

FAITH MATTERS

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GRACE OR KARMA?

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON



Just a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Stephen Davis, retired professor of the philosophy of religion at Claremont University. In preparation for the meeting, I read Dr. Davis's book called *Christian Philosophical Theology*, which includes a chapter contrasting two basic approaches to religion throughout the world. The first—which can be found in much of the East—is a religion of karma, and the second—prominent in the Abrahamic religions of the West—is a religion of grace.

The first approach has a lot to recommend it—which explains its great endurance across the centuries. A karmic approach says that, by a cosmic spiritual law, we are punished or rewarded according to our moral activities. If we do bad things, we will suffer, either in this life or a life to come. And if we do good things, we will be rewarded, again either here or in the hereafter. Karma might not be immediate, as is the law of gravity (REMEMBER JOHN LENNON'S PLAYFUL SONG "INSTANT KARMA"), but in the long run, people are rewarded or punished according to merit. And this satisfies our sense of fairness and justice.

Now a religion of grace is different. It teaches that all people are sinners and hence deserving of punishment, but that God, out of sheer generosity, gives them what they don't deserve. Think of one of the most popular lines in Christian poetry: "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a

wretch like me." In terms of a karmic religion, wretches deserve a wretched fate, and it would be unfair for wicked people to be given a great gift. But devotees of a religion of grace exult in this generosity. Think in this context of the parable of the workers hired at different times of the day or the story of the Prodigal Son. Those make sense only in a religion-of-grace context.

Now lest Christians become self-righteous about espousing a generous religion of grace, we must keep in mind that there is a serious objection indeed to such a construal of religion. If grace is a gift, and if there is no real warrant for the gift, then how come only some get it and others don't? How could it possibly be fair that some people receive the gift of eternal life—through no merit of their own—and others don't? This complaint becomes even more acute when we realize that the Bible—from beginning to end—presents a God who chooses. God selects Abel and not Cain, Abraham and not Lot, Jacob and not Esau, David and not Saul. In fact, one of the most basic truths of the Biblical revelation is that Israel itself is a chosen people, a holy nation, a people set apart. And God insists—just to make the point clearly—that Israel was not chosen because it was the greatest, most just, most accomplished of all the peoples of the world, just the contrary. So again, is any of this fair? In response to this charge, Christian thinkers have tended to say that no one deserves anything and

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therefore we should never complain about inequities in the distribution of free gifts. Still. Still.

In order to resolve this dilemma, it might be useful to look at a couple of Biblical texts, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. No one could ever accuse the prophet Isaiah of underplaying Israel's importance or the fact that Israel is the specially chosen people of God. But listen to these words from the 56th chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah:

“The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, loving the name of the Lord, and becoming his servants — all who keep the Sabbath free from profanation and hold to my covenant, them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.”

Israel was indeed chosen, singled out, uniquely graced — but precisely for the world and not for itself. What is grace? Gift! But when you cling to a gift, hoarding it for yourself, you undermine its nature as gift. The whole point of receiving the divine life is to give it away in turn. If you hoard it and make it your private prerogative, you undermine it; it turns to ashes. But when you give it away, it is renewed within you.

We see much the same thing in controversial and puzzling story of Jesus' conversation with the Canaan-

ite woman recounted in the Gospel of Matthew. The foreign woman comes to Jesus seeking a favor, but he protests that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He seems to be operating out of an exclusivist understanding of Israel's privileges. When she presses the matter, the Lord comes back harshly enough: “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” At which point, the petitioner utters one of the great comebacks recorded in the Bible: “Please, Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.” Delighted not only by her cleverness and pluck but by the depth of her faith, Jesus says, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done to you as you wish.” Yes, the table of grace was set for the children of Israel, but the food from that table was not meant for Israelites alone, but for all those who would come to that table, by hook or by crook. Israel was chosen, yes, but for the sake of the world.

In regard to Dr. Davis's categories, I will speak my mind clearly. Thank God we are not living in the dispensation of karma, for who of us would be able to stand in the fierce winds of pure justice? But we devotees of a religion of grace have to know that the gift is not for us alone; rather the generosity of God is meant to awaken a like generosity in us. If amazing grace has saved a wretch like me, I have got to become a vehicle of grace to every lost soul around me.



BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

Bishop Robert Barron is the founder of *Word on Fire Catholic Ministries* and Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. He is also the host of *CATHOLICISM*, a groundbreaking, award-winning documentary about the Catholic Faith, which aired on PBS. Bishop Barron is a #1 Amazon bestselling author and has published numerous books, essays, and articles on theology and the spiritual life. He is a religion correspondent for NBC and has also appeared on FOX News, CNN, and EWTN. Bishop Barron's website, WordOnFire.org, reaches millions of people each year, and he is one of the most-followed Catholics on social media. His regular YouTube videos have been viewed over 18 million times. Bishop Barron's pioneering work in evangelizing through the new media led Francis Cardinal George to describe him as "one of the Church's best messengers." He has keynoted many conferences and events all over the world, including the 2016 World Youth Day in Kraków, Poland and the 2015 World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, which marked Pope Francis' historic visit to the United States.



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