

GRACE NOTES

LAYERING SMALL GRACE UPON SMALL GRACE

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God's truth comes to us from different places at different times. Each truth event sounds a small note of grace that together, if we listen, make up the musical score of God active in the world today. Listen to these ten small notes of grace from ten recent books.

Douglas Jacobsen and Rodney Sawatsky
Gracious Christianity: Living the Love We Profess
Baker Academic 2006

It is not difficult to understand the problem this book addresses. The words “agree” and “disagree” appear seven times on the first two pages. The problem is contentious Christianity, “the defensiveness and mean-spiritedness that pervade so many expressions of Christian faith in America and around the world.” What we need is gracious Christianity, Christianity that lives up to “the free and unmerited favor of God.” How does that kind of Christianity look when explained through some of the classic doctrines of theology—God, creation, human nature, revelation, salvation, Christian living, church, Bible, and the End Times? The authors tell us.

The author's solution is to have gracious conversations. The word “conversation” appears eleven times on the same first two pages. Both authors are from Messiah College, one a professor of church history and theology (Jacobsen), the other (Sawatsky) president who unfortunately died before the book was published. They wrote this short book trying to answer the question of “how Christians could be more embracing of those different from themselves, but remain people of strong faith and conviction.” They succeed.

This book is right for our time. The signature doctrine of Christian faith is grace. Grace as a concept is something most Christians can talk about in some detail. As a principle to live by it is less widespread. This book could become a classic, the *Mere Christianity* of the first quarter of the 21st century. It sounds the right notes in our cacophonous world.

Daniel Hillel
The Natural History of the Bible:
An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures
 Columbia University Press 2006

Hillel's premise is that the events, characters, and ideas in the Bible developed within a particular combination of environmental circumstances and that the former can be properly understood only in relation to the latter. To understand the Bible fully we must be able to imaginatively recreate the original environment of the physical landscape. This recreation is fundamental to being able to envision the original social context which is in turn necessary to understanding the so-called original "hearers" of the biblical texts. Remove the impact of the original environment from this hermeneutical task and a crucial piece of the puzzle is lost.

Interest in the *natural history* of the Bible is not new. Henry Tristram wrote *The Natural History of the Bible*, the same title as this book, in 1873 (SPCK). He described the geography, climate, animals, and plants of the Holy Land. He did not describe the *environment* proper, however, if by that we mean the way these various elements interact to create an environmental system. And he did not even begin to speculate on how human beings and their societies and even religious ideas interacted with and were influenced by this environmental system. Thus he was not an *ecologist*.

Hillel is a natural historian. But he does more than describe the various domains of the biblical world: riverine, pastoral, desert, rainfed, maritime, urban, and exile. As an environmentalist and ecologist he shows how these domains work together with human beings to create the biblical world and ethical monotheism, the natural expressions of God's revelation, as we understand it today.

Epictetus
A Manual for Living
 HarperSanFrancisco 1994

Former Roman slave and Stoic philosopher Epictetus lectured on the good life. His students took notes. The notes became a collection called the *Discourses*. A selection of the most pithy excerpts were collected in a manual modeled on military manuals of the day called a *Manual for Living*. If reading this short work (less than 100 pages) sounds familiar, it is because the Apostle Paul was influenced by Epictetus's teachings, influence we find reflected in the Pauline letters.

Epictetus's advice revolves around three loci: (1) Master your desires. One does not master desires by eliminating them (a common, but false, stereotype of Stoicism). You do it by teaching yourself to desire things

you can actually control and attain, and by not desiring (coveting or rejecting) things you can't. (2) Perform your duties. Epictetus taught that we have duties to God ("Within the Divine order we each have our own special calling"), to family, and to our own gifts. We are like actors in a play. The Divine will has assigned us our role in life. (3) Think clearly. Reason was paramount for Epictetus. He insisted we use it ("as you think, so you become"), and that we protect it ("treasure your mind, cherish your reason"). The virtuous life depends on reason first and foremost.

This new translation by Sharon Lebell is a worthwhile read.

James Burge
Heloise and Abelard: A New Biography
HarperSanFrancisco 2003

Heloise and Abelard lived one of the great love stories of the Western literary tradition. Abelard was perhaps the Christian church's greatest philosophical theologian of the Middle Ages and one of its greatest thinkers ever. Heloise's letters reveal her to be not only an intellectual match for Abelard, but possessor of a writing style second to none. This new biography tells the story well, both the inspiring passion and the eventual tragedy.

One particular strength: storyteller Burge intimates how professor Abelard may have justified his affair with student Heloise because of his view of sin as intention. Both Abelard and Heloise were nominalists for whom an act was sin only if its perpetrator was aware of the act's evil nature. Both Abelard and Heloise went to their graves thinking their love for each other justified their actions. For Abelard, sin originates in "consent to that which we believe to be wrong." For Heloise, "the pleasures of lovers that we shared have been too sweet—they can never displease me, and can scarcely be banished from my thoughts."

It is this view of sin that seems to make this 850 year old story so relevant to our individualistic age where acknowledgment of sin has largely ceased to be a communal affair and has been replaced by the psychological dynamics related to shame, remorse, apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Ham Sok Hon
Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea
Friends World Committee 1985

Ham Sok Hon has been called the Gandhi of Korea because he articulated a spiritual vision for Korea not unlike Gandhi articulated a spiritual vision for an independent India. Whereas Gandhi's vision originated in his understanding of Hindu Vedic thought, however, Ham

Sok Hon's originated in his understanding of Christianity (and later Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism). In retelling the history of Korea from this perspective, the author identifies Korea's spiritual fate to be suffering and its calling to be to show the world how to bear that suffering, "without grumbling, without evading, and with determination and seriousness." This is what will help lead the world to salvation.

Most people living in the world today believe not just in individual calling from God, but also some kind of communal calling. In the age of modern nation-states, very often that communal calling is seen in the form of a divine mandate for their country: Israel's chosenness, the United States's Puritanism, Saudi Arabia's Wahabism, and so on. The problem, of course, is that these unique callings are rarely seen as complementary, but usually competitive: "My country's calling shows it to be the most favored of God."

Ham Sok Hom, this prophet of Korea's calling, seems to avoid that by identifying Korea's calling in such a humiliating form—suffering. This largely unknown (by Western readers) Korean nationalist may have some important things for the rest of the world to hear.

John D. Caputo
Philosophy and Theology
Abingdon Press 2006

The conversation between philosophy and theology has been a staple of Western philosophical and Christian theological discussion since the church first began the attempt to analyze the story of Jesus. For much of that 2000 year history, theology has been seen as the singer of the melody in the duet, philosophy struggling to keep up the harmony. More recently philosophy gained the upper hand by setting itself up as the rule keeper for how to do rational discourse. John Caputo engagingly tells this story (in less than 100 pages) and then says that both of these prioritizing endeavors are wrong-headed and that theology and philosophy are more like complementary ways of talking about one's faith than competitive, either/or analyses.

It is no little thing to say that a new way of thinking about the relationship between theology and philosophy has emerged, but this book shows that such is the case. It is an extremely well told story, manageable by even the most philosophically challenged. It gives one hope that the postmodern turn might turn out to be more than just a critique of modernity after all, and that postmodernism may provide us with some ideas on how to proceed into the 21st century.

Readers of this book will be stimulated to know how to embrace theology in a world that has become overly enamored with the important realms of affective and practical thought.

Sarah Strauss

Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures

Berg 2005

This book is about the spread of yoga from its Indian, Hindu, philosophical roots to its status today as a worldwide phenomena. How did this happen? Why yoga and not mimamsa, vedanta, samkhya, nyaya, and/or vaisheshika (the other major Indian philosophical systems)? Sarah Strauss argues that it is because yoga was transformed by Indian modernist innovators like Vivekananda and Sivananda who recognized its Indian nation-building potential, and Western modernist innovators who emphasized its health and freedom building properties.

Strauss's discussion of how yoga has spread from its home in India to other places in the world (particularly the West), how it changed in the process, and how those changes have been reintroduced to India, has interesting parallels to the Christian mission effort. A delicate balancing act between being faithful to the yoga tradition (e.g. Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms) and at the same time showing how this ancient spiritual technology meets the many needs of the postmodern world sounds eerily like the same challenges faced by Christian mission workers. Because it is a discussion from another, totally different context than the one we are so used to in missiological circles, "aha" moments of recognition occur regularly.

David Morgan

The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in

Theory and Practice

University of California Press 2005

If you are interested in religious art in general, Christian religious art in particular, and the role art has played in Christian missions, this book has much to offer. The thesis of the book is a familiar one: religious scholars, especially Western ones, have overemphasized the role and importance of the written and spoken word to the detriment of the painted, sculpted, and drawn "word." In this particular book, David Morgan makes the case for the importance of visual images for the religious studies scholar.

In the course of making that convincing case, however, he offers a paradigm of art as it relates to religion's mission efforts, "The Circulation of Images in Mission History." In that chapter he offers a typology of ways of seeing, what he calls the six moments in the circulation of images: (1) images and attitudes that a culture uses to prepare for mission work; (2) images taken from home to be used in the work of the mission field; (3) positive indigenous visual responses to the mission work; (4) negative indigenous visual responses to mission work; (5) visual images sent back

home to encourage further mission support; and (6) the development of an indigenous visual art culture. This chapter alone makes this book worthwhile reading for the student of Christian art history and the history of the Christian mission movement.

Bhatta Jayanta
Much Ado About Religion
 New York University Press 2005

This is one of the volumes of the new Clay Sanskrit Library, an ambitious series of translations and annotations of classical Sanskrit literature into English. *Much Ado About Religion* (*Agamadambara*) is a play that satirizes the relationships among competing religions in ninth century India, particularly Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jains.

It is the story of a young Vedic “seminary” graduate, Sankarshana, who takes on as his life’s calling the unmasking of the heterodox sects of Buddhism, Jainism, and the ascetic life in general. In a series of encounters with the leaders of these movements he brilliantly exposes them as frauds and defeats their religious teachings as false. The play ends, though, not with the victory one would expect for Sankarshana, but his humiliation as an arrogant, young know-it-all who does not really understand life, and the Buddhist, Jain, and ascetic leaders are shown to be the real heroes, appreciated for what they do know, not denigrated for what they don’t.

This is a surprise ending for those of us who are Western Modernists. Sankarshana had clearly defeated the others with his Vedic philosophical arguments. He should win—but didn’t. For Jayanta’s Hindu readership, however, it was a confirmation of one of the core values of Hindu India. The question was not how does the one relate to the many, but how do the many make room for the one. It is intriguing to see that core value challenged in present day India by the Modernist thesis which has infiltrated right wing Hinduism and continues to threaten the stability of that society.

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and Robert Benewick
The State of China Atlas
 University of California Press 2005

A new image of China, the ancient, inscrutable, centralizing kingdom (zhongguo) has emerged: China the modernizing, economic giant. It is a revealing image. It is not too much to say that all of our futures are inextricably tied to what happens in China in the next decade and beyond.

How to deal with China’s rising power has become a cottage industry for publishing. *The State of China Atlas* is an indispensable visual introduction to this new China. It consists of over 100 pages of beautiful color charts and graphs that summarize China’s demographics, economics, politics,

everyday life, and environment. An ending set of tables compares all these aspects of China with the rest of the world.

Because China is, well, China, all of these modernizing developments sound achingly familiar and perplexingly different. The Chinese have not ceased being Chinese and thus this inexorable march toward a market economy is frequently punctuated with an ancient Confucian tradition, a mix that has made words like Tianamen Square and Fulan Gong easily recognizable terms.

Christianity is growing in China, especially in the South and East. Official estimates put the numbers at 30 million, informed estimates go as high as 50 million. Freedom of religion from state controls is likely to follow a pattern not unlike the growing freedom of economic markets—two steps forward, one step back—never totally free from government control, but freer. Good news for mission workers. The more intriguing question is what kind of indigenous Christianity will emerge. The success of house churches is probably due to more than their flexibility to elude government controls, but also because they represent an ecclesial form that has deep resonances with Chinese family and social structures.