Conversations around the centrality of grace

A review article by Duncan Reid


Opening this book is like being invited to a dinner party. Some of the guests I have known for a long time, though I cannot claim to know them well. Others I have met or heard speak at conferences, one or two I know only by repute. They are all friends, so I feel something of an outsider, and somewhat daunted by the thought of reporting on their conversation. But they are friends of Graeme Garrett, so I know in advance that the gathering will be welcoming of relative strangers, that it will be characterised by conviviality and humour with serious intellectual wrestling, earthed in the Australian cultural context. The book promises to say something about ‘the centrality of grace’ (p. 2) and the work of the theologian, two issues that immediately catch and hold my attention. My response will necessarily be somewhat personal.

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First, grace... We use the word, assuming we all know what it means and that we all mean essentially the same thing by it. But do we really? We all on occasions sing Cardinal Newman’s hymn expressing wonder that there could be ‘a higher gift than grace’; this higher gift is ‘God’s presence and his very self / and essence all-divine’. Here grace, ontologically ‘lower’ than God’s very self, refers to what Catholic scholastic theology knows as created grace, a cultivated product of the habit of perfection’ (Gerard Manley Hopkins). The Catholic tradition, of course, knows another sort of grace, God’s own self-communication (Karl Rahner). But I suspect that this notion of created grace still informs a great deal of what we think of as (western) spirituality. How different in feel this is from the Orthodox sense of grace as God’s own dynamic, intensely fearful and yet mysteriously beckoning presence, God’s deifying presence, if we allow it to be. There can be no conceivably ‘higher gift’ than this. This grace is God’s very self, but presented to us in such a way that we can survive its scorching proximity. So we already have an ecumenical problem here. And then there is the Protestant version of grace: John Newton’s ‘amazing grace ... / that saved a wretch like me’; saved, past tense: it has already been accomplished, it is no ongoing process. And me – as individual. We are a long way here from the habit of perfection, nurtured in community. Nor is the wretch to be deified. But, asks the western Christian, what is this about being deified? Isn’t that a bit presumptuous, a bit pantheist, a bit pagan, even? And then there is the grace that comes preceded by the indefinite article, ‘a grace’. Finally we have the popular, Scott Peck version of grace: those welcome, fortuitous events that happen to all of us on occasions. Destiny seems the defining element in this usage of ‘grace’. Here, I suspect, we have moved beyond any worldview framed by the biblical narrative. And all this is to say nothing of grace in the sense of beauty of movement, whether literally or figuratively intended. So I decide to watch carefully for how each contributor chooses to use this, to me, problematic little word. Almost every contributor, I note, does use it, some in several senses.

And second, the theologian’s task... Each contributor has engaged with this concern. What is it that a theologian does? Well, a theologian speaks, writes, wrestling publicly, in pulpit or classroom or the press, or all three, with the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebecca, the God of Jacob and Rachel, the God of Jesus Christ and his church. The theologian tries to make sense of our human circumstances, by reference to this ancient collection of stories and in living relationship with their primary subject, God. And tries to make sense of the stories, by reference to our common human circumstances. This is no private activity – even Jacob’s wrestling, which may have been private for a night, became public knowledge pretty soon after. ‘What are you limping for, dad? What exactly have you been up to – this time?’ So the theologian is one who feels compelled to speak, write, communicate, teach. Each of the contributors, who are themselves educators of some note, reflects on one or another, and sometimes several aspects of this very public responsibility. As someone whose studies and working life have centred on the nexus between theological and educational thinking, I resolve also to watch carefully for what I might learn about these themes.

The collection is reminiscent in structure of George Herbert’s seventeenth-century reflections on various aspects of ordained ministry; the parson’s preaching, the parson’s catechising, the parson’s library and so on. In this contemporary antipodean echo, each chapter is subtitled ‘the theologian as ...’ Like Herbert’s rural ministry, theological teaching will be delivered in simple, accessible language, conversationally, without cant or self-promotion. Any reader of a collection will, depending on interests and expertise, feel the pull to enter into dialogue with some essays more than others, and in my reading of this collection I am no exception. But in the interests of fairness, and at the risk of taking a seemingly pedestrian approach, I shall try to give roughly equal space to each contributor, taking them in order of appearance. So let me introduce to you the contributors to this volume, one by one.

Stephen Pickard addresses the theme of theologian as priest. Essential for understanding the call to priesthood, he argues, and indeed to ‘the dynamics of human transformation’ (p. 9), is the category of promise: in the case of ordained ministry, God’s promise to us and our promise in response. But the language of promise, understood as ‘a performative act with intrinsic obligations’ (p. 15), has been significantly reduced or completely lost from modern ordinals, and this has diminished both the understanding and practice of priesthood. Pickard proposes a program for ordination training whereby candidates are ‘slowly and intentionally inducted into the deepest secrets found in the vows’ (p. 20).

Jane Foulcher, in addressing the theme, ‘theologian as preacher’, offers – to an age that has become tone deaf to the homiletic genre – ‘an apology
for preaching’ (p. 24). What emerges is a finely crafted sermon on a text from Graeme Garrett’s own preaching: ‘I speak, and we listen, in the name of God. Holy Trinity’. Each word here is mined for its significance to the preacher’s craft. The chapter grapples with the ambiguities of preaching through the trope of vacating the pulpit – the actual, physical pulpit of a country church – to those who, though highly skilled at crafting words, are strangers to the Christian story.

Kerrie Hide explores the theme of theologian as spiritual director. The ‘dissociation of sensibility’ between theology as an academic discipline and spiritual direction goes back at least to the fourteenth century in the west, and, as Hide argues, has been detrimental to both. It has prompted further divisions between the various disciplines within theology (just try chairing a meeting of theological teachers when redrafting the overall course structure is on the agenda!), and the various approaches to spirituality. The spiritual director seeks the direction of the Spirit to enable, in an act of love, another ‘to focus on the presence of the Spirit within their story’ (p. 39). It is a slow, painstaking task of ‘awakening the wisdom of the body’ (p. 46) and embracing the grace that already dwells secretly within each human person.

John Painter is a pioneer of the move to teach biblical studies within the secular, Australian higher education environment. I am firmly of the opinion that active involvement in the wider educational scene is essential for keeping theological education from isolation and stagnation. And claiming a space for the gospel, or even a more general religious perspective, within this broader academic culture can be no bad thing either. Painter’s contribution, a reflection on the theologian as biblical interpreter, calls for the importance of reading the Bible intelligently, in which ‘a progressive revelation of God and God’s purpose for the world becomes a theological criterion’ (p. 63). The actual problems facing our generation – climate change and overpopulation – must be allowed to stand at the forefront of any responsible engagement with the biblical text.

Thorwald Lorenzen, whose observations are invariably acute and to the point, is charged with the heavy responsibility of addressing the theologian’s prophetic role. This Lorenzen places under the guidance of the Hebrew tradition and the prophetic office of Christ himself. ‘Prophets,’ he concludes, ‘do not pick and choose issues that are convenient. Their passion for God and their compassion for God’s creatures and God’s creation makes them sensitive to situations in which God’s ways clash with our ways... There remains much to do for theologians who understand their role in obedience to the Lordship of Christ’ (p. 82). And, we could add, who have the courage to practise their prophetic-theological calling.

John Langmore addresses the public task of theology in his chapter on ‘the theologian as citizen’. Accepting responsibility for the public sphere has always struck me as a particularly Anglican virtue – and vice. It’s one of the things that keeps me personally being an Anglican. At its worst it can give us failures to distinguish church from society (Jane Austen’s Mr Collins or Australia’s own ‘flogging parson’), citizenship from discipleship. But at its best it gives us parishes that undertake responsibility, in suitably reticent and unobtrusive ways, for the members of whole communities, and whole multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. This sense of responsibility, as Langmore explains, also carries powerful prophetic implications.

Sarah Bachelard explores the role of theologian as ethicist. She is careful at the outset to dissociate such ethical concern from the ‘life-pinching stance’ (p. 105) that can easily be taken for Christian ethics. To explain a grace-filled ethic, Bachelard unpacks two almost identical encounters involving huge power differences, one from Tolstoy and the other from Primo Levi. The one point of contrast is the sudden intrusion of – let’s call it ‘grace’. In one encounter, the human subject is in some sense granted the possibility of ‘seeing or recognising the reality of the other’ (p. 111); in the other encounter, not. One encounter is ethical, the other not. The train of events that follow are vastly different. At the base of such experiences, according to Bachelard, following a suggestion of Rowan Williams, is the presence of a (or perhaps the) ‘non-competitive other’ (pp. 110–11).

David Neville also addresses a fundamental ethical question in his reflection on the theologian as peacemaker. Starting from Barth’s notion of correspondence, Neville ultimately, like Barth himself, refers back to the teaching and example of Jesus. Jesus preached, and demonstrated, the reign of God. Even though, Neville concedes, the scriptures contain ‘texts of transcendental terror’, ‘there is good reason to read such texts as projections of humanity’s [not God’s] proneness to violence’ (p. 113). The scriptures do not whitewash human behaviour; these stories are not just nice stories about nice people. And yet it is the ‘visions of shalom’ (p. 129), of the peaceable kingdom, standing at the beginning and end of the Christian scriptures, that must direct the theologian’s task.
The mark of a worthwhile university has been described as 'one in which the student is brought into personal contact with, is made vulnerable to, the aura and the threat of the first-class ... this is a matter of proximity, of sight and hearing.' The teacher, or better the community of teachers in lively collaboration, embodies this daily proximity to which the student is exposed. Heather Thomson, structuring her chapter on the triune categories of creativity, wisdom and spirit, takes us to the heart of the matter in her reflection on the work of Graeme Garrett, theologian as teacher. Creation prompts an analogy from the natural world - the sea. 'He that will learn to pray, let him go to Sea,' in George Herbert's aphoristic reconnecting of spirituality and learning. Thomson goes on to explore the dimensions of humour and playfulness in the imparting, and getting, of wisdom. Spirit brings us full circle, to creativity in teaching. As editor of the volume, Thomson demonstrates the community of lively collaboration in the institution in which she and many of the contributors teach.

Geoffrey Brennan starts by asking: 'what makes for a good conversationalist? Is there any connection between being a good conversationalist and being a theologian? And ... what, if anything, does theology itself have to say about conversation?' (p. 154). 'Scholarly enquiry is a highly conversational enterprise' (p. 159), he proposes, going on to suggest this as an indicator of whether an institution is 'in good intellectual shape'. Institutions, whether educational or religious, that fail to recognise the need for new ideas, for collaboration, for conversation, are most at risk. The antidote? Like Bonhoeffer's reflection on the freedom of friendship, Brennan commends the freedom of unstructured conversation. His very personal reflections on the theologian as conversationalist lead us, in fact, into an ode to friendship.

Tom Frame continues this theme by addressing the matter of theologian as writer. Writing is a form of conversation, extended across time and space - as in Umberto Eco's monastic library where books murmur to one another, comment on one another, respond to one another. This is how books work. Frame offers an overview of theological publishing in Australia - not a particularly encouraging one for Australian theological writers. But, as he concludes, 'theologians are writers. It is an integral part of their sacred calling' (p. 181). And the subject matter of theology deserves and demands clear, accessible prose.

Terry Falla is the final contributor with a reflection on the theologian as poet. Theological writing should not only be clear and functional but also beautiful. Falla illustrates this imperative by showing how the Syrian translators of the New Testament transmitted the message through language that played with words and ideas. Syriac is Falla's personal 'language of the heart,' and he writes with the passion of a lover, or perhaps - his own word - an addict (p. 187). He would have all theology written with a similar passion, and grace, for style as well as content.

The collection ends with Graeme Garrett responding, under the heading (a playful theological insider's joke) 'a concluding unsatisfactory postscript'. Embracing grace, he tells us, is grace that embraces us. But it's also grace that we embrace, as 'the task of the theologian' might suggest. As people of faith, we 'embrace the embracing grace of God' (p. 200). This is the essence of faith. But most importantly, we do this with others, in conversation, in friendship. That is the nature of this book. Have I decided what is meant by 'grace'? How each writer uses the term? I'll leave that for you to discover for yourself. For my part, I have learnt (I am also an Anglican, after all) that maybe it's best not to define grace too closely.

By the end of the book, I find I have been enlightened and surprised, have learnt new things and been reminded of old things I once knew but had forgotten. I have not been disappointed. I commend this book wholeheartedly. It is beautifully and skillfully planned and compiled, with each chapter beautifully and skillfully written. Its presentation is a credit to the St Mark's imprint, Barton Books. It is a fine example of the collaborative work being done within the Australian theological scene. Above all, it is a wonderful testimony to the career of one of Australia's wittiest and most creative theological teachers.

Notes
2 'Amazing grace', Together in Song, hymn 129.


8 G. Herbert, 'Jacula Prudentum, or Outlandish Proverbs, Sentences, &c (1640),' in G. Herbert, Works, p. 304.
