"The Spirit of Grace: Prevenient Grace as a Basis for Dialogue with Other Religions"

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Spirit of grace, and health, and power,
Fountain of light and love below,
Abroad thine healing influence shower,
O'er all the nations let it flow.
Inflame our hearts with perfect love,
In us the work of faith fulfil;
So not heaven's hosts shall swifter move
Than we on earth to do thy will.

Charles Wesley, "Hymns and Sacred Poems" (1742)

The events of September 11 have brought into sharper focus a myriad of theological issues and questions. Perennial questions raised by issues such as theodicy, the concept of just war are just two examples. There is another set of questions raised that is particularly relevant to our discussions today. Is there a way in which an evangelical Wesleyan can engage in sincere and authentic dialogue in search for a common theological ground with other world religions?

It would seem that in order for sincere and authentic dialogue to be attained at least two criteria should be met. First, from the evangelical point of view, the dialogue should be able to maintain Christological supremacy, without relegating Christ to the pluralistic category of one among many at worse, or first among equals at best. Secondly, the other trick to this task is allowing the theological integrity of other religions to be maintained. Both should be done simultaneously while offering due regard to both one and the other.

What this paper will suggest are ways a Wesleyan may look at the concept of prevenient grace as a basis for dialogue with other religions.

Prevenient grace as experience of the "Spirit of Grace"

Wesley's definition of grace was, "The power of the Holy Ghost, enabling us to believe and love and serve God." ("Instructions for Children," 1745). Given the fact that Wesley was writing that definition for children might suggest he was oversimplifying matters a bit. Perhaps he was. Nonetheless, there is a significant insight to be found here, namely a connection between pneumatology and the doctrine of grace, creating a pneumatology of grace, if you will. So significant was this connection between grace and the Holy Spirit, it prompted Charles to rename the third person of the Trinity, the "Spirit of Grace" in many of the hymns, such as the one cited above. Grace may be appropriated Christologically for Wesley, but it was applied pneumatologically. An experience of the Holy Spirit is consequently an experience of grace. An experience of grace is an experience of the Holy Spirit. Both are the gift of the Triune God.
question becomes how far may this relationship between the Spirit and grace be carried? Might a pneumatology of grace be carried over, say for example, a doctrine of creation? Might the concern for an epistemology of the Holy Spirit be just as well as an epistemology of grace? And what are the implications on the image of God? Then there are the nature and grace, Christ and culture issues. There are certainly too many to be explored here.

The pneumatology of grace should have implications for the doctrine of prevenient grace. The connection between the two can more clearly be seen when we revisit Wesley's definition of prevenient grace.

2. If we take this in its utmost extent it will include all that is wrought in the soul by what is frequently termed 'natural conscience', but more properly, 'preventing grace'; all the 'drawings' of 'the Father', the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; all that 'light' wherewith the Son of God 'enlighteneth everyone that cometh into the world', showing every man 'to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God'; all the convictions which his Spirit from time to time works in every child of man. Although it is true the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at least deny, that ever they had them at all. ("The Scripture Way of Salvation" III.I.2)

The implicit claim here is often lost in the theological shuffle. The Spirit of grace is a universal human experience. As a universal human experience the pneumatology of grace entails a divinely motivated desire to "do justly, to love mercy, and the walk humbly" with one's God. The desire for justice, mercy, and humility are not unique to Christianity. How Christians go about attaining fully and making real justice, mercy, and humility is uniquely known to Wesleyans as "the way of salvation." But the common desire for these values are longings that grow out of our common experience of prevenient grace.

This enables Jews, Muslims, and Christians to share in a mutual quest for justice, mercy, and humility out of a common experience of God's grace.

Prevenient grace as grace of creation.

All of this would seem to suggest that prevenient grace should be incorporated into the doctrine of creation. This was a move made by Arminius. Muller notes that Arminius saw grace belonging to the created order "as part of its fundamental relation to God" (Richard Muller, God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius, 1991, 244-45). This raises questions regarding the relationship between nature and grace, and of the natural condition of human beings. In his debate with Junius, Arminius objected to the view inherited from Augustine and Aquinas, that creation imparted both natural and supernatural gifts of grace. The supernatural gift was only specific to Adam and Eve, and not transmissible to following generations. Arminius instead argued that natural and supernatural gifts of grace are God's gift to all humanity and that the supernatural gifts of grace belong to the imago Dei, and consequently "transmitted to his posterity without exception" according to the "administrative decree of creation" and providence, to the end that "the principles and seeds of moral virtues...remain in us after the fall" (Arminius in Muller, 245-46). While Wesley does not explicitly make a similar argument, he does hold to a similar understanding of the image of God, an understanding that simply does not make sense unless one does what Arminius does here at the point of creation.

What this means is that grace becomes an ontological category and not just a soteriological one. It becomes the fundamental way the Triune God relates to the
created world. To exist is to exist in a prevenient relationship to and with God as Creator. The only alternative to prevenient grace is non-being.

A pneumatology of grace where the doctrine of creation is concerned would strengthen Colin Gunton’s case, as laid out in his 1992 Bampton Lectures, The One, the Three and the Many: God Creation and the Culture of Modernity. In trying to provide a theological response to post modernity and cultural pluralism, Gunton turns to Trinitarian theology as a way of understanding the nature of God and God’s relationship to the world. In stating his case he turns to the perichoresis of the Trinity to account for the nature of this relationship, concluding, “It is not therefore something which holds things together, but someone: the one through whom, in the unity of the Father and the Spirit, all things have their being” (179). He then points to the classic doctrine of the image of God and suggests that human beings are by the nature of our creation and existence perichoretic beings. “If the notion of perichoresis helps us to rethink the matter, it is by virtue of the fact that, although it envisages close relatedness, it never does so to the detriment of particularity. Rather, it teaches that, as made in the image of God, we are closely bound up, for good or ill, with other human beings” (169). There is not any time or space here to explore Gunton’s argument more fully. I would just argue that his case might indeed be strengthened if one develops and pneumatology of grace as it specifically relates to the doctrine of creation.

Prevenient grace as the “image of God”

It should be apparent by now that much of our concept of common humanity intersects at the “image of God.” Here is where we return to Wesley. For him the image of God was natural (rational), moral (relational), and political (governing) in nature. The significance of these categories is that they are not exclusively rational but profoundly relational in their nature. The image of God summarizes our intra-personal relationships, our inter-personal relationships, and our relationships with humanity and the created order. For Wesley all the attributes of the image of God are re-inscribed by prevenient grace and common to all humanity.

But Wesley, perhaps more specifically Charles Wesley, often used the hymns to talk about the Trinitarian nature of the image of God. Unfortunately, he does not give much help in understanding exactly what he meant by that. But it does get the theological imagination working. Seeing the image of God as reflecting somehow the image of the Triune God was not a common notion. Perhaps this Trinitarian understanding of the image of God is way one might go about better understanding the perichoresis of human beings.

It is from the re-inscription of the “moral” image comes Wesley’s notion of conscience. He spoke of it in terms of the marred “remains of the image of God” as including “some discernment of the difference between moral good and evil, with an approbation of one and disapprobation of the other, by an inward monitor excusing or accusing....” (“Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels” II.1) All of which led Wesley to conclude,

Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And everyone, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared as with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath. (“On Working Out Our Own Salvation” III.4)
The concept of conscience and the image of God means we can address moral issues as human beings, not just as Christians, Muslims, and Jews. This is not to suggest that we should keep ourselves from addressing them for the perspective of our respective traditions. It is only to suggest that a pneumatology of grace enables us to maintain our theological particularity while doing so.

**Prevenient grace as grace of culture.**

Creation, the image of God and conscience allows us to talk about certain ethical issues. The next question that arises pertains to culture. What then is the relationship between Christ and culture? Niebuhr’s classic, *Christ and Culture* may offer a way of looking at the issue. In his work he offers several models: Christ against culture; the Christ of culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture in paradox (the dualists); and, Christ the transformer of culture. Niebuhr understands as culture, “...that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name culture, now the name civilization, is applied in common speech” (32). It is the secondary environment imposed upon the natural world, consisting of “language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values” (32).

It could be said that there was a little bit of each in Wesley’s understanding of the relationship between Christ and culture. Prevenient grace as seen up to this point might allow a relationship of Christ *of* culture, or even a relationship of Christ and culture in paradox. He certainly had no problem in plundering the Egyptians at that point, making use of culture to further his own cause. But his Wesley’s views on justification by faith might suggest that Wesley holds to Christ as the transformer of culture. It is interesting to note that Niebuhr saw Wesley transformationalist. On this basis Marquardt has critiqued Wesley’s social ethics (*John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, 1991). But his views on Christian perfection might suggest that Wesley sees Christ against culture. Christians were indeed *in* the world but they were in no way to be of the world. These varying views of Wesley on Christ and culture may help to explain why so many varying traditions claim Wesley as their theological progenitor, from liberal Christians to the holiness tradition. Each has its own understanding of Wesley on grace.

Perhaps there is a way of understanding prevenient grace as the grace of culture. This would seem to suggest that a grace of culture seeks to find God present in human creation and activity. It is our attempt, like Paul, to name the unnamed god. This seems to be what African theologians are doing through their notion of enculturation. Perhaps the history of Christian missions in Africa would have been different had a doctrine of prevenient grace encouraged this to happen.

The perichoresis of the pneumatology of grace insists that “Everything in the universe is what it is by virtue of its relatedness to everything else” (Gunton, 172). This is true even of human culture in all its plurality. Our task is to name God in Muslim, Jewish, and even western culture.

**Prevenient grace and the “new creation”**

The way we have been looking at prevenient grace is somewhat different from the way it is usually seen by evangelical Wesleyan theologians at least. When prevenient grace is usually mentioned in that context it is seen as “porch” of salvation that leads us to the way of salvation. This is certainly how Wesley saw it.

“...salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) ‘preventing grace’; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight, transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life, some degree of salvation, the beginning
of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by 'convincing grace', usually in Scripture termed 'repentance', which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation, whereby 'through grace' we 'are saved by faith', consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God."

("On Working Out Our Own Salvation" II.1)

There is no doubt that an evangelical understanding of prevenient grace as the first step to God’s way of salvation. But what this discussion has suggested is that prevenient grace is not just the porch of salvation. It can also be seen as a foundation for discussion with other world religions the commonly held God granted human values of mercy, justice, and humility. That being said, our prayer becomes

Spirit of grace, and health, and power,
Fountain of light and love below,
Abroad thine healing influence shower,
O'er all the nations let it flow.