Grace, Freedom, Relation

The essay seeks to illustrate the contribution of the biblical Christian experience and understanding to the question of the relation between freedom and necessity. With an epistemological approach that is formally theological, it aims to provide a cosmological and ontological horizon of meaning and thereby promote a dialogue between science, philosophy, and theology. According to theological language, grace expresses the meaning and the destiny of reality as being originated, informed, and directed by gift and forgiveness. Freedom is understood not only as the possibility of choice, but as the core expression of what is human, both in being guaranteed and founded upon the grace of God and being fully realized as a freedom allowed by the grace of God; such freedom is realized where it is given in relation to, and as a relation to, another in mutual recognition. It thus becomes possible to draw from the theological concept of creation to propose a renewed

(Translation by Julie Tremblay)

F. Scardigli et al., *Determinism and Free Will*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05505-9_4

paradigm for understanding the transcendence and immanence of God with respect to the world. The transcendence of God is so transcendent as to express itself in the most perfect immanence, in as much as reality is created freely by God, through grace, in the call to freedom. Therefore, none of the perspectives for the interpretation of reality are to be considered as absolute, whether they be theological, philosophical, or scientific. Rather they need to interact, respecting the specific formalities and level of each, and listening carefully and without preconceptions to the reasoning involved in each approach.

A Methodological Premise

In this article I shall seek to express what the biblical Christian experience and understanding bring to the dialogue between grace, freedom, and relation. The focus is primarily theological and anthropological, from a Catholic perspective. In my opinion, it discloses an ontological and cosmological horizon that promotes and opens the way for comparison between science, philosophy, and theology. As a premise, it is useful to recall some methodological aspects that will allow for a pertinent interpretation and a fruitful interaction—from my point of view—between philosophy and theology in the context of this topic.

To simplify, we could say that the reality that surrounds us and that we live in is seen, interpreted, and to some extent also made by us from a multiplicity of different approaches which in no way exclude one another. Rather, in a certain sense—which must clearly be understood and managed with prudence and wisdom—they complement one another.

The first approach (especially today, and in many ways, if nothing else at least with regard to evidence and

practical usefulness) is the scientific approach, in the modern sense of the term. It involves reading reality according to what many today refer to as "methodological naturalism", which means interpreting reality on the level of its physical, chemical, biological, and psychological expression. Since these involve measurable quantities, they can be checked using the instruments available in each case, *iuxta propria principia*, starting from and according to their own principles, based on the structure and dynamics of each of these levels. This is done using the experimental method, building models based on justifiable hypotheses, making predictions, and objectively checking the results. It is the type of approach used, for example, even if in different ways according to their specific fields of inquiry, by Galileo Galilei in physics and astronomy and Charles Darwin in biology, two names that have revolutionized our way of viewing the world and of being in it.

The philosophical approach (here also in the broader sense of the term) moves on a level of interpretation of reality that is distinct and different from those investigated by science in the modern sense. According to a classical understanding of philosophy, it begins with the unavoidable question raised by humanity about the final reason for the self and for all things, enquiring about the meaning (and final end) of what exists and of what happens. This approach presupposes that answers to this kind of question can somehow be found, as tentative and provisional as they may be, and that reasons, to be discovered and elucidated, exist and are given in the world. In this way, the philosophical approach to reality presupposes and expresses the profound perception of a threshold between what is here and now for me, spontaneously described and scientifically interpreted, and its principle and final end, certainly mysterious and beyond, yet rich with the promise of a truth capable of providing light and flavor to our existence and our destiny.

The theological approach is yet another and different approach. It also begins with a question about the reason for and meaning of things, but in this case, not as raised only by myself and based on the experience and tradition of thought that I have received and live amongst: rather it is raised—and this is the point—beginning with and in dialogue with God. In the religious experience, which has a specific realization in the experience of Christian faith, God himself (whom I experience, in wonder, from the heart, in the biblical sense of the term, that is, in the spiritual center of my existence) has taken the initiative to pronounce a word—for the Christian, *the* Word which, in order to speak to us in a definite and purposeful way, became man in Jesus Christ.

Fantasy, illusion, projection? It undoubtedly could be that, or could become that, but—based on the sincere experience of many and perhaps even my own personal experience—I must also take this specific approach to reality into account. I must do this even more so because it is not inexpressible, but, arising from a form of dialogue, albeit a completely singular dialogue with God, it is communicable through the fact that it tends to show in itself the reason (the *lógos*) that inhabits it. Moreover, because it is also a human approach, albeit enlightened by the light that comes from God, it therefore grows and develops, and can be made more precise, verified, and put to the test, and for this reason can, or perhaps better, *must* dialogue profitably with the other forms of knowledge. Even theology, therefore, like philosophy and science, can refer to a specific level in which reality is given and discussed.

Each of these approaches operates within its own field of exercise and offers something important, at its own level, regarding the questions of necessity and/or of freedom as keys for interpreting existence. The scientific approach, for example, in the work of Galileo, says

something indispensable about the how the Solar System works, and in the work of Darwin, something crucial about the evolution of the living species. What is essential is that no approach should try to invade the other fields with its specific language, method, and goal, because in fact, and in principle, it would not have the competence to do so. Yet it is not always easy—in fact, quite the contrary—to interact with the others while remaining strictly faithful to one's own approach. In the end, the plurality of approaches tends to interpret reality, in a way that is coherent and beneficial for everyone, as something that is a whole in itself, even if it expresses itself on a series of different levels.

As previously mentioned, the three concepts that are fundamental in the interpretation of the sense of being from the theological point of view, which I have been called upon to illustrate and which are the starting point for my contribution, are precisely grace, freedom, and relation. I will say something about each of these in my attempt to set out a coherent description of the interpretation of reality offered by the theological, cosmic, and anthropocentric vision in the biblical-Christian Revelation.

If Truly "Everything Is Grace"

I begin with grace. I should say immediately that, in the terminology which has matured through great efforts over the centuries, from the heart of Christian experience and intelligence, the term does not merely refer to a sentimental and ultimately accessorial or even illusionary dimension of reality. According to the perspective proposed here, it involves a vision illuminated and inhabited by the light and the essence of truth. It is understood in the sense that

grace speaks of the meaning and destiny of reality, insofar as it is originated, informed, and directed by gift and by forgiveness.

First of all, it is commonly said that reality "is given", in the sense that it is a gift which gives itself. Being a gift expresses the intimate and irreducible being of reality. Being given and being a gift set the rhythm from which emanates the perfume of the reality that it safeguards, not as accidental and contingent, but as substantial and abounding with the taste of the eternal. Being a gift, therefore, is an epiphany of the sense and truth of reality.

But that is not all, because grace also refers, with an intensifying determination, to forgiveness. As the meaning of reality, the word "gift" implies not only the intrinsic gratuitousness and excess of what is being offered, but also the gratuitousness and excess of its being recognized, welcomed, and offered again. Thus it is precisely the nature of grace as a gift to propose itself freely again and again in an excess of forgiveness, whenever the gift is not acknowledged or is misunderstood or even rejected. It is here—in this specific determination of forgiveness—that grace expresses the fact that it is a gift to the very end (*eis télos*, in the Scriptures).

In a word, using the expression of Georges Bernanos on the final page of his *Diary of a Country Priest*: "everything is grace!",[1] everything being illuminated in its essential truth by gift and forgiveness.

A window upon the mystery of grace as the original theological key to the interpretation of reality is opened in the experience led first by Israel and then by Jesus. Little by little and then rather suddenly an unexpected horizon

[1]Georges Bernanos, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Paris: Éditions Plon, 1936): «tout est grâce».

is revealed, in which the dialectic of destiny and freedom is rewritten from top to bottom. It is clear that this is not done in a pacified or pacifying way, but nonetheless in a form that is intense, enlightening, and provocative.

In the Old Testament, God speaks to humankind, saying: "I will safeguard you as the pupil of my eye" (Deut 32:10). The eye of the Divine, in this image, is not like the blindfolded eye of Tyche, the goddess of fortune, distributing good and evil, and deciding destinies by handing out good and bad luck. Rather, the eye of God looks upon humankind with a view to protecting them as what is most precious and intimate to God himself: just like when someone blinks to protect their pupil from being harmed by the sun or by a piece of flying dust.

Yet what does it mean, and what is behind such an experience of feeling and knowing that one is being watched and protected? What kind of grace are we faced with in this view? And what happens to the destiny and freedom of humankind? Our thoughts go straight to the apostle Paul and to the remarkable text *Letter to the Romans*, which has drawn the attention of so many throughout history, and rightly so: from Augustine to Luther to Karl Barth. It is in this letter, in fact, that the manifesto of grace is indelibly written, starting with the events in which Jesus the Christ was crucified, then rose again. However, to reach an understanding of its meaning, we must first of all provide a quick overview of what precedes this dramatic moment when Paul experienced grace in Christ, as attested in his letter.

Let us return, therefore, at least for a moment, to the verse of the psalm previously mentioned. It all begins with the fact that ancient Israel experiences the benevolent (and demanding) gaze of the Lord God. The moment the Lord hears Israel cry out to him in pain from the land of Egypt, he "comes down" to free the Israelites. There

was certainly a free and unmotivated choice at the origin of this, an election made by the Lord for his people that would be sealed with a pact at Mount Horeb. The book of *Deuteronomy* describes this choice (4:32–40). It was a free act of election, but at the same time it was a demonstrative act to awaken the people and lead them towards a shared awareness, beyond ethnic and religious borders, that everyone was looked upon by this gaze. This is how Psalm 33 expresses it: «From his dwelling place he watches all who live on Earth, // he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do».

The Bible prefers the Hebrew word *chen* to refer to this particular attitude of God towards humankind, which the Greek version of the LXX translates for the most part as *cháris*, grace. Two meanings are conveyed by the Hebrew term: first and foremost, benevolence, in the originating sense of wanting what is good for others and looking upon others with kindness and without envy; and secondly, mercy, in the sense of having a tender heart that knows how to understand and forgive.

Many Hebrew words are used to express the experience of divine mercy and benevolence, but there is one that is especially suggestive and rich in meaning: *rahamim*. It comes from the root word for womb, uterus: *rehem*. Thus *rahamim* has a feminine and maternal connotation alluding to the visceral relationship that a mother has with the fruit of her womb. It is the translation of this term that we hear in the liturgy as the "bowels of mercy" (*viscera misericordiae*). It refers both to the attitude of benevolence and forgiveness and to its ultimate reason and root: the visceral love of a mother for her own son. Having made this point, we can now focus on two important considerations.

(a) The Jewish perception and semantics of grace in itself contains an original and almost inextricable polarity,

at least at first glance: because mercy is different than benevolence. In fact, benevolence means wanting the good for others and in itself connotes the identity and action of God whose name is the Lord: that is, "I am and will be with you" (see Ex 3:14). He, therefore, wills the good and only the good of others. This is what resonates most clearly and majestically in the first page of the Bible, in the account of the creation. The "let there be light" (Gen 1:3) pronounced by God, with all that follows, is a free, gratuitous, benevolent act that finds confirmation in the statement God makes about the effect of his action: "and God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:4), an affirmation that expresses both wonder and satisfaction and, in the case of the creation of man and woman, becomes: "and God saw that it was very good" (Gen 1:31).

The mercy of God, on the other hand, shows his obstinate will to go beyond the hesitant and imperfect way with which humanity responds to his benevolence, even offering, of his own initiative, to re-establish the relationship when it has been interrupted or betrayed or refused. In other words, mercy intensifies the gratuitous and relational intentionality of benevolence. Forgiveness reveals the free and unlimited abundance of the gift. Moreover, in and through forgiveness, God gives even more than was promised and given. Mercy, therefore, makes tangible, on the side of God, the excess that God promised in benevolence, and, on the side of humanity, the measure of responsive and responsible freedom, as implied and encouraged in relation to mercy.

(b) The second consideration involves another formidable antinomy that the Jewish experience and semantics of grace exhibit and inspire: the one established between the particular dimension of election and the universal

> dimension of the gaze of God, which is expressed, for example, in the account of the creation in Genesis. Produced by the event of grace itself as embraced by Israel, this antinomy necessarily causes acute tensions. Yet it is progressively perceived as insurmountable, in that the two poles of the particular and the universal dimensions of grace are to be held together, come what may, so as not to betray in a destructive way the novelty of God's irruption into human experience and history. In the book of *Deuteronomy*, for example, the idea of election is developed as the nonnegotiable principle which grace depends upon, as shown by God towards Israel. Yet the prophets—from Amos to Jeremiah—do not like to speak of election, for fear that it be understood as an automatic guarantee of salvation, closing an exclusive circle that implies the exclusion of others. The idea of election, in the experienced awareness of the theological aporie it conceals, is therefore balanced, on the one hand, by the idea of a possible "rejection" by God (see Jer 14:19) and, on the other, by the intrinsic reference of the election to a universal project that is destined to call upon all peoples (see Psalm 87).

The theology of the apostle Paul surely accounts for this rich, though internally even antinomic, inheritance. The concept of *cháris* is absent in the synoptic gospels, with the exception of some occurrences in Luke, while in the gospel of John it is present only in the Prologue (1:14–17). In Paul, however, it is definitely a central theme, since it best expresses the meaning and dynamics of the salvation event that God so freely and paradoxically produced in Jesus Christ for the benefit of humankind.

The heated nucleus of the Pauline doctrine of grace flows forth from the fact that, in Jesus, the definitive and

irrevocable "yes" of God's love—*agápe*—resounded in the world. For Paul, this is the grace of Christ, the grace that is Christ himself, Christ present and operating in believers through his Spirit. This is the conclusion reached by Paul after encountering the risen Jesus. In Christ's story, Paul finds the key for reading the plan that was hidden for centuries in the foreknowledge of God and finally realized in the fullness of time. This is the *focal point* from which Paul looks upon everything and demonstrates his discourse about grace with tenacity, passion, and impetuosity: because he judges it to be decisive in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the concise argumentation of the *Letter to the Romans*, in fact, the interpretation of the *cháris* of God in Christ allows Paul to propose in a new way the two antinomies which, as we saw, connote the experience and understanding of grace in the First Testament: the one between gift and for-giveness, and the one between particularity and universality. He does so, not to seriously reduce the two poles of these unavoidable tensions, but rather to show their intrinsic dynamics and effectiveness.

(a) Let us begin with the second antinomy, as Paul himself does. Jesus Christ represents, for him, that singular event of grace *from God* which is made possible by the particularity of the election in relation to Israel. Upon the wood of the cross, it is opened from within itself to the universality of all peoples. This is because, in Jesus Christ, the unequivocal offer of God's grace is witnessed and shown to everyone, Jews and pagans alike. No one can claim privilege or merit. God's initiative is absolute, gratuitous, and universal. Therefore, it is not belonging to the people of Israel, nor performing the works associated with the observance of the Law given to Moses that justify one before God.

As Paul exclaims: «Does God belong to Jews alone? Does he not belong to Gentiles, too? Yes, also to Gentiles, for God is one and will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised through faith» (Rom 3:29–30). This is central, the gospel of grace: «There is no distinction—Paul insists –; all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. They are justified freely (*doreàn*, by pure gift) by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus» (Rom 3:22b–24). Faith is unconditional openness to *this* grace. It "justifies", meaning it renders us just before God, because it is the acceptance of God's gift and for-giveness in Jesus Christ. It is God, therefore, who by grace makes us righteous, meaning new and capable of walking henceforth in justice, in conformity with the grace received and embraced.

It is *by love* that grace justifies and frees us from sin (which is closure within oneself, in relation to God and others, to the point of implosion). In fact, grace is nothing other than the overwhelming attestation, in Jesus Christ, that God is *Abbà*, Father, and that we are sons. The reality, awareness, and exercise of that is precisely grace, meaning a free gift, not only in the sense that they are objectively bestowed *upon us* by and in Jesus Christ, but also in the sense that their acceptance *in us* is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, that is, of the presence of God's love itself as the breath of life in *our* freedom. As Paul explains: «For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, "Abbà, Father!" The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God» (Rom 8:15–16). In this logic, grace is the principle of freedom: it enkindles, promotes, and requires it.

(b) The other antinomy contained in grace, the one between gift and forgiveness, also receives new light from this *focus*. In fact, it is clear that the first obvious product of grace is forgiveness. Yet the experience of forgiveness is none other than the wide open door to receiving the abyssal gratuitousness of God, upon which all things depend. By being and acting in the regimen of gift, brought to its highest expression in the gift of self, God constitutes others in their capacity also to be themselves through self-giving. Grace, therefore, reveals, for Paul, the astonishing law of excess and abundance that regulates God's being and actions with its measure beyond measure of freedom and love. This same law is called upon to regulate the being and action of humankind, as His image and likeness.

Paul's theological intuition here allows for further understanding of the election, which is also gauged from top to bottom by the experience and understanding of grace in Jesus Christ. It is not the bestowing of grace which is commensurate with the election that predetermines its quality and recipients; rather, it is the election which is commensurate with the measure of grace beyond measure that occurs in Jesus Christ. This principle, derived from the salvific event of Jesus Christ, is evident in the *Letter to the Romans*, especially where Paul speaks, in Chapter 8, of «those who are called to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers» (Rom 8:28–29).

To be pre-established or predestined, acknowledged for those who love God, is not to be understood in the sense of a separation from those whom God may not have pre-established or predestined—an interpretation that

would prove tempting to some and gain importance in the later theological tradition. No. As Heinrich Schlier points out,[2] those who are called qualify as predestined "so that it is clear how God precedes those who love him". In fact, "he has predestined humankind from the beginning—and that is clear in those who love God, who have answered God's call—to become sharers in the being of Christ".

The Father's election is «before the creation of the world» (Eph 1:4), and therefore radically precedes any consideration of human responsibility in history, be it good or bad. Yet it passes through the redemption of all in «the blood of Christ» (Eph 1:7). In him, the grace of God is conceded "at a high price"—to use the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer –, without holding anything back on the part of God.[3] Humankind is therefore asked to receive it with an acceptance that is unarmed, of course, yet serious, active, and responsible. Grace is not deserved through one's deeds; it becomes operative in faith through love (see Gal 5:6).

The grace that reaches us and that we are called upon to embrace and live is not chance or destiny, dispensed with eyes closed by "fortune", but the gift willed by God's love for all and entrusted to each person's freedom. Certainly, the inevitable antinomies of grace expand the horizons of our freedom and love to infinity. So to accept grace in our existence and in our intelligence requires something radical and paradoxical, which is signified by the cross of Christ. This is how Simone Weil describes it, in her unique and striking way: «Grace fills empty spaces, but it

[2]Heinrich Schlier, *Grundzüge einer paulinischen Theologie* (Freiburg im Breisgau—Basel—Wien: Herder, 1978).

[3]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Trans. by R.H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, York 1963).

can only enter where there is a void to receive it; and it is grace itself which makes this void».[4]

Freedom, the Only True Place for the Encounter Between God and Humankind

To say this about grace—or rather, to have this experience and, from within it, investigate our understanding of reality—means to say that "everything is freedom" or—as Luigi Pareyson[5] liked to say—that there is only one thing that I am not free to do and that is not to be free!

However, this does not mean that all reality, at its different levels of realization and in the different kinds of interpretation that they require and propagate, is to be understood according to the terms of freedom that are attributed in a personal way to God and to humankind; nor does it mean, on the other hand, that freedom is to be understood in absolute and arbitrary terms, as something that is completely unrelated to anything else. The fact is, rather, that the experience of freedom, and the corresponding insight of intelligence to specify its meaning, which unfold from the horizon of truth we call grace, can be precisely delineated. The freedom we are dealing with here is not just self-determination as the possibility of choice, but the concise expression of the human being. This expression occurs both in freedom being guaranteed and founded by and in the grace of God, or better, by God who is the gift of self and therefore himself freedom,

[4]Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1948). Own translation.

[5]Luigi Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà. Il male e la sofferenza* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995).

and in its full realization, precisely as graceful freedom which in turn expresses itself in the gift of self.

In other words, the experience and understanding of grace simultaneously require and propagate the experience and understanding of freedom, both of God and of humankind. If, in fact, the key to interpreting the sense of reality is grace, freedom results as both its condition of possibility and its effective realization. Without freedom there is no grace, just as without grace there is no freedom. It is no accident that, among the first Christian theologians, in the second century after Christ, Irenaeus of Lyon, filled with the Spirit that springs forth from the New Testament witness of the event of Jesus Christ, not only emphasizes the fact that Jesus's is the "gospel of freedom", but he dares to make the following statement: «He [the Creator] made all things freely, and by His own power, and arranged and finished them, and His freedom is the substance from which He drew all things».[6] This statement, if we situate it in the context of his thought, is to be understood in the sense of the ontological correspondence between the freedom inscribed in the reality of God and the freedom of humankind, and through humankind, of the cosmos.

Within the horizon of sense and truth disclosed by grace, we may say that freedom is the only true place of encounter between God and humankind. If the human being were not to access God through liberty and as liberty, it would contradict his being human: and not only that, but it would also contradict God himself in his most intimate and mysterious being. Moreover, we can definitely say, looking at the history humankind has shared with God, that the wearisome and often tragic experience of human freedom goes hand in hand with human

[6] *Adv. Haer.*, II, 30,9; see IV, 20, 2.

experience of God's freedom. This is so clearly the case that, throughout the upheavals human history, one is not given and does not occur without or against the other.

«*Eàn oûn ho huiòs humâs eleutheróse, óntos eleútheroi éseste*»—according to the fourth gospel (8,36): «if therefore the Son frees you, then you will truly be free». Freedom is the grace of the Son: the Son of man who is the Son of God and who—in his Passover of abandonment and resurrection—becomes the epiphany of the freedom of God and the epiphany, literally in the specific place of being (expressed by the Greek adverb *óntos*), of human freedom. This is the crucial task entrusted by his Spirit to our history.

It is difficult for us to conceive and rejoice in the measure of freedom that was unexpectedly and joyously unveiled for the disciples in their encounter, first with Jesus of Nazareth, and then with him as risen. Yet upon a closer look, this is the culmination and fruit—albeit surprising and unforeseen—of a path toward freedom that was opened at the very outset of the history of humanity, thanks to God having constantly made himself present and thanks to his unpredictable irruptions in history, which little by little created new thresholds of consciousness and responsibility. The torment that has afflicted human history since primordial times can in fact be summed up in these terms: how is human freedom possible within the sphere we live in, which is closed upon itself? Is not humanity, along with all the gods, subject to the inevitable trajectory of destiny, which gathers all together and guards them? After all, this is the perception that often ran through human experience and thought; the impenetrable veil of fate seems to surround the existence of the cosmos, and it is only from within the dense net of its web that a limited though responsible measure of freedom is permitted. It is due to this measure of freedom that humankind is called to serve justice and virtue.

As Plato wrote in reference to the myth of Er in *Politeía*, «Virtue has no master»,[7] and Cicero identifies the specific quality of *civis romanus* as being servants to the law in order to become free: «*legum servi… ut liberi esse possimus*».[8] Yet, for Plato, the choice of one's own life project depended upon what happened in the previous life and remained shrouded in the oblivion of time immemorial.[9] While for Diogenes Laërtius, the wise and the just are free only because their actions conform as closely as possible to the needs of the cosmic and social order.[10] In this context, perhaps the highest intuition of the only lever that can disconnect the world from the wheel of destiny was offered by Buddha. As in the case of all the pearls of truth and the fruits of justice that have matured throughout the history of humankind, across all latitudes of religion and culture, such an intuition is no stranger to the discreet but effective stimulus of the light that comes from God. In fact, in the abyssal depths of his interiority, Buddha intuitively experienced that the sense of freedom comes from beyond the world and that it can be obtained only in a nullification of the world itself, with its inevitable chain of causality. Thus, by exercising universal compassion, the dawn and power of true freedom can at last shine forth from this empty nothingness.

The experience of Israel fits in here, though along a different path, which ultimately seeks the answer to the same yearning. Israel's path is one in which God's invitation is not to leave history behind—not even to come back to free it from the bonds of fate—but rather, He becomes a companion of humankind in history, coming down

[7] *Politeía*, X 614A–621D.
[8] *Pro Cluentio*, 53, 146.
[9] *Politeía*, 620A.
[10] VII, 88; see Cicero, *De fato*, 17.

himself to "free Israel from the hand of Egypt" (as in Ex 3:8; 20:2; see also Deut 26:7–9). The freedom pursued by God is the one that decides the life of humankind in history. It seeks to create the specific conditions and place where human beings can express their freedom vigorously and authentically among themselves. The experience of freedom is both a gift and a responsibility. But first of all and ever renewed, it is a gift that spreads and promotes the exercise of responsibility. In the dramatic history of Israel, therefore, freedom takes on worldly and communitarian connotations. These are the grounds upon which the profile and identity of men and women take their shape: created "in the image and likeness" of God himself (Gen 1:26), they are free, in their mutual relationship, which opens upon the world. The experience that slowly becomes consolidated, but not without divisions, failings, and fresh starts, is that the Lord, and only the Lord, exacts and guarantees the freedom of humankind. In truth, He himself is the freedom of humankind. It is in relation to Him that human beings acquire the freedom to be themselves. This explains the eternal and critical struggle against every form of idolatry. He is their freedom also in the sense that, as His divine will is transplanted from His heart to theirs, the amazing amount of freedom that is in His heart can also germinate in the heart of humankind. This is what the Lord promised through the voice of the prophet: «I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you so that you walk in my statutes, observe my ordinances, and keep them» (Ez 36:26–27).

Nonetheless, Israel's experience of freedom is not without contradictions. First of all, the one that occurs as the law of freedom is petrified into a law of slavery by the human heart of stone. This contradiction is stigmatized

by Jesus and by Paul as the prerogative, so to speak, not only of Israel, but also of any faith experience in a covenant relationship with the personal Lord God. In their experience of freedom, Israel is ruled by a God who is the sovereign and invincible Lord of freedom. His freedom is measured only by His faithfulness to the promise and grace towards humanity that He himself unquestionably decreed, which is therefore God's fidelity to Himself. Magnificently showing how God is free only and always in faithfulness to Himself, the Bible provides a chink of light so dazzling it is dark, and thus so difficult to grasp in its gratuitous unfolding in history.

Certainly, as we saw in what Irenaus of Lyon said, the gospel of Jesus Christ is essentially the "gospel of freedom", as the gospel announced by Jesus and the gospel that is Jesus himself. The tortured path of freedom seems to lead towards Him: even if that can only be said—following the logic of Christian faith—after the fact and, once again, not without experiencing the acute laceration of contradiction. It is impossible, albeit truly fascinating, to perceive here how the freedom of God and the freedom of humankind are realized before our own eyes in the figure, *kerygma*, and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. What we *can* do, however, is try to identify the source of his freedom. How can Jesus radiate and disseminate freedom?

Jesus lives off freedom, *because he is freedom*. His freedom coincides with his adult relationship as Son before the *Abbà*. The Breath of freedom abides in Him, and is spread to his surroundings by Him. It is born from and forged in his relationship with the *Abbà*. The numerous threads of the history of freedom between God, Israel, and all peoples are surprisingly and unexpectedly tied together in this relationship. It is the experience of God/*Abbà* that Jesus has and is which determines the freedom he bears witness to in his proclamation, his life, and his death. His freedom

expresses his being the Son, that is, his being before God as One who measures and gives his own life in the hope that others may exist and live, as a gift, what He himself lives. In this sense, God/*Abbà* is truly and fully the source of Jesus' freedom. This is not to be taken for granted: because if freedom was a gift of the Father, it was at the same time—in the history of the Son who «became flesh» (Jn 1:14)—a painful achievement, an agonizing decision, and an endless risk. Episodes of struggle and suspense in great distress testify to this: in the temptations in the desert at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Mc 1:12–13; Mt 4:1–11; Lk 4:1–13); in the mortal anguish he suffered in the olive garden towards the end of his ministry (Mc 14:32–42; Mt 26:36–46; Lk 22:40–46); and even more so in the cry of abandonment from the cross (Mc 15:34; Mt 27:46).

Here the Father's gift of freedom to the Son becomes one of the greatest dramas in the history of humanity. The freedom of God that came down from above died in the furrows of history, if we can borrow the metaphor from the Bible, so that it could germinate in the life of humankind: «unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit» (Jn 12:24). The freedom of God, and God alone, is faithfulness to Himself in his will for the other to exist and to have life in himself (and this is the Son, Jesus). The immensity of this freedom, which is specific to God, is poured out in the same extreme measure of freedom associated with Jesus, the Son, who freely and unconditionally believes—without the need for any form of reassurance—in his Father's love. He continues to do so even when the Father is silent and does not intervene to defend the cause of his Messiah, and even when everything around him seems to be proclaiming the very opposite of love, the root and fruit of freedom. Allow me to make a twofold observation about this.

(a) On one hand, the New Testament registers the dramatic tension between Jesus' freedom and the will of God, *Abbà*, in the noted episode of Gethsemane. Without any attempt to soften the effect, it shows Jesus' mortal anguish in adhering to the will of the Father; and it thus shows the extreme and risky nature of this freedom, called to conform, not to blind necessity, but to «a costly grace» (as Bonhoeffer says), referring to the gift and forgiveness of God as the alpha and omega of the meaning and destiny of truth. His anguish expresses the extreme challenge involved in embracing his freedom, that is, in conforming to the freedom of God, which is entirely expressed through His gift and forgiveness.

(b) On the other hand, the same New Testament refers to what Jesus said at this point, which sheds light upon the meaning of the above drama embodied in his passion. His freedom (*eleutería*) is shown to be the substantial expression of his *ex-ousía* (literally, what comes from the substance of his very being): «This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power (*exousía*) to lay it down, and power (*exousía*) to take it up again» (Jn 10:17–18).

This is where it becomes clear that Jesus exercises true freedom, because it is realized in accordance with the Father's freedom, in the gift of self that is also forgiveness, recapitulating in itself the destiny of all reality. His belief in the love of God/*Abbà*, dedicated to his brethren to the end (*eis telos*, Jn 13:1), in response to the freedom of God «who first loved us» (1Jn 4:19), has now been definitively (*ephápax*) rooted in the history of humankind: «On Earth as it is in heaven.» Jesus opened a window upon the staggering abyss of God's freedom and its traits, such as the *agape* that gives

his life so that the other may exist and be like himself, in the grateful acknowledgement of the gift received (of the gift he himself is). From the very heart of history, God's freedom is thus offered in Jesus as a measure of the grace and truth of human freedom with and for others before God. Yet this measure is not the sole property of Christians, but rather, it is the definitive and irrevocable inheritance of all humankind. Nonetheless, the temptations, which Christ had already overcome in the desert and throughout his earthly existence, need to be avoided from now on, so that in the Spirit of Jesus, God's freedom may germinate from Heaven and prosper as human freedom on Earth.

Indeed, the question of freedom has been challenging human conscience, thought, and action for several centuries now. Not that it had not done so before, but there is no doubt that modern times bear particular witness to the unavoidable appearance of this critical challenge on the scene of history. It has been such a question that today, having reached, willing or not, the terminus of modernity, we are also bluntly forced to realize that, not only can freedom be expressed in many different ways, but its understanding and exercise have entered a new phase in its history. Certainly, freedom should be approached in rigorous and open dialogue with neuroscience, philosophy, and theology. Such an approach creates a space in which, and through which, the different kinds of access to freedom through the relevant disciplines can interact with each other, while respecting the specific characteristics and autonomy of each, and at the same time being dialogically articulated according to a overall polychromatic and coherent plan. The methodological principle of "distinguishing to unite",[11] or in other words,

[11]Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite, or, The Degrees of Knowledge*, Trans. by Gerald B. Phelan, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (IN) 1995.

reflecting and acting "without separation and without confusion", once again bears fruit.[12]

At the same time, such an approach must be open to the diachronic dimension of the history of freedom, which is also connected to the history of the world in which we live, and which we ourselves constitute. Indeed, the passage from neuroscience and philosophy to theology invites us to reread the *quaestio de libertate*, not only distinguishing between its various levels of expression (biological, anthropological, theological), but also looking at the way each of these emerges in the specific history of the development of the created universe. In this context, we may examine, at least from a phenomenological point of view, the impact that the event of Jesus Christ had on history in the tremendous drive for a self-awareness and self-configuration of freedom on the human and social levels. The Christian tradition bears witness to this in its most specific meaning, and so does the complex and ambiguous history of modernity.

Yet there is more to it. The impact of Jesus Christ upon the history of humankind (and the world) has brought about a true change of perspective. Of course, this encourages us to look at freedom "from below", in the biological and anthropological development of its conditions of possibility and the specific way it is exercised socially, even though—as Kant taught us—its effective possibility derives from another order.[13] Yet at the same time, it also encourages us to look at freedom "from above", that is, by identifying the logic of God's plan for creation as it unfolds in Jesus Christ, who corresponds—in human

[12]According to the article of faith defined by the Council of Chalcedon (451); Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, Edited by Peter Hünermann for the original bilingual edition and edited by Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash for the forty-third English Edition, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012, no. 302.

[13]Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Leipzig: P. Reclam, 1878).

form—to the very event of God. Being *Agápe*, in the reciprocal and open gift of Self to Himself in Himself, God is a Trinity of persons, as testified by Christian faith. It is clear that this logic is specifically theo-logical. However, because of its intrinsic nature, it does not diminish the value and significance of the achievements made along the way by bottom–up thinking. If anything, it does justice to them as consequences of a specific approach, recognizing the fact that they are ultimately founded upon the logic of the historical unfolding of God's (Trinitarian) plan for creation.

In Jesus, the revelation of the co-original dignity in God of identity and otherness opens the theoretical space for creation as it unfolds *from* God, according to the plan for its gratuitous and free fulfillment *in* God. Creation thus becomes fully itself in the specific form of relation *with* God, who establishes it in its otherness. Such an ontological hermeneutic in Trinitarian terms expresses the inherent meaning of the freedom of being, in God and in humankind.[14] This is to be delineated in at least two steps. The first involves developing the explicitly ontological potentiality of the category of possibility. By expressing the self-determination of freedom, which assumes the intentionality of what is and what should be, possibility is achieved for what it is only in the relation of the self with others, as the self is implicated in the very exercise of possibility. The category of possibility, therefore, interpreted according to its ontological significance in the personological and ultimately Trinitarian perspective, is what it is only if exercised and intrinsically understood in the

[14]Klaus Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1992). Allow me to refer to my *Dalla Trinità. L'avvento di Dio tra storia e profezia* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2011), the English translation, *From the Trinity*, is being published by the Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC.

dynamic of com-possibility. We thus find ourselves faced with the Rubicon which—as von Balthasar would say—metaphysics has to cross, since it arises from an existence of being and thinking in Christ: the threshold that leads from the individualism of the substance to the interpersonality of the relation.[15]

Crossing this Rubicon opens the way to a second step that must be taken in order to explore the potentiality (of experience and intelligence) made available by going in this direction. In the delineation, so to speak, of its transcendental conditions, freedom is shown to be not only compossible, but also effusive; or better still, it reciprocates reciprocity *in actu*—that is, ontologically.

Relation as the Truth of Being

In the logic of what has been discussed so far, we have already touched upon the third term of the triptych proposed at the beginning: relation. If, in fact, grace is given as and in freedom, then freedom is given as and in relation. So much so that, from a theological perspective, an equation can be proposed between the ontologies of grace, freedom, and relation.

In the metaphysical framework proposed by Aristotle, relation is merely an "accident" of substance, and moreover the least, the most fragile, and accessorial among the "accidents" of substance.[16] Yet for Augustine, a brilliant interpreter of the *novum* introduced in the vision of being by the biblical Christian experience, the relation *in*

[15]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: theological dramatic theory*, 5 Vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988–1998).

[16]See Aristotle, *Categories*; http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/categories.1.1.html; Id., *Metaphysics*; http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html.

divinis expresses the very meaning of substance, that is, of being itself, in what makes it what it is, in the expression of its meaning.[17] Along the same lines, in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas forged a definition of God's very being—*Ipsum Esse per Se subsistens*—as *relatio subsistens*,[18] according to which it is given only in the ever renewed and boundless relation of reciprocity between the three divine persons. This line of thought has been brought up to date by Antonio Rosmini, according to whom every personal being—not only God but also human beings—is in itself a relation.[19] And this is so, insofar as being is freedom, and freedom is an "I" which becomes itself in the gift of self to another, thereby giving life to the "we" of open reciprocity.

Is this not confirmed by our own experience? We say that we feel "free", not so much in the self-determination of ourselves, as in the successful establishment of a relationship with others: "with you, in this situation, in this relationship, I really feel free?" Freedom is achieved as such in the context of grace, when we are given what is in itself free, that is, where freedom is given in and as relation. And not just any relation, but that of reciprocal acknowledgement. Ultimately, the relation—as I like to say—is that of "reciprocating" reciprocity, so it is a relation that is not closed and exclusive, but open and boundless, propagating to infinity.

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[17]Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V, 5.6: «*Quamobrem quamvis diversum sit Patrem esse et Filium esse, non est tamen diversa substantia, quia hoc non secundum substantiam dicuntur, sed secundum relativum; quod tamen relativum non est accidens quia non est mutabile*».

[18]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 29, a. 4; cfr. A. Krempel, *La doctrine de la relation chez Saint Thomas. Exposé historique et systématique* (Paris: Vrin, 1952).

[19]Antonio Rosmini, *Theosophy*, Trans. by Denis Cleary and Terence Watson, 3 Vols., Rosmini House, Durham 2007–2011, n. 903.

A mystic of our time, Chiara Lubich, referring to the central and generative truth of the Christian vision of God as a Trinity, concluded that «*the Trinity is freedom*», meaning that freedom is given within the space of reality described by an infinite reciprocating reciprocity.[20] In light of this, if we consider the Christian event for what it is from a theological point of view—as the truth (of God) offering itself in the history (of humankind)—then it becomes possible and necessary to give word and reason (*lógos*) to the Christian event as constitutive of and thus revealing the sense of being. This implies the exercise of a *lógos* that not only respects the identity and the vocation of being thus constituted, but also itself reveals and promotes being. It is precisely to this intense center of speculation that the *lógos* is called to give reason to the existence we experience, or as Luigi Pareyson would say, to explain how the relation with oneself coincides with the relation with others.[21]

This is not just about forging the classical concept of substance as what is conceived in and through itself; nor the modern concept of subject, as what is immediately or mediately transparent to itself. Rather, it involves thinking about existence in the truth that is given historically of its being relation to itself while being relation to another. This coincidence between "self-relation" and "hetero-relation" in the identity of existence thus expresses, in the most concise and precise way possible, the epochal turning point suggested to the responsibility of the *lógos* after modern times. The task at hand is to go back to the timid initial *lógos* of Augustine, renewed and superbly explored—but only *in divinis*—by Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages,

[20]Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007).

[21]Luigi Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona* (Genova: Il Nuovo Melangelo, 2002).

and which has come back on the scene in the dissolution of modern times, as intuited by Rosmini. This reconnects with the beginning, but from within modernity, therefore shifting from the theological to the anthropological and cosmological horizons, and thereby proposing a reformulation of them. The relation *with* God, or better still, *of* God who is the foundation of the freedom of the individual, becomes in itself the foundation of the interpersonal relation. The *lógos* is called upon to reflecting upon this and the existence in the historical situation of its being the relation from and to God.

The coincidence between "self-relation" and "hetero-relation" that dwells within our experience, in the depths of a void which can never be filled, is rooted in the absolute coincidence with relatedness that is specific to God. Pareyson describes how God is «absolute irrelativity, yet He poses a relation». This is the truth consigned to the *lógos* by the being which opens itself to the Christian event. Opening the self to itself, by being open to the Christian event, is the actuating revelation of the same gift and the same task. God has to be God, who is defined in relation to himself alone: so that existence can recognize him as such, recognizing him as its ultimate truth. For this reason God is to be acknowledged as the principle and the goal of a relation which must *first* be real and true for God, in order to be real and true for existence. Since God is the coincidence of absoluteness and relatedness, following Pareyson once again, it cannot be said that relation includes God, but that God includes the relation, since He is such a term of relationship that He is at the same time the condition of relationship. Of course, the relation is defined in different ways according to how it is viewed, moving from God in reference to humankind or from humankind to God. Nonetheless, insofar as it is real and true because it is postulated (by God) and accepted

(by humankind), the relation is given in the same form: as freedom. Thus from the heart of the ontology which the *lógos* is called upon to understand and give voice to, we are brought to the task of formulating an ontology of liberty as the expression of an ontology of grace and constitutive and revelatory of a radical ontology of the relation. Proceeding in order, let us first ask in what sense relation is to be considered *from* God as freedom.

This must obviously occur without contradicting the absoluteness of God as God, and the otherness of humankind as the receiving end posited by the relationship *of* God with humankind, and therefore as received. The relation must thus be taken, in reference to God, as the sign and fruit of a gratuitous excess that gives itself, and in so doing constitutes the other term by entering into the relationship. The gift of self is the foundation of the relation. Being is itself revealed in such a relationship, which can only be expressed and thought of as a gift. The sense of "gift" here is not merely *to give* something (but to whom, if there is no recipient?), but *self-giving*, that is, the giving of self which, to be real and true, presupposes the establishment—through gift—of the other as other, inasmuch as the other is able to receive himself by receiving in freedom the gratuitous self-giving of the one who was at the source of the gift. Hence, in asymmetric reciprocity, the *lógos* is called upon to express the relation from the receiving end that is humankind. The human being is in fact in a free relationship with God because the human being is posited as such by God. Relation exists, therefore, in the dynamic coincidence between "receptivity" and "activity". By receptivity, the person is ontologically constituted at the receiving end of a relation which calls for recognition and is to be exercised as such. Activity involves living the relation, given and received, as relation, and thus in freedom. In this way, as concluded by Pareyson, the "passivity"

that reveals the asymmetric situation of the relation—in that it is freely offered by God—«is nothing but the diaphragm between two activities, one of which takes place upon the extension of the other», such that the freedom of existence is revealed as the «initiated initiative and consent to a gift».

More can be said, continuing the same line of thought. Indeed, how can human freedom manifest itself in existence, effectuated in response to the "extension" of the freedom of God? It happens every time someone gives himself to God by giving himself to another: «whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen» (1Jn 4:20b). The gift of self, in which freedom is realized to its fullest measure, is certainly the response to God's gift of self that establishes the human being as freedom: because God's gift of self is precisely the ontological foundation of the other as other than himself, and that is, as freedom. But *how* can this freedom (of humankind) receive itself as taking place upon the "extension" of the freedom that is God, from whom it originates, if not by being given in turn? This occurs within, not outside, the historical situation of humankind, that is, in relation to another who is also the receiving end, historically situated, of the relationship in freedom from and to the Other. Is this not the direction in which the *lógos* who «became flesh» (Jn 1:14), the anthropic *lógos* of the cross (1Cor 1:18), invites us to look? In his incarnation and crucifixion in the tragic reality of history, he expresses and promises the "self-relation" that coincides with the "hetero-relation". This occurs within human existence, of course, but it occurs first of all in God himself, in the depths of his very Being. The coincidence between "self-relation" and "hetero-relation" does not occur only in the relationship that he establishes in freedom as the source and end in relation to existence. It takes place specifically

within Himself. What the *lógos*, in light of the event of Jesus Christ, is called upon to think about truth, with existence as the starting point, is in fact the otherness *in* God (the *Abbà* and the Son in the Spirit) as the revelation of the liberty *of* God and, for that reason, the space for the reality and truth of being *other than* God. As such, it is real and true—upon the "extension" of the gift of self *in* God and *from* God—in the gift of self *between* human beings: «love one another as I have loved you» (Jn 13:34). This is the task and promise of the revelation of freedom brought about by grace which is relation, therefore, in the *lógos* of being that finds its measure in the *lógos* of Christ crucified.

Conclusion: Return to the Premise

Clearly, the theological understanding of the biblical Christian inheritance that I have proposed can and must interact with a philosophical understanding. In conclusion, we should ask whether it can and must also interact with the understanding offered by scientific rationality, in the modern sense of the term? I think that the answer, albeit challenging and arduous in its elaboration, can only be positive in this case.

It suffices to recall, for a suggestive and thought-provoking example, what the apostle Paul wrote in his *Letter to the Romans*, Chapter 8: «creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; (…) in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God» (19–21). Freedom—in the reciprocal gift of self disclosed by grace—is

the epiphany of glory, that radiant light in which everything exists ontologically and will appear for what it is in truth.

That theology which is more sensitive and attentive to the issues raised about the universe by the new scientific perspectives (theory of relativity, uncertainty principle, quantum theory), in the last century, has opened up a dialogue which has tended to overcome those ideological barriers on both sides that had previously caused centuries of indifference, if not outright hostility. The rediscovery of what has been defined as "specifically" Christian has been decisive in this respect (see H.U. von Balthasar, J. Ratzinger, K. Hemmerle, W. Kasper); that is, the revelation in Christ of the Being of God as Trinitarian love. Teilhard de Chardin was a pioneer in his attempt to show the integrability, or rather, the convergence, between the evolutionary vision of the universe proposed by modern science and the Christocentric and Christo-finalistic interpretation proposed by New Testament faith. Following his endeavors, theology from all the Christian traditions came up with important studies in the effort to reinterpret the principle of creation in Trinitarian terms, in meditative comparison with the most widely accredited scientific results. Representatives are found in J. Moltmann and W. Pannenberg, from the theology of the reform; J. Polkinghorne, from the Anglican world; A. Ganoczy, J.-M. Maldamé, and A. Gesché, from Catholic theology; D. Staniloae and, ahead of his time, S. Bulgakov from Orthodox theology. An interesting reading is offered in cosmological terms by what has been called *process theology*, which refers to the writings of A.N. Whitehead. Two topics of particular interest for the dialogue between theology and science are inspired by interpreting the

theological concept of creation within the horizon of truth that articulates the sense of being according to the logic described in the connection between grace, freedom, and creation.[22]

(a) The first concerns the form of comprehension of that specific relation between God and the world which is expressed by the concept of creation. Two ideas are central to the classical vision: the fundamental concept of *ex nihilo* and the secondary accidental concept of cause and effect. Yet when the event of Jesus Christ is taken up as the key of interpretation of the relation of creation between God and the world, the resulting paradigm that expresses this relation changes. It can no longer be one of cause and effect, but rather a paradigm of the relation between grace and freedom, which is love and thus gift of self: in God Himself between the Father and the Son in the Spirit, and in Him, with creation, as what is other than Himself. In this sense, a form of relation is signified whereby its coming from and depending on God loses every deterministic connotation of cause and effect, and whereby otherness not only implies identity but also

[22]For example, see Ernan McMullin, *Natural Science and Belief in a Creator: Historical Notes*, in Robert John Russell—William R. Stoeger—George V. Coyne (Edd.), *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding* (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory 1988, pp. 47–79; *Cosmos ad Creation. Theology and Science in Consonance,* Ed. by Ted Peters, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1989; Italian Theological Association, *Futuro del cosmo e futuro dell'uomo*, Ed. by Saturnino Muratore, Ed. Messaggero, Padova 1995; Ignazio Sanna, *Fede, scienza e fine del mondo,* Queriniana, Brescia 1996; Jacques Fantino, *La rencontre entre science et théologie*, in "Revue des sciences religieuses", 71/1 (1997), pp. 60–78; Jean-Michel Maldamé, *Science et foi, conditions nouvelles du dialogue,* in "Revue Thomiste", 97/3 (1997), pp. 525–562; Giovanni Prodi—Maurizio Malaguti (Eds.), *Memoria dell'origine*, Quaderni Sefir 2 (Rome: Pontificia Università Lateranense—Mursia, 2001).

autonomy. It will of course be necessary to distinguish—as Christian doctrine does—between the level of the Trinity in itself, where there is a co-origin of the Father and of the Son-*Lógos* (Jn 1:1) in the Spirit, and the level of creation. Using a spatial image to describe both the distinction and the relation between these two levels in a figurative manner, we can say that, through the eternal Word/Son in the Spirit, the Father places the world "outside himself". Yet, having said this, the relation between God and the world must be considered, not only as being modelled upon the relation between the Father and the Son/Word in the Spirit, but also as being pre-formed by looking at the latter relation, since it is called upon to extend such a relation to the creatural level. According to Christian revelation, once the Son/Word has become man, it lives as a creature the same relationship it has always had with the Father in God. Thus it both reveals and realizes the intrinsic sense, dynamic, and finality of created being: to become—as Christian tradition says—son in the Son. Certainly, this has first of all an anthropological significance: it expresses the identity/vocation of the human being. But, through mankind, it expresses the identity/vocation of all creation (as we have seen was affirmed by Paul in his *Letter to the Romans*).

The Trinitarian principle of a relation between God and the world in terms of gratuitousness and freedom offers a harmonious paradigm for understanding the meaning of the transcendence and/or immanence of God with respect to the world. Though apparently plausible, the two major models that have in fact prevailed and still prevail in defining this relation are really not fully satisfactory for an unbiased comprehension of the Universe, nor as epistemological

criteria for the interpretation of reality constituted by the principle of creation. The first model is that of the transcendence of God with respect to the world, without any immanence of Him in the world. Following a scheme of exteriority and even separation, this model cannot avoid generating problems for theological, metaphysical, and even cosmological interpretation. The second model is instead that of the immanence of God within the world, which often ends up negating the real otherness of God as it identifies Him with the world, in different forms. This model raises many difficulties, some of them even in opposition with each other, on the theological, metaphysical, and cosmological levels. The paradigm suggested by the Trinitarian perspective rethinks the abstract and basically dualistic (and therefore, ultimately excluding or unifying) contraposition of the transcendence and/or immanence of God with regard to the world. The paradigm thus offers an understanding of transcendence in a way that does not exclude a specific form of immanence, and of an immanence that presupposes and safeguards transcendence. It could be said that the transcendence of God is so transcendent that it expresses itself in the most perfect immanence in creation.

Using a term with a long history in philosophy, cosmology, and theology, some authors speak of the *pericoresi* (περιχώρησις) between God and the world, that is, of the reciprocal "indwelling" of one in the other, which requires and expresses their mutual otherness and distinction. So it is not by happenstance that we find the term first used with a cosmological meaning by the Greek

philosopher Anaxagoras of Clazomenae,[23] and later by the Stoic philosophers, to express the intrinsic correlation of each reality with every other in the harmony of the single cosmos. In theology, the same term would be used by John Damascene (at the end of the Patristic period) to express the mutual interiority in the distinction between the divine nature and the human nature in Jesus Christ "without confusion and without separation", as proclaimed by the profession of faith at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Theology then used the term to designate the relation of mutual indwelling between the Father, the Son/Word, and the Holy Spirit in God the Trinity. Such language has become of particular relevance in our times to express in a satisfactory way the relation between God and the world in light of a Trinitarian interpretation of the christological event.

(b) Within this perspective, we find a second topic whose formulation attempts to respond to a second question. Though typically theological, this question is not without significance for cosmology and even scientific investigation. It involves the theological truth according to which God/Father creates through the Son/Word and the Holy Spirit. Irenaeus of Lyon provides a suggestive image here, namely that the Son/Word and the Holy Spirit are like "the two hands" of the Father who gives form and life to creation. This theological truth, so clearly affirmed by Scripture, was expressed by Scholastic theology which used

[23] *Fragment* 12; Hermann Diels—Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. II, Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Zürich/Berlin 1964, vol. 2, p. 38.

Aristotelian language to say that the incarnate Son/Word is both the exemplar cause and final cause of creation. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is, in some way, its quasi-formal cause (K. Rahner). Such a definition emphasizes that, just as in God other is the subsisting of the Son/Word and other is the subsisting of the Holy Spirit, so it is in creation, due to the presence and work of both. In fact, in classical theology, because of the rather static and predefined conception of cosmology, almost the whole discourse ended by illustrating the role of the Word. Thus, in conformity with the prevailing Christological perspective in Western Christianity at that time, very little or no space was dedicated to the Holy Spirit, that is, the principle of life, of dynamism, of relation, of newness. Along these lines, the evolutionary and relational vision of the universe accredited to the contemporary sciences led to a renewed cosmological theory in general, and this also stimulated a rediscovery of the pneumatological dimension of the principle of creation. At the same time, a decisive renewal has been underway in pneumatology during the last few decades, in all areas of theological reflection about the Holy Spirit. The proposal offered by W. Pannenberg goes in this direction. According to him, the God/world relation that occurs through the action *ab extra* of the Spirit of God, as the relation between the Father and the Son that gives movement, energy, and life to all creatures, can find a model of interpretation in the "magnetic field" (developed in the theories of physics, starting with M. Faraday).[24]

[24]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids [MI]: Eerdmans, 1991).

The grammar of the Trinitarian relation—as grace and freedom—between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, can therefore also offer insights that may help us to understand the genesis and dynamic structure of created reality. Indeed, the latter testifies first of all that there is an origin/beginning from which everything springs (in both a metaphysical and a temporal sense) and that, as such, it is certainly inaccessible to any scientific method. Therefore, it is impossible for any naïve and dangerous form of concordism to occur between scientific results and what is revealed, since they remain on two different levels. Created reality is structured according to a plan and a dynamic that manifest their intelligibility, taking on a distinct form from one time to the next. This form, on the other hand, is neither isolated nor static, because it is the result of multiple relationality (at various levels, e.g., subatomic, atomic, chemical, biological, psychological) both within itself and in the broader context of evolution and expansion in which it is located. In this way a dynamic self-transcendence is realized, which at each moment of time involves abandoning the previous form and equilibrium in order to access new and ever more complex forms and equilibria. The greater stability of the latter does not contradict, but rather precedes and in turn renders possible the passage to other figures and higher levels. This opens the way for numerous avenues of research, many of which have not yet been explored.

What is essential, in my opinion, is not to render absolute any of the points of view involved, whether they be theological or philosophical or scientific. Rather it is important to allow them to interact, fully respecting the specific formality of each and their particular level of operation. Such interaction is based on attentive and unbiased listening to the respective reasons of each. Even this relation, in the end, is a question of grace and freedom.

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