is (God's ontology, beyond definition and beyond description), who always shows "grace" to all God's creatures even when they don't deserve it, are immoral or ungracious. Ultimately, God seeks all humanity to move towards a gracious existence and a moral life, embraced in the very essence of who God is and how God acts in human history (God's ontological function, beyond definition and beyond description).

To answer the question, what ultimately determines our destinies: "grace" or "morals"? The answer is both, but not necessarily. That is, when one looks at "grace" as God's help and pleasing quality in

humanity, and “morals” as God’s essential morality and acceptable manners in humanity. That is to say, there is a sense in which God expects us to be gracious (that is “grace” as pleasing quality) and moral (that is “moral” as acceptable manners) as we move on our life’s journey to our destinies, but at the same time, our achievements, our positions, and our final destination will not depend on how gracious or moral we have lived our lives, but on simply who God is (who is full of grace and untainted morality) who simply gives, accompanies and blesses us.

That is to say the ontological being of God goes beyond fallible human categories or definitions or descriptions of “grace” or “morals.” God simply acts for the human family and for the world according to God’s terms. Pure and simple!

Conclusion

“Grace” and “morals” are of the ontology of God and are of the ontological function of God in human history and beyond history. There is a sense in which God shows us, as part of our ontological and co-existential reality, what “grace” and “morals” are and God calls us from time to time to a gracious and moral life. Our destinies (firmly established paths or places where we end up in life or our future course of events) are not fixed, but we are called to work out our life’s paths in full recognition of our responsibility to cooperate with the Supreme Being, our great ancestor (Jesus Christ) and our ancestors. Having said this, God is beyond what we conceive of and acts in ways which surprise us, beyond “grace” and “morals”, and our knowledge and experience of who we are and what we do. In this way, God remains God and humanity remains humanity! The destiny of humanity, therefore, becomes a cooperation, a surprise and a complex phenomenon of life which has no straight answers. In such an arrangement, God supremely creates, rules and preserves according to God’s mind, terms and standards, but always, at all times and in all places for the good of the human family and the world in which the human family lives!

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