

Amazing Grace: Christian and Buddhist

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One of the most significant concepts or insights to emerge in the history of religion is the concept of Grace. Living in Western culture where the idea of Grace has been a core principle of Christianity and taken for granted, this fact may escape us. However, when we look at the history of religion broadly from ancient times until modern, religions of self-effort, self-striving, or self-power have been more evident.

From the earliest times human beings lived in a kind of barter society where the principle was "I will give if you give." People over centuries have thought it necessary to placate, propitiate, appease a god, or purify themselves and make sacrifices to gain his favor or dispel his anger. In all probability these efforts were inspired by the threatening environment and life dangers that ancient people experienced. The perceived gap between humanity and the gods have required that human beings do something from their side to make a relationship with a god. This ancient attitude toward the gods persists even in more highly developed religions which prescribe various practices and rules of life that a person must do in order to be saved.

The forms of religion have altered over centuries but the basic religious attitude that it is the devotee's responsibility to qualify or prepare him or herself to achieve his own salvation has remained. What is more rare and the exception is the offer of compassion and freely given Grace by a god to enable a person to realize salvation and spiritual emancipation.

In western tradition we can trace the thread in the Jewish Bible or Christian Old Testament where an elaborate system of sacrifices developed over centuries with the fundamental purpose to restore relation with God. So far that is in the self-striving mode. However, a suggestion of Grace can be seen in God's lovingkindness which enabled the ancient Hebrews to escape slavery in Egypt and it is further seen in the conditions that permitted the later Jews to return to Palestine from their exile in Babylonia and Persia.

The symbolism of sacrifice as an act of Grace was taken over by early Christians, notably by the Apostle Paul who clearly articulated it as the basis for salvation in Christianity. In his interpretation God had incarnated himself in Jesus who became the sacrifice for all humanity to reconcile them to God. His presentation offered a grand vision of Divine Grace where, in effect, God sacrificed himself for the world.

This understanding of the path of salvation in Christianity captured the imagination of the ancient Graeco-Roman people, leading to Christianity's becoming the dominant religion of the Mediterranean world and eventually all Europe. Christian Grace is based in a theistic understanding of God and though it remains the object of theological contemplation, it is a mystery of how the God of the universe could become a human being in Palestine and whose death had universal significance.

However, Christianity is not the only religion with a concept of Grace. We see it in the cat and monkey view of salvation in Indian tradition. The baby monkey must hold on to the back of its mother by its own power, while the mother cat carries its baby by the nape of its neck, suggesting Other Power. In Islam Allah is the all merciful and all-compassionate One who grants salvation through his unconditioned freedom. However, these traditions do not spell out the principle as clearly as in Christianity.

The other tradition which developed a clear concept of Grace has been the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist tradition, appearing in Japan in the teaching of Shinran (1173-1262). This

development is paradoxical because Buddhism in its ancient forms is a form of self-realization where one follows the example of Gautama Buddha (6th C. BCE) who strove to gain his own emancipation from the bondage of passions, ignorance, greed, and delusion. In the almost 2000 years history from Gautama Buddha to Shinran, much history and development had taken place as Buddhism spread from India to China and eventually to Japan.

The seed for the development of Mahayana Buddhism and the principle of Grace perhaps lay in the compassionate minds of nameless, ancient Buddhist teachers who recognized that the ordinary person would take virtually endless aeons of time to perfect the rigorous discipline of Buddhism, leading to enlightenment. They dedicated themselves to assisting such people on their path, giving rise to the concept of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva or Buddha-to-be begins with self-realization on a path of fifty-two stages leading to Buddhahood. Along the way they develop deep compassion for the masses. Instead of attaining their own enlightenment for which they are qualified, they turn back into the world of suffering and delusion to assist others.

From this development the Pure Land tradition evolved focused on Dharmakara Bodhisattva who sought a way to bring all beings to enlightenment. He made vows (forty-eight) to create the perfect environment for the swift attainment of enlightenment. This tradition began to flourish in China with teachers such as T'an-luan, Tao-ch'o and many others who explored the texts and simplified the teaching for the ordinary person.

As a result, the monastic disciplines underlying early Buddhism were replaced by the recitation of the Name of Amida Buddha as the practice for laypeople. This name embodies all the virtues of the Buddha and makes them available to all beings. Through recitation of the name, one acquires merit to be born into the Pure Land where enlightenment is inevitable and swift.

Still the teaching carried the marks of self-striving because it was necessary for the individual to acquire his own merit directed to birth in the Pure Land. There was a hint of Grace in that the Name recited was given by Amida Buddha (Dharmakara-as realized Buddha) as a means of salvation. The name is central because of its virtue representing Amida Buddha.

In the final stage of this evolution Shinran interpreted the Name as representing complete and absolute Other-Power. The path of development can be seen in Shinran's interpretation of the term Nen in Nenbutsu. In its earliest stage it represented meditation practice in the monastic, meditative tradition. In the second, it transformed into recitation of the Name, particularly in the interpretation of Shan-tao. For Shinran, it acquired the meaning of Faith, trust, the trusting mind. In Shinran's teaching the Nenbutsu was given by Amida Buddha simultaneous with the arising of trust in Amida Buddha's vow of universal, unconditional salvation. The recitation of the name was transformed to an expression of gratitude with no other ulterior motive or search for virtue and perfection to qualify for enlightenment.

Based on several vows In Dharmakara's story, Shinran taught that the total salvation process, from the arising of trust in Amida to our return to this world to work for the salvation of all beings, comes about through the working of the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha, without any meritorious contribution by the objects of his compassion.

It is clearly an expression of a Buddhist understanding of Grace. It arises from the unconditional compassion of the Buddha and embraces without exception those from the most spiritually advanced to those desperately evil. It is unmerited favor.

Consequently, there are theistic and non-theistic approaches to the mystery of Grace. In ancient Christianity there was, perhaps, more appreciation of the spiritual and mystical side of Grace. Though certainly taken seriously and literally, Christians focused on the high drama of the story. Two of the four Gospels do not mention the story, while Paul never refers to it. For early Christians it was focal but not subjected to analysis.

In our modern times with the rise and dominance of science, there has been a tendency to focus on the literal, historic reading of the story and efforts to prove the factuality of events in the story of Jesus. The modern approach reflects the scientific ethos of our time. As a result Christianity has suffered a loss of credibility with efforts to isolate or insulate Christianity from scientific criticism.

Interest has spread to the Asian, including Buddhist, approach to understanding Grace because it is more directly visible in our lives. In the Christian approach one is called to believe in a set of events outside and beyond the person. The Asian approach focuses on the processes of Nature. Nature is seen as the great feminine, embracing and nurturing all life. In Buddhism the process of Interdependence in all aspects of life reveals how interconnected and interrelated we are. The emphasis on Interconnection appeals to modern sensibility because of the mass character and sense of isolation, even in a crowd, experienced by many western people. Grace is seen in the ongoing fruitfulness of the world, despite its threats.

The Christian awareness of Grace could broaden if the drama of the self-sacrificing God was once again seen as the drama of cosmic life, embracing and supporting all in the flow of life. Going beyond issues of factuality and literality, the power of the story can come through as it did for the ancient people. The mystery of Grace will enable us to discover how we all can live together without destroying each other. It will replace hatred with love when we see each person as an embodiment of Grace, channeling from its source, to impinge on our own lives.

Despite differing histories, cultural ways and thought, it should be possible for the multitude of traditions to build bridges of understanding, while sharing their Grace. Thereby, the diverse peoples of the world can make common cause for peace and human fulfillment.