

A Note on the Doctrine of 'Grace' in the Upaniṣads

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I

Ever since Rudolf Otto raised to academic prestige the comparative study of Christian and Hindu theism,¹ a comparison of the doctrine of grace² in these two theisms has been an important component of this study. On the Hindu side this has led to the identification of the Upaniṣads with 'the theistic tone of theology'—namely, the Kaṭha, the Īśa and the Śvetāśvatara. These Upaniṣads show 'that there were thinkers in the Vedānta school during these centuries who held that Brahman was a personal God. They used the words Deva, Bhagavān, Īśa, Īśāna of him and spoke of his grace.'³ The Kaṭha and the Śvetāśvatara are repeatedly referred to in the context. Thus we are told that in the Kaṭha, Viṣṇu appears 'as Lord, where yoga and immortality are in question'⁴ and that 'in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad the impersonal Brahman is represented by Śiva (Rudra) and the Lord (Bhagavat). By the efficacy of his austerity and the grace of the god (*devaprasāda*), the sage Śvetāśvatara spoke about

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¹ 'Visits to North Africa, India and Japan in 1911-12 turned Otto's attention to the more primitive expressions of religion and also gave him an enduring appreciation of the great oriental faiths. Numerous studies of the religious thought of India gained him a place among the influential and sympathetic European interpreters of Hinduism. Among the more important of these studies are *West-Östliche Mystik* (1926; Eng. trans. *Mysticism East and West*, 1932) and *Die Gnadensreligion Indiens und das Christentum* (1930; Eng. trans. *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity*, 1930). Otto's last work, completed just prior to his death, was a series of German translations and commentaries upon the Bhagavad Gita and the Katha Upanishad,' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 16, Chicago: William Benton, 1968, p. 1162).

² 'A beneficence or generosity shown by God to man, esp. : divine favour unmerited by man: the mercy of God as distinguished from his justice,' Philip Babcock Gove, Editor-in-chief, *Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language*, Springfield, Mass.: Cul. Merriam Co., 1961, p. 984.

³ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1971, p. 364.

⁴ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Upanishads Gita and Bible*, London: Faber and Faber, 1962, p. 86.

Brahman to the seers.'⁵ In addition to the Kāṭha and the Śvetāśvatara, some scholars also refer to Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad as teaching 'a doctrine of divine election and divine self-revelation', while recognising that, 'it is in the Kāṭha and the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣads that the notion of divine grace (*prasāda*) appears, and that the last verse of the latter contains *bhakti* explicitly.'⁶

The purpose of this paper is (1) to point out that the three theistic Upaniṣads referred to as indicating the doctrine of grace in Hinduism do not develop it to the same degree and (2) to determine which of them develops an understanding closest to the Christian notion of grace.

II

It is true that the Muṇḍaka and Kāṭha Upaniṣads contain verses which can be interpreted to imply a doctrine of grace, in the sense that the revelation results from divine initiative. Thus the following verse from Muṇḍaka may be quoted to that effect :

This Self cannot be obtained by instruction, nor by sacrifice (or intellect) nor by much learning,

He is to be obtained by him alone whom he elects, to him his Self reveals his own real form (*tanū*).⁷

It may further be noted that this verse is identical with Kāṭha Upaniṣad 2.23.⁸

By themselves, these verses clearly establish the case for God's revelation at God's initiative.

However, when these verses are quoted, often the succeeding verses are overlooked which seem to indicate certain 'qualifications' on the part of the recipient of grace which the person must possess before it can be received. Thus the next verse in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad runs :

Nor is the Self to be gained by one who is destitute of strength, or without earnestness, or without right initiation. But if a wise man strive after it by these means (by strength, earnestness, and right meditation), then his Self enters the home of Brahman.⁹

⁵ *Ibid.* 'There are some traces of grace in the later classical Upanishads, slightly in the Kāṭha and clearly in the Rudra-praising Śvetāśvatara,' (Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, London : Faber and Faber, 1970, p. 42).

⁶ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Love of God according to Saiva Siddhanta*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 63.

⁷ Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.2.3 ; as quoted in translation by Mariasusai Dhavamony, *op. cit.*, p. 63. Also see F. Max Müller, *The Upaniṣads*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1900, p. 40.

⁸ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *op. cit.*, p. 63 fn. 2.

⁹ F. Max Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

And the verse which succeeds the one identical to the one in Muṇḍaka runs as follows in the Kaṭha :

But he who has not first turned away from his wickedness, who is not tranquil and subdued, or whose mind is not at rest, he can never obtain the Self (even) by knowledge.¹⁰

It is clear then that although the ship must sail by the grace of the wind, the sails must be set just right if it is to have any effect.

III

It is in these prerequisites, or rather in the softening of the prerequisites and greater emphasis on the glory of God that the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad seems to carry the doctrine of grace closer to its Christian counterpart. It is worth noting though that even when the author of the Upaniṣad received the insight on 'Grace' it was not by 'Grace' alone, for the wise Śvetāśvatara himself gained this insight 'through the power of his penance *and* through the grace of God'.¹¹

But having said this it must be pointed out that unlike the Muṇḍaka and the Kaṭha Upaniṣads, wherein the statement of the doctrine of grace is itself 'hedged' in the statements immediately following, no such inhibitive postscripts accompany the statement of the doctrine of grace in the Śvetāśvataropaniṣad in the famous passage:¹²

The Self, smaller than the small, greater than great, is hidden in the heart of the creature. A man who has left all grief behind, sees the majesty, the Lord, the passionless, by the grace of the creator (the Lord).¹³

IV

To conclude : the doctrine of grace does find its early adumbrations in the Muṇḍaka, the Kaṭha and the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣads. The formulation of the doctrine, however, is not uniform. The Kaṭha

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹ Śvetāśvataropaniṣad 6.21 ; see F. Max Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 266, emphasis added.

¹² Śvetāśvataropaniṣad 3.20.

¹³ See F. Max Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 248. It is interesting to note that the same verse with a slight variation occurs in Kaṭha Upaniṣad (2.20) but (1) is followed after two verses by 2.23 about which we have already commented. In the Śvetāśvatara one more verse follows and then the *adhyāya* closes. (2) There is a textual problem with the Kaṭha version, with the reading *dhatu-prasādāt* appearing for *dhatu-prasādāt* which has the effect of toning down the theism of the verse considerably (see Mariasusai Dhavamony, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65); a toning down which (3) Sankara carries through to his interpretation of Kaṭha 2.23 which, with considerable exegetical ingenuity, he interprets in non-dualistic rather than theistic terms.

Ūpaṇiṣad shares a crucial passage with the Muṇḍaka Ūpaṇiṣad on the one hand and with the Śvetāśvatara on the other. However, on the whole, the doctrine of grace with prerequisites seems to be common to Muṇḍaka and Kāṭha, whilst its formulation in the Śvetāśvatara Ūpaṇiṣad seems to come closest to its Christian formulation¹⁴ in which it is God's glory rather than the devotee's eligibility which is the prime underpinning of the doctrine.

¹⁴ See F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. London : Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 586-7.

The Editorial Board of **The Indian Journal of Theology** records with a sense of loss the passing away of two of its members, the Revd. Canon Subir K. Biswas and the Revd. Fr. Thomas Nallail S.J., during 1977.

Apart from the articles which he contributed from time to time, Canon Biswas regularly attended the meetings of the Board, where his advice was greatly valued.

Fr. Nallail, who was a professor of theology at Morning Star College, Barrackpore, had recently been co-opted as a member of the Board. The Board had looked forward to the benefit of his learning and experience.