

The Question of God's Grace in a face of woundedness.

A theological reflection.

Synopsis

The title of this essay arose within me while I was on a flight from India to Melbourne. At the time, I was reflecting on the place of grace in relation to God's action within humanity. The face of an Indian girl I had witnessed, floated across my mind. Tears welled in my eyes and gently rolled down my cheeks. Her face had left an indelible impression upon me. Her face personified woundedness, which then compelled me to wrestle with the question of God's grace. Her image, in relation to God's grace, is both the reference point and grounding place for this essay. For this reason, this essay will seek to unlock a clearly articulated language of meaning for grace, in relation to human woundedness.

Introduction

It is often declared that grace is God's gift. So, what is the gift? Does the gift change within differing contexts? And, what is the point of the gift for someone like the girl in India? How can she receive and/or respond to this gift? These questions form the basis of the essay. The process of inquiry and response to the questions posed will be that of the art of reflection.¹ This reflection will be grounded in three Stories: that of the girl in India; a personal Story of grace; and the Christian Story.² This essay will proceed in the following manner: after setting the horizon, a word picture will be drawn of the girl in India. From there, the reflection will centre on a personal Story of grace. The entry point³ into this reflection will be through Rosemary Haughton's model of transformation.⁴ This reflection will seek to draw out the shifts in the symbols of God, places of identity and languages of meaning⁵ for grace. As the lived-faith journey is communal in intent, the essay will then consider how this individual Story of grace sits within the wider Christian Story. In this way, a systematic theological framework of understanding will be established in response to the question, "What is the gift?" With a clearly articulated appreciation of the word 'grace', the essay will re-turn to the girl in India and respond to the second question, "What is the point of God's grace for her?"

To Set the Horizon

The horizon, or, boundary, of this essay is its hermeneutical approach: that of Story. One might demand, "What has Story to do with systematic theology? Story is fiction. Systematic theology is a rational doctrine of truth!" And yet, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Gospels express theology through Story. Why is this so? Firstly, theology is not just the study of God for studying sake. Theology is about deepening relationship with the living God. Although theology features the study of God, we cannot study God per se. We can only study our experience, or, Story of God. Within this context the word Story symbolizes the facts of our experience, subjectively interpreted within our given

¹ In this case, the art of reflection is to meditate upon; wonder; listen; hold; ask questions of what is experienced in the light of the beliefs of a specific religious tradition; and draw all this together in such a way as when conditions are sufficient, insight is revealed.

² Whilst God is not Christian, the systematic theological framework employed will be that of the Christian faith-Story.

³ Entry point: an entry point is a 'way in' that is contextually relevant.

⁴ Rosemary Haughton, *The Transformation of Man: A Study of Conversion and Community*, (Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1967, 1980)

⁵ See Bernard Lonergan SJ, *Method In Theology*, Chapter three: 'Meaning' especially "Meaning is embodied or carried in human intersubjectivity. . ." (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1972) pp 57-99

knowledge at a particular moment in history, in response to a 'breaking in,' or, encounter with God. Accordingly, our collective Story is the "foundational reality"⁶ of a systematic theology. As such, Story is an appropriate hermeneutical tool.

What is it that informs our subjective interpretation of our experience? Bernard Lonergan writes that each of us lives in a world, which is bounded by the extent of our knowledge and the reach of our interests.⁷ This is our individual horizon. This horizon is determined by our conscious knowledge of our Self and our world and, the subconscious assumptions inherent within our social, cultural and religious traditions. We bring all of these aspects to our interpretation of the facts. Is this the whole picture though? Are we utterly bound by our un/conscious subjective constructions of our experience? Lonergan would disagree. It is his contention that we are created to wonder, to question, to self-transcend our horizon.⁸ Story provides the unifying basis from which to ask questions. Therefore, a systematic theology, which allows for an understanding of self-transcendence in response to God's continuing revelation, emerges from our Story.

With this horizon set, let us turn now our attention to the girl in India.

The girl in India

My family and I are in a car amid the seeming chaos on a road in India. The road is awash with people and animals. Crammed together are people walking, riding bikes, driving camel and oxen carts; people hanging out of buses, riding in taxis and cars and on motorbikes. Cows stand or lay in the middle of the road, forcing all traffic to skirt around them. The weather is hot and humid and the smell of engine fumes chokes the air. When the car stops in the traffic, people begging call out and/or tap on the window of our car. Amazingly, amid the chaos there is a sense of colour, vibrancy and life; even within the beggars who are quite vocal and active.

In stark contrast to this sense of life, is the face of one girl who seems to appear out of nowhere. In the blink of an eye she appears. She is standing still and silent, just staring; staring into our car. She has fairly short, curly, brown

⁶ Kathleen Williams, 'Grace in our Times,' Lecture Week 1, 2006

⁷ Lonergan SJ, *A Second Collection*, ed William Ryan SJ & Bernard Tyrrell SJ, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1974) p 69

⁸ Lonergan SJ, *A Second Collection*, p 80

hair. Her hair seems unique in that a typical Indian female has straight, long black hair. Her skin is quite pale in colour, which is also not typically Indian. It is not her hair, or, her skin, that draw me in. It is her eyes. Her eyes are big and round and very dark in colour. Big eyes, likened to those of a fish, are considered beautiful in Indian culture. And yet, whilst her eyes hold a certain beauty, they convey to me a sense of hauntedness and lifelessness. Her eyes speak of deep wounding. I feel a sense of shock run through my being. Shock then turns to fear. I only look into her eyes for a moment, however that moment enters into my being.

It is as if she symbolizes a place of brokenness that is beyond fear, beyond defeat, even beyond despair. It is a place of the walking dead. The sense of stillness about her is disconcerting within the noisy, smelly, lively chaos of the rest of the street. Her stillness does not resonate with a deep peace. Hers is a haunted stillness.

Whilst I do not know her actual story, I know the impact her eyes have had on me. Since that moment in time, I have let the impact of her eyes continue to wash over me. I feel a great sense of sorrow when I allow her eyes to enter my own "soul."⁹ What evil must she have experienced in her short life to leave such an impression on her? What is the point of grace for her? What is the gift of God for her?

It is this picture of human woundedness, as symbolized by the image of the girl in India, that I ask the reader to bear in mind and heart for the remainder of the essay.

A Personal Story of Grace

My story of grace is written in the form of a poem.¹⁰ Whenever I read this poem I feel a sense of wholeness, connectedness and empowerment within me. Will I rob the beauty of my experience by delving into it within an academic setting? Why take that risk? The idea though, is not to analyse this poem, or, "contain"¹¹ it within a model. The idea is to prayerfully and rationally engage with the poem in the light of relationship with God, Self and faith community.

⁹ Soul here refers to the Thomas Moore's understanding of soul "not as a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance. *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992) p 5

¹⁰ See Appendix A for the poem in its entirety.

¹¹ Houghton, *Transformation of Man*, p 86

In this way, the reflection will give rise to a "rational self-consciousness"¹² that is and, knows itself to be, "attentive, intelligent, responsible and reasonable."¹³ From this rational self-consciousness will emerge my "objective truth."¹⁴ This objective truth will orientate my value system from a place of freedom. Consequently, this reflection on my poem will lead towards a deepening of the interior movement, whilst consolidating a basis for the responsible outworking of that movement.

Why utilize Rosemary's Haughton's model of transformation? Haughton's model is a pattern, based on the Christian tradition, extrapolated from contemporary lived experience, which names the movements of transformation. Other words that are interchangeable with transformation are conversion, self-transcendence, being-in-love¹⁵ and grace. Therefore, her model is particularly appropriate as an entry point into reflection on my Story of grace.

Haughton's model begins with formation. It is her claim that without formation there can be no transformation.¹⁶ Formation is "the process of using all the influences of culture . . . to form satisfying and stable emotional and social relationships." It is this stable basis of formation that provides the language in which to name and ground our transformation. Therefore, whenever we encounter an in-breaking of God, we name that encounter through our faith community's contextually based language. This naming then shapes our "Christian identity"¹⁷ and the way we respond to and enact that encounter.¹⁸ Without the stabilizing influence of formation, the 'release of power' can become dangerous and destructive.¹⁹ Consequently, formation is crucial for transformation.

The formation behind the first movement of my poem consisted of me being born into the Protestant Christian faith tradition. The predominant explicit doctrine was "No creed but Christ, no book but the bible." The implicit doctrine

¹² Lonergan SJ, 'The Subject' in *A Second Collection*, editors: William Ryan SJ, & Bernard Tyrrell SJ, (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1974) p 80

¹³ Ibid., p 80

¹⁴ Ibid., p70

¹⁵ Lonergan SJ, *Method In Theology*, p 105

¹⁶ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 32

¹⁷ Fred Lawrence, "Orthopraxis" in TNDT 733, as cited on handout: 'Praxis and Orthopraxis', Kathleen Williams, Grace in Our Times Lecture Week 10

¹⁸ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 245 "the language of conversion is of crucial importance, because it determines the way in which conversion is worked out and the idea of living with its affects."

¹⁹ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 35

came from The Gospel of John, chapter 3:16.²⁰ This faith tradition held a literal interpretation of the teachings of the Christian Scriptures. They paid a particular emphasis to the teachings of the Apostle Paul around salvation by faith not works.²¹ Unfortunately, within this communal context, it was not explained that Paul's teaching was contextually based: in that he was responding to a particular question around the "relation of Jews to Gentiles"²² rather than, "on what terms, are [Christians in the twentieth century] to be saved."²³

There were positives within this formation. Firstly, it was a stage of faith.²⁴ One cannot grow towards maturity, without first being fully a child. Also, I learnt to recite the Christian scriptures, with a special emphasis residing in John 3:16. This laid a foundation within me that although I was a sinner; I was loved by God. Therefore, the most significant aspect of this formation was love. *My* family of origin loved me, *my* small church community loved me, and *my* God loved me. I felt safe in the world. Therefore, formation is not just about law. Formation incorporates experiencing yourself as being loveable.

There were also negatives to this formation. The emphasis on '*my*' in this place of formation is deliberate. The faith community in which I was formed not only took on the individualism of its Western culture, its emphasis was on personal salvation. This emphasis created within me the idea that I was chosen by God. Therefore, I was conditioned to experience myself as special and 'above' those who were not chosen. Also, we knew the answer, without even knowing there was a question! The answer: "Jesus is the answer for the world today." In addition, I was raised to be a 'good Christian girl' who kept the peace at any cost.²⁵ Although, at what cost? Myself as a truncated subject,²⁶ living in a predominantly truncated faith community.

Although I have named this first place as formation only, there was a transformation within it. Houghton's model of transformation comprises the movements of intervention; encounter; sin in the form of breaking down the

²⁰"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." John 3:16, NRSV, (London: Collins Publishers, 1989)

²¹ See Romans 3: 21-26

²² Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, (London: SCM Press, 1977) p 3

²³ *Ibid.*, p 3

²⁴ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, (USA, HarperCollins Paperback Edition, 1995)

²⁵ Houghton, *Transformation of Man*, p 27

²⁶ Loneragan: The Truncated subject neither knows [her]self, or is aware of [her] ignorance. 'The Subject' in *A Second Collection*, p 73

barriers of formation; repentance; release of power; self-discovery; and community.²⁷ Whilst transformation is an ongoing movement throughout life, there are pivotal moments of intervention when the irruption of God is experienced in some way. For me this happened when I was around sixteen years old. At that particular moment in time, the doctrine of John 3:16 came alive within me. I responded to this invitation and chose to become a disciple of Jesus. I was baptised by full immersion. Full immersion symbolizes the death of your former self and the rising of your new self as clothed in Jesus. Although I had been raised in the 'way' of the church, this moment was a re-orientation (repentance) of my motivation for action and meaning in life. I chose to turn around from living for myself. I now lived to be a disciple/imitator of Jesus.

There was a 'release of power' at this time. Although, it was not in the same vein as Haughton implies in her model. She states that the "release of power occurs only when people have been drawn into the 'in-between' state where the structures of ordinary life are not operative."²⁸ This was not the case in my initial transformational movement. Without being drawn into an in-between state, I had a release of a deep passion within me to now follow Jesus.

Transformation incorporates the dimension of self-discovery. This self-discovery usually comes about through a death or self-surrender experience. In this initial transformational moment, the death experience was more of a *denial of self*, rather than a death and new birth. Although this moment of transformation included a denial of self at the deeper level, there was a self-discovery in that my decision to follow Jesus shaped my Christian identity.²⁹ This focussed my values on serving others. Also, I felt that I could achieve anything in Christ who strengthened me.³⁰ In this way, I pushed through my personal boundary of 'lack of confidence' and, at a young age I became one of the leaders at our church.

With regard to community, we were a community of people with a common meaning³¹ and purpose. It was a loving, extended family-style church community. We spoke the same language of meaning. Why is language of

²⁷ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*

²⁸ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 134

²⁹ Galatians 2:20 ". . .and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." NRSV

³⁰ Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." NRSV

³¹ Lonergan SJ, 'Existenz and Aggiornamento' in *Collection*, edited by Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1988) p 226

meaning important? Haughton professes that "language is communal, it means a society."³² Therefore, a group of individuals cannot be a community unless they have a common language of meaning. In this faith community, the language in which transformation was expressed³³ was personal salvation. This meant that mission, that is, the outworking of transformation, was around good works and saving 'souls.'³⁴

Within this place of meaning-making:

The symbol of God is:

God is imaged literally within the Trinitarian formula of: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is an interventionist; a Mr. 'fix-it'. God loves all people, however 'He' blesses 'His' own, that is, Christians. Within this Trinitarian formula there is a fervent Christocentric focus.

The place of my identity is:

I am Christian; I have a dualistic understanding of body and soul.³⁵ I belong in the exclusive kingdom. I am a loved child of the Father God; I am a disciple of Jesus. I need to convert others into the kingdom. At this point, in the words of Lonergan, I am a "being in Christ Jesus as a being of substance . . . known through "faith" and affirming true propositions"³⁶

A language of meaning for grace is:

Belief in a literal interpretation of John 3:16. Because of God's love and action of sacrificing 'His' Son on the cross, we are saved from our sin and will live with God for all eternity.

What is the point for the girl in India?

If she were to become a Christian her soul would be saved for eternity. Where does that leave her life now though? Was not Jesus' good news predominantly for the poor in the here and now?³⁷

³² Rosemary Haughton, *The Passionate God*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1981) p 60

³³ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 98

³⁴ The use of souls here refers to the soul as an object which is distinct from the body and lives eternally.

³⁵ In line with Luther's separation of body and soul in 'The Freedom of a Christian' in *Selections From His Writings*, translated, edited and with an introduction by John Dillenberger (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1961) p 54

³⁶ Lonergan SJ, 'Existenz and Aggiornamento' in *Collections*, p 230

³⁷ Matthew 11:5 NRSV

The second movement of my poem is named as 'better formation'. Yes, there is the intervention of 'the door opening'. Yes, there is encounter which incorporated conflict³⁸ between the local faith community and myself. This in turn created a conflict within myself, "who am I meant to be?" Yes, there is release of power in that there is excitement at learning, deep hurt and anger due to the alienation from the faith community. Yes, this release of power drives me to break the boundaries of formation in that I am no longer 'good' and compliant. I have broken the unwritten law that proclaims, "you will not get angry at God." Also, even though my family still worship at that church, I have the courage to leave. And yes, the excitement and anger furnish me with the energy to stay engaged with the tradition through study at university. These emotions could have been the "agent of self-discovery."³⁹ This could have been a moment of transformation. It was thwarted though, because I could not stay with the hurt in a way that would lead to healing. I continued to protect my heart by my head. I allowed drivenness for truth take over. There was no self-surrender; no death. I was not ready to be vulnerable with God. Therefore, this was a place of better formation.

With regard to leaving the community of faith, it was appropriate at that time. Haughton states that it is the "ritual . . . that bridges the gap between formation and transformation."⁴⁰ My faith community practiced a 'wordy' ritual of communion. As I was in transition, I did not have a new entry point into the language of the community. I no longer held the common meaning of the group as truth. I had to leave. To have not done so would have been detrimental to the community and, I believe "death by asphyxiation"⁴¹ for me.

Within this place of meaning making:

The symbol of God is:

Unsure, although definitely not 'Father'.

The place of my identity is:

I am a theological student.

A language of meaning for grace is:

³⁸ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 39

³⁹ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 39

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p 177

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p 35

I cannot articulate one.

What is the point for the girl in India?

There is no point.

Within the third movement of my poem the intervention, or irruption of God, comes once again in the form of the door opening. However, added to this are the sense of annihilation, which is the "vulnerable point for the breakthrough itself"⁴² and, the faint cry within. Whilst there is no formalized repentance,⁴³ perhaps self-surrender⁴⁴ is a form of repentance?

There is certainly a discovery of self.⁴⁵ Even within the seemingly dangerous era of post-modernism which is characterized as a "transitional state . . . which is outside the law,"⁴⁶ due to its denial of "totalising systems . . . [or] universal truth."⁴⁷ I find myself as *woman* and, I am loved for no other reason than God is love. No longer a child who looks to their Father for rescuing when in trouble. I am a woman who takes responsibility for her own actions.⁴⁸ The release of power is a radiant joy in which I am able to breath deeply of life and love.

As far as language is concerned, it was the language of the Christian Eco-Feminist⁴⁹ theological faction, which rooted this movement of grace in the faith tradition. Unfortunately, the local faith community could not support this language.

Within this place of meaning making:

⁴² Haughton, *A Passionate God*, pp 58/59

⁴³ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 7

⁴⁴ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*: This transformation "occurs in the moment of self-surrender to love" p 80. [A] "surrender without any knowledge of what might come of it." p 81

⁴⁵ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*: This is a "salvation event - true human encounter." (p 31) Also, there is a "reconciliation with Self." (p 119)

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p 126

⁴⁷ Gary Ferngren (ed), *Science & Religion*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) p 383

⁴⁸ Lonergan SJ, 'The Subject' in *A Second Collection*, p 79

⁴⁹ Eco-feminism is named by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza as "seeks to make connections between the destruction of the natural world and the oppression of wo/men. It stresses the notion that not just sentient life, but all living things, present and future, form one sacred Body, and that in the evolutionary creative process we all become manifestations of it." ⁴⁹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza: *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2001) p 67

The symbol of God is:

That Who is Participating Presence.⁵⁰ This Presence is both Within and Beyond.

The place of my identity is:

I am precious and passionate woman of God who breathes within the breath of God. It is a place of life and love.

A language of meaning for grace is:

This transformation is not connected to a certain belief in the Jesus Story. This movement is one of "transforming union"⁵¹ with God. In the depths of silence, there is an intimacy⁵²-in-relationship with my-Self and with God.

What is the point for the girl in India?

None. Firstly, presumably the girl does not have a post-modern mindset. Secondly and sadly, this movement of grace is so far removed from her experience as to be irrelevant for her.

The fourth movement of the poem, images grace as a dance. As Rowan Williams cautions, I did not go searching for a metaphor for grace⁵³ and choose 'the dance'. The dance image arose from my story. This image draws me in, speaking from and into my experience of grace, giving "mean[ing] . . . not through science or philosophy, but through a participation."⁵⁴

What is particularly highlighted within this fourth movement is community. In a multicultural, multi-faith post-modern era, where is the doctrinal basis for the local Christian community? How can a faith community have a healthy formation whilst allowing for both individual and communal transformation? Perhaps a beginning place is that when the members meet as one group, they

⁵⁰ That who: is a dialectic, which decentres fixed images of God. Implicit within these words is the sense of both Within and Beyond, whilst remaining relational. Is: represents a state of Being. Presence: symbolizes intimate participation reverberating from within creation's being.

⁵¹ Thomas Keating names transforming union: "transforming union is a way of being in the world that enables us to live daily life with the invincible conviction of continuous union with God. it is a new way of being in the world . . . it is a restructuring of the consciousness." *Invitation to Love: A Way of Christian Contemplation*, (New York: Continuum, 1992) pp 91, 101

⁵² Intimacy: to be wholly open and known "without fear of losing yourself." David Elkind, *Erik Erikson's Eight Ages of Man*, (Educating and Ministry Through Life Passages Course Readings, 2006)

⁵³ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Towards a New Theology for the 21st Century* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005) p 143

⁵⁴ Lonergan SJ, 'The Subjective Field of Common Sense' in CWL 3. *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*; edited by Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran (5th edition Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) p 208

share their faith stories, rather than doctrinal concepts. Secondly, if the ritual space is shaped with symbols and words which are open and invitational, perhaps all the members will be able to accept God's invitation to meet.

Within this place of meaning making:

The symbol of God is:

That Who Is Participating Presence.

The place of my identity is:

To walk with God in unprotected heart does not stem from the "paradise consciousness of undifferentiated oneness with God and with all creation."⁵⁵ It means a compassionate self-knowledge where I recognize my light and darkness. As Merton states: "If I find Him [God] I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him [God]."⁵⁶ This is the place of differentiated, transforming union.

A language of meaning for grace is:

"With the drawing of this love
and the voice of this calling,"⁵⁷
to discover your authentic Self
in transforming union
with divine Love.

What is the point for the girl in India?

Again, this is assumedly so far removed from her experience, as to be irrelevant.

Questions that arise from this reflection on my experience of grace are: does this shift in the languages of meaning for grace imply that there is a linear, hierarchical order to grace, dependent upon your wealth and education? Or, does it suggest that grace is not revelation from God. Rather it is contextually imagined by us to suit our own ends? No, at all stages of the lived-faith journey, grace is God's free gift of Self in relationship with us; meeting us where we are, at a given point in time.

And so, the question we are left with is, "How can it be that none of these way of experiencing grace have meaning for the girl in India?" Is there perhaps more to

⁵⁵ Haughton, *A Passionate God*, p 92

⁵⁶ Thomas Merton cited in J.J. Higgins, S.J. *Thomas Merton on Prayer*, (Sydney: Doubleday, 1975) p 49

⁵⁷ T S Eliot's poem: Little Gidding

grace? Moeller stresses, "a treatise on grace which does not speak of Christ and of the Trinity on every page of its exposition will be seriously out of focus."⁵⁸ In my concluding movement of grace there is no explicit reference of Christ, Trinity, or, for that matter sin, or formal community. How do I, and others like me, 'live deeply from our own tradition, whilst holding it open-handedly?' How do we find our way back into the community of faith? How do we find our way back into the doctrines? Hans Kung may have a response to this question. He proposes, "faith is in the final analysis humility . . . the humility of obedience."⁵⁹ Within the humility of obedience,⁶⁰ is it possible to re-turn to the Christian Story and discover an authentic, contemporary theological framework of understanding for grace that will respond to woundedness? Let us make a start at least!

A Contemporary Christian Theology of Grace

As reported earlier, systematic theology is not concerned primarily with obtaining knowledge; its concern is with experiencing a deepening of relationship with God. Therefore, a contemporary theology must speak from the collective revealed Wisdom of the tradition, whilst speaking into the knowledge and questions, fears and dreams of a specific context. In this case the context is one of a twenty-first century, Western post-modern, cosmological story of evolution. What theological questions arise from this contextual place? For the purposes of this essay, the revealed Wisdom of the tradition will be confined to the doctrines of "made in the image of God"⁶¹ and the Jesus Story.⁶²

In the beginning . . . all questions seem to sit within one overriding question. This question is "what is the meaning and purpose of life, if we are only going to die?" This question does not arise within a vacuum.⁶³ Behind this question is the perceived human predicament of limitation and mortality.⁶⁴ Behind this predicament is "fear of death."⁶⁵ Behind the fear of death is the fear of losing

⁵⁸ Moeller as cited in Hans Kung, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, (USA: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964) p 200

⁵⁹ Hans Kung, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, p 72

⁶⁰ Obedience here takes up the notion of to hear, or, to listen as found in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol 2, (d) Colin Brown, 1976.

⁶¹ Genesis 1:26 NRSV

⁶² The Jesus Story: This term in no way demeans the central figure of the Christian Story. I deliberately choose not to use the title 'Christ' so as to de-centre my western-cultural assumptions of conquering, war-lord, triumphal connotations laid on the work and person of Jesus.

⁶³ Charles Hefling, *Why Doctrines?* (Massachusetts: The Lonergan Institute at Boston College, 2000 Second Edition) p 8

⁶⁴ Roger Gould, *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978) p 218

⁶⁵ Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: A Way of Christian Contemplation*, pp 8-9

the Self. Now, what happens when we take this fear of losing our Self and place it within a Christian religious horizon? This religious horizon is bounded at one end by the Creation Story of "made in the image of God, fallen from grace, yet having a soul capable of receiving and responding to the divine initiative;"⁶⁶ and bounded at the other end by the expectation of an apocalyptic event⁶⁷ in which we are saved from eternal death by an outside force. This outside force is Christ the Messiah who defeats death, fixes the breakage (fallen state) and returns to claim his own and his rightful place as king. What happens when our fear of losing our Self is placed in this setting is that the symbol of eternal life becomes predominantly aligned with "the expectation of life beyond death . . . [and then] life this side of death naturally appears simply as preparation for it."⁶⁸ Is that all the meaning there is to this life? Is all we go through in this life just a preparation for the next! Does this speak into our contemporary context, or, hold any meaning for the girl in India?

What if we were to have a Copernican moment?⁶⁹ What if we were to radically shift our attention from the here-after to the present moment, including what we know of our universe and ourselves? Will the Wisdom of the tradition still hold true? With its "rational symbol[ic]"⁷⁰ language of God, will 'The Jesus Story' and understandings of 'sin', be able to speak from and into a Western evolutionary story? To be able to listen to the tradition, it is first necessary to articulate the relevant horizon of the evolutionary story. In this Story the givenness of human nature is such that it is intertwined within the web of connection of the whole earth community. Haughton would extend this sense of connection to a "moving web, a pattern of flowing, a never ceasing in-flow and out-flow of being . . . of love."⁷¹ This means that the human species is not isolated from, sits outside of, or, on top of the rest of creation. Rather, humanity takes its place within this organic web of connection. As with all of creation, we are part of the dynamic and, sometimes vulnerable process of evolution.

⁶⁶ Kathleen Williams, *Grace in Our Times*, Lecture Week 11, 2006 'Theological Anthropology'

⁶⁷ Metz, *Love's Strategy* as cited in Shawn M. Copeland, 'Political Theology as Interruptive' - Presidential Address, CTSA Proceedings 59, 2004

⁶⁸ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 223

⁶⁹ Copernican moment: a radical shift in thinking, which "undermines [or decentres] former authority." Norman Melchert, *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, (USA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995) p 285

⁷⁰ Paul Ricoeur writes of the "rational symbol ." Engaging in doctrine through the lens of a rational symbol, rather than a concept, allows doctrines to regain life in a contemporary context. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Northwestern University Press, 1974) p 281

⁷¹ Haughton, *A Passionate God*, p 21

Where is the place of God in this framework? Maritain sheds light on this:

"God makes a world in which created processes have their own integrity, so that they do not need God's constant direct intervention to be themselves. At a deeper level, it assumes a unity between grace and nature: the integrity of a created process will, if pursued honestly and systematically, be open to God's purposes."⁷²

Therefore, we are part of a universe that is continually changing and growing in complexity, which is open to God's purposes. This does not image God as an Interventionist. Rather, the implication is God as Participating Presence Within and Beyond the integrity of the created process. Creation's call to move and grow comes from God and leads to God.

Within this created evolutionary process, old age, death and decay are a natural part of life. These are moments of change in a human's life. These are the vulnerable moments. Recognizing death and limitation as a given-ness of the natural process of living does not take the pain and wounding out of them. However, if we accept them as part of our known experience, what further theological questions might emerge in relation to the three tenets of the Christian Story?

One emerging theological question is, "what differentiates the human species from other species in relation to being "created in the image of God?" One response to this question is, that if God is love and, we are created in the image of love, then our very being is to love. Furthermore, added to our being as love, we are also called as a humanity and, as individuals within that humanity, to "individuation . . . [where we develop] a more complete awareness of [our-self] as distinct, yet not cut off."⁷³ Lonergan's material on the 'subject' offers further insight on this matter. It is his contention that the human person is both substance and subject.⁷⁴ As substance, we are an evolutionary part of the collective earth community. As subject, we are "aware of our own consciousness."⁷⁵ We are awakened to the fact that we are created to be "self-constituting."⁷⁶ We realize that we are responsible for our own becoming.⁷⁷ It is

⁷² Maritain cited in Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Towards a New Theology for the 21st Century*, p 9

⁷³ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 38

⁷⁴ Lonergan SJ, 'Existenz and Aggiornamento' in *Collected Works*, p 224 (cf)

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p 222

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p 226

⁷⁷ Lonergan SJ, 'The Subject' in *The Second Collection*, p. 78

in this way of being created to wonder and question and take responsibility for our 'becoming' that we find our particular niche within the earth community, in response to the call of God. Therefore, a contemporary language of meaning flowing from "made in the image of God" is that our very being is love and we are a self-constituting species.

Now our attention will turn to the Jesus Story. The Wisdom of the tradition proclaims that in 'some way', the Jesus Story both reveals humanity's sin and reveals God's grace. What is the 'some way', or, "excess of meaning"⁷⁸ in the Jesus Story that speaks into our context. The Jesus Story as recorded in the Gospels proclaims that Jesus lived his "humanity to its fullest expression"⁷⁹ in union with God. In living fully, Jesus reveals God's grace as loving relationship. In living fully, Jesus also reveals the *way of grace*. Jesus' power was, and is, in his ability to awaken in others God's gift of grace.⁸⁰ Therefore, for those who believe in the 'Way' of Jesus, they consciously choose to live their humanity fully in transforming union with God. In this way, eternal life is embodied in the here and now.

Within this theological framework, what is the place of Jesus' death? A return to the dance image of the poem might reveal some insight. Before one can dance, they need to be invited to dance and they need to respond to the invitation. Within the Christian Story, the invitation is offered through the hand of Jesus. It is not just a hand; it is a wounded hand. The Christian Story has within its core a wounded healer. From a place of freedom and responsibility, Jesus of Nazareth: Anointed of God, chose to live authentically even though it meant his death. Thus as Haughton declares, "love seeking love consists in being vulnerable . . . [in] the undefended self being offered."⁸¹ In this way, Jesus does not 'fix' our relationship with God through the heroics in the form of an outside deity who is an all-conquering warlord. Jesus' life and death reveals how our relationship with God can be restored: by our choice to live authentically as a self-constituting species. This is the core of our faith tradition. But, you might cry "what about the resurrection?" Yes, the Resurrection Story is integral within the Christian story. However, unless we hold the Cross Story as central within our being, we are liable to fall "victim to

⁷⁸ Ricoeur states that a rational symbol has "an excess of meaning". *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* p 281

⁷⁹ Laurence Freeman, *Jesus: the Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2000) p 43

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p 47

⁸¹ Haughton, *A Passionate God* p 149

a theological heresy . . . aptly called "Christolatry."⁸² Consequently, we can idolize the triumphal resurrected Christ, thus thwarting intimacy-in-relation with God.

The Jesus Story not only reveals God's grace, it also reveals our sin. In living fully he exposed our choice to not engage in the 'way of' grace, therefore revealing our sin. Let me use Haughton's model of 'exchange of life'⁸³ to ground this proposition. Her model "pictures life [which she later names as love⁸⁴] as given and received in exchange, without ceasing, forever".⁸⁵ It is her contention that within this exchange there is a "constant flow of energy."⁸⁶ Within this model, sin is named as our choice to block the flow of energy thereby consciously negating, refusing, or, resisting the "exchange of love."⁸⁷ This conscious choice has two particular consequences. The first is that we do not grow via self-surrender into the self-knowledge, thus blocking being-in-love. Haughton depicts the second consequence this way. She states that when one refuses exchange as love: "exchange there has to be, but it becomes exchange as dominance and enslavement, forcing the surrender of that which is needed for existence, and surrendering in fear that which should have been given in tenderness."⁸⁸ This could be named as evil. Hence, our individual and historically collective choice to sin actually provokes evil.

And yet, here is the paradox. Within Haughton's model of transformation sin is necessary.⁸⁹ We can only truly know we are loved if we have rejected love and then returned to find it still there. We can only transform through our formation if we sin and break through that formation. Therefore, it would seem that sin is part of the created process of transformation! How can this be? The exploration of this subject is beyond the scope of this essay. Perhaps for now, we just need to hold this dilemma in tension?

Before we turn our attention to the point of grace for the girl in India, If Moeller is correct in his proposition, there is one more symbol to be articulated: that of the Trinity. Is there a Trinitarian symbol arising from this reflection? Yes.

⁸² Mary Daly as cited in Dorothee Solle, *Choosing Life* (London: SCM Press Ltd, English edition 1981) p p85

⁸³ Haughton, *A Passionate God* p 21 (cf)

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p 35

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p 21

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p 23

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p 92

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 114-115

⁸⁹ Haughton, *Transformation of Man*, p 34

God symbolized as 'That Who is Participating Presence' is Beyond, Among⁹⁰ and Within.

Beyond: as Mystery
 experienced as the drawing of love
Among: as vulnerable⁹¹ love
 witnessed to in the wounded healer
Within: in transforming union
 experienced as intimacy-in-relationship

A Christian language of meaning for grace is:

The gift of grace is the possibility of discovering your true self within intimacy-in-relationship with God; birthed in the reality of the Jesus Story. Therefore, the gift of grace is embodied and enacted in humanity as vulnerable love.

To re-turn to the girl in India

What then, of the girl in India. What is the point of grace for her particularly? Is she just a necessary consequence of the suffering inherent within the natural order of the evolutionary process? Does she perhaps not matter in the overall scheme of the universe? To these questions one must shout a resounding no. The Jesus Story reveals that grace is gift both for the individual and the communal earth community. However, what is the way forward for her to both receive and respond to the gift?

If formation is so essential to transformation, then perhaps the Indian girl needs conversion to the Christian religious tradition. Perhaps this will leave the way open for transformation. Then again perhaps not, since "the message can only be delivered in the language available,"⁹² and grace is not grace unless it finds its expression in the "concreteness of the human body."⁹³ How then might she experience the gift? John Shea states that unlike most species, humans are "born as vulnerable infants."⁹⁴ As such, we are totally dependent on others for our physical, emotional and spiritual needs. When these needs are not met, or

⁹⁰ I procured the word 'among' from Donal Dor, *Divine Energy: God Beyond Us, Within Us, Among Us*, (Missouri: Triumph, 1996) p title

⁹¹ Vulnerable in the way that Houghton suggests, "This giving of love is so hard precisely because of this background of sin. So giving love finally involves a sort of death, for this giving is a giving without hope of return." *Transformation of Man*, p 81

⁹² Houghton, *Transformation of Man*, p. 145

⁹³ Denise Ackermann 'Reconciliation as Embodied Change: A South African Perspective', A Paper as presented at CTSA Convention, 2004 Published in *CTSA Proceedings 59* (2004) p 6

⁹⁴ John Shea, *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults* (Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) pp 132-134

more precisely in her case, abused, then perhaps what the girl needs is to experience her survival needs met in the language of love;⁹⁵ by other humans. If she does not experience human love, how will she be able to encounter Godself as love? Perhaps a in-breaking of God's grace for someone like the girl in India is not through vulnerability, as it is with those who live lives of privilege in the first world. Her whole life is one of vulnerability. Perhaps the in-breaking of God for her is in encountering love through a human being. In this way, the vulnerable love offered her through another human being might be the place where the evil she has experienced might be absorbed⁹⁶ and, she may begin to experience herself as loveable.

Within this formation of love, there must be space for her to tell her Story. To tell of her woundedness to people who will bear "witness,"⁹⁷ that is, listen compassionately "before uttering a word."⁹⁸ To witness a Story of woundedness is not a passive stance. A "witness is never a spectator."⁹⁹ To truly witness a Story of woundedness will call us to the place of lament: questioning our comfortable, secure theology;¹⁰⁰ our relationship with grace; our praise in worship¹⁰¹ that comes from the place of privilege. So often we silence people's Stories because we dare not bear witness to them. It is too painful and confusing for us. We choose instead to *do* something for those people. And yet, if the wounding is denied, healing and transformation cannot take place.¹⁰² Furthermore, when those who are "already transformed by love"¹⁰³ bear witness, they do so from a place of a "life of faith which is unafraid to examine suffering, but is nonetheless grounded on hope."¹⁰⁴ In this way, they can hold the person in hope until the person is ready to take hope on her/himself.¹⁰⁵ Is God's grace operative in this process of bearing witness? Yes. The Jesus Story reveals grace as "embodied"¹⁰⁶ vulnerable love, drawing one into healing and hope.

⁹⁵ Houghton states "the most important part of a human formation that can make way for the transformation of love is in fact the experience of being loved." *Transformation of Man*, p 114

⁹⁶ Copeland, 'Political Theology as Interruptive', p 8

⁹⁷ Ibid., p 8

⁹⁸ Denise Ackermann, 'Reconciliation as Embodied Change: A South African Perspective', p 2

⁹⁹ Copeland, 'Political Theology as Interruptive', p 8

¹⁰⁰ Ackermann, 'Reconciliation as Embodied Change' - Ackermann states that we often choose to "sanitize God by removing God from the ugliness of evil and suffering. . ." p 9

¹⁰¹ Ibid., She also states that "our liturgies are impoverished by the loss of lament." p 9

¹⁰² Ibid., p 9

¹⁰³ Houghton, *Transformation of Man*, p. 81

¹⁰⁴ Ackermann, 'Reconciliation as Embodied Change' p 9

¹⁰⁵ National Conference: Spirituality and Mental Health, Victoria, 2005

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p 6

There is one more word to be said about grace. Grace is not a private love affair with God. A true experience of the gift of grace will compel a faith community to seek justice for others. As a human being we are responsible for our own actions and also as a collective species we are responsible for the woundedness of other human beings and the earth community. Woundedness caused by evil, is provoked by our choice to not live as we were so created. As a result, we all have to take responsibility for allowing people like the girl in India to experience evil and love-lessness. Our experience of grace must lead towards repentance as individuals and as a species, making visible the invisible victims¹⁰⁷ of injustice and moving towards actual justice for all. Our theology of grace must challenge the faith community to respond to this outward movement.

Concluding Remarks

Within the Christian tradition grace is: the gift of Godself, revealed as vulnerable love, in and through embodied relationship. Within this love, we are called forth to grow into the fullness of our humanity. For this reason, Christians are not the chosen ones. They are the ones who have responded to the invitation to live in freedom and with responsibility within transforming union with God.

What is the point of this gift for the girl in India? That she might initially experience herself as being loveable and in time as being-in-love. For her to receive this gift, she must first experience formation through being truly loved by other human beings. From this place of encountering vulnerable love, she may one day be able respond to the love of God from her context, which could well be Hinduism.

¹⁰⁷ Dorothee Solle, *Choosing Life*, p 57