

George Grant on Oman's *theologia crucis*

George P. Grant's PhD dissertation focused on John Oman. And Grant's theology of the Cross actually bears many of the marks of Oman's *theologia crucis*. Both men held the Cross as central to all Christian theology, that faith (not reason) is essential to one's knowledge of God's love and forgiveness, and that God's providence must ultimately remain a mystery. Both believed redemption was accomplished—consummated¹—in Gethsemane and Golgotha. They believed that Christ is risen, but that Easter Sunday did not reverse a Good Friday defeat. The Resurrection was not a fulfillment, but a consequence of the Cross.² Sheila illustrates Oman's lingering impact on Grant by comparing an analogy common to each.

Oman: "The *theologia gloriae* sees on the cross 'the King in rags, who will soon tear off his disguise and show himself in triumph.'"

Grant (1976 lectures at McMasters): "There is a ghastly way of speaking about the Resurrection in the modern world which I call the fairy-tale way. A prince is dressed in rags, and everybody scorns him. Suddenly the clothes are pulled off and he appears in his prince's costume, and everybody treats him well."³

But Grant also critiques Oman's theology as insufficient—too simple, triumphant, and voluntaristic for moderns whose faith is shattered by despair. Oman's vision is beautiful as far as it goes: Grant acknowledges Oman's Cross as a prophetic revelation of the Father's love, the Son's forgiveness, and the call to "find joy in the world by the knowledge that all can be redeemed."⁴ It also reveals God's call to an ethic of forgiveness: "Oman's faith is that Our Lord on the Cross reveals the Father as Love, Who demands from men that they take up their crosses in forgiveness. The Father's Love and man's freedom to partake of it are the essence of Christianity."⁵ But something is missing. By resisting Oman, Grant tells us his own story—how this simplicity is marred by the reality of doubt and despair that comes with extreme affliction. Here are two illustrations from Grant's thesis:

In none of Oman's writings is there that note of despair of himself and the world ... which makes men parade unflinchingly the doubts that hold back from faith. Oman is always *able to believe* that the Love of God rules all space and time, and to find in men *the capacity to follow* the destiny of the Cross.⁶

¹ Grant, "Five Lectures on Christianity," *CW* 4: 944.

² S. Grant, "Grant and the Theology of the Cross" (1996), 247–8, 255.

³ S. Grant, "Grant and the Theology of the Cross" (1996), 247.

⁴ Grant, "The Theology of John Oman," *CW* 1: 171.

⁵ Grant, "The Theology of John Oman," *CW* 1: 168.

⁶ Grant, "The Theology of John Oman," *CW* 1: 287. Grant notes how Oman affirms his joyous faith in the face of the agonies and defeats of life by appealing to the universal rule of love and Divine Providence (286–7).

Oman's [theology] is based on the faith that only in the theism of Calvary can men in honesty see the pain of the world and still be able to say that the Father is over all and in all. But of course it is possible for an imaginative and reasonable man to look at Calvary and despair. It cannot be said that suicide is by definition irrational.⁷

Grant had experienced the human limitations of our freedom to believe and our capacity to respond to the Cross. Athanasiadis' summarizes Grant's general critique of Oman:

Grant criticizes [Oman's liberal] interpretation of the crucifixion of Christ as the experience of divine redemption. Grant accuses Oman of not appreciating the experience of the afflicted, the sceptic, and the defeated. To speak about Christ offering the forgiveness of God as something those at the foot of the cross can simply embrace by an act of the will, Grant believes, does violence to the truth of experience wherein a person becomes so crushed by circumstances that forgiveness or the larger love of God ... cannot be touched in a way that heals and redeems.⁸

We see summarized in these few sentences Grant's attack on liberal progressivism, providence, and the theology of glory. We see his experiential attentiveness to affliction and to contemplative epistemology (versus willing belief). So, very early on one hears all the pertinent seed-themes of Grant's later, mature theology of the Cross—years before he reads Weil.

Thus, while Grant and Oman each hinge their entire theologies around a vision of the Cross, Grant's version encompasses not only Calvary's proffered redemption, but also reveals the agony of the journey that links Gethesemene and Calvary to our own faith/doubt experience. For Grant, the Cross does not so much demand a choice (to believe and to forgive) that many cannot even make, as it summons us to simply wait at its foot, even in the astonishment of despair. The Cross beckons us to see and wait even as God sees and waits.⁹ The Cross bears witness to the anguish of absence as much as to the consolation of presence. Harris Athanasiadis condenses this double-vision of the Cross perfectly:

On the cross, Christ revealed both the agony of the darkness and the beauty of the light of love rising through and beyond the darkness. Any spirituality that is not nourished by the truth of engagement with the darkness as possibility and actuality, as well as by the light of love as disruptive and transfiguring grace, is not true to the revelation of God on the cross.¹⁰

In summary, for Grant, our real life experience of the Cross includes all three statements: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (despair); "It is finished," (consummation,

⁷ Grant, "The Theology of John Oman," *CW* 1: 354–5.

⁸ Athanasiadis, "Waiting at the Foot of the Cross" (2006), 258–9.

⁹ Cf. Journal entry, "11/06/1942 (Christian, *SL*, 105).

¹⁰ Athanasiadis, "Waiting at the Foot of the Cross" (2006), 267.

implying both completion and union); and “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” (surrender, trust).¹¹

Grant on Dostoevsky’s *theologia cruce*s

This line of thinking—or truth-telling—drew Grant to the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, especially in the days from Bermondsey to his conversion.¹² Briefly, Dostoevsky’s theology of the Cross serves as a bridge from Oman to Simone Weil.

In his dissertation, Grant compares and contrasts Oman and Dostoevsky’s faith, emphasizing how they share a powerfully simple gospel, but that Dostoevsky better illustrates the mystery of faith because he knows the aching difficulties through which moderns must wrestle towards belief. Quoting a letter by Dostoevsky to which Grant can relate:

I want to say to you about myself, that I am a child of this age, a child of unbelief and skepticism, and probably – indeed I know it – shall remain so until the end of my life. How terribly it has tortured me (and tortures me even now) – this longing for faith, which is all the stronger for the proofs I have against it! And yet God gives me sometimes moments of perfect peace; in such moments I love and believe that I am loved; in such moments I have formulated my creed wherein all is dear and holy to me. This creed is extremely simple: here it is: I believe that there is nothing lovelier, deeper, and more sympathetic, more rational, more human and more perfect than the Saviour; I say to myself that not only is there no one else like Him, but that there could be no one. I would even say more: If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with the truth ...¹³

Grant’s assessment is that Oman and Dostoevsky’s gospels are akin, evident in the middle section of the above quote. But the beginning and end are a departure that Oman could not have written. Oman’s strength is in preserving the note of joy in the act of faith. “But to say that the act of faith must always include this joy is to iron out Christian experience into one pattern.”¹⁴

Years later (1958–9), Grant was asked to give a talk on Dostoevsky for CBC radio.¹⁵ In truth, because of time pressure he delegated it to Sheila before adding his final

¹¹ He would also include the Gethsemane experience of “Father, take this cup” (affliction) and “Not my will, but yours” (acceptance).

¹² Cf. GPG to Mother, 09/11/1940 (Jersak, *MSO* 14.27); GPG to Mother, Autumn 1941 (Jersak, *MSO* 14.28); GPG to Professor Trotter, 12/26/1941 (Jersak, *MSO* 14.29); Grant said, “... only Dostoevsky has influenced me equally.” GPG to Alice Boissonneau, Spring 1946 (Christian, *SL*, 128).

¹³ Grant, “Theology of John Oman,” *CW* 1: 355 (citing John Middleton Murry, *Fyodor Dostoevsky* (1923), 77–8). Grant cites it again in 1958–9 in “Fyodor Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 416, and in “Faith and the Multiversity,” *CW* 4: 634.

¹⁴ Grant, “Theology of John Oman,” *CW* 1: 356.

¹⁵ Cf. Grant, “Fyodor Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 408–19.

tweaks and touches. The two had a long history of reading Dostoevsky and were of one mind on the subject. These were the years when Grant was combing the European existentialists—Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Marcel, Sartre, and Heidegger—attempting to sort through the relationship between a transcendent, eternal God and the phenomenon of subjective human freedom.¹⁶ According to Grant, Dostoevsky’s doctrine centres on absolute freedom of the will (“man’s freedom is his very self”), but salvation *must* come from beyond as a gift of grace (contra Pelagianism, Marxism, and Western liberalism). Apart from the grace of God, human freedom will inevitably either be crushed (“reducing him to a member of the ant heap”) or will run wild in self-will to self-destruction.¹⁷

While affirming the attack on liberal progressivism, Grant does not consider this the whole truth (i.e., the idea of freedom as our essence) but argues that Dostoevsky’s greatest influence is his dialectic of faith and doubt:

How overwhelmingly Dostoevsky sees the case against God. ... [L]ike the modern doubt, the agonizing struggle of the believer to reconcile the necessary and the good. This, rather than simply ‘the problem of evil’ seems to me the root of Dostoevsky’s grief, his particular anguish and division. ...

The dialectic starts from Dostoevsky’s unwavering love and adoration of Jesus Christ. Always Christ is the good. But the terrible fear is that reality may after all be quite indifferent to the good, the good as we know it in Jesus Christ; that the cry of dereliction on the Cross was not answered.¹⁸

Dostoevsky utters this brand of doubt in all its force through the character of Ivan Karamazov.¹⁹ Ivan, to Grant, is much more than a ‘proud and irreligious atheist.’ In his complexity, he verbalizes the genuine crisis of faith that assails the late moderns:

He is consumed with desire for reconciliation, for divine universal harmony. He says, ‘All the religions of the world are built on this longing, and I am a believer.’ Nevertheless, because of the ghastly suffering that has been inflicted on the innocent, he cannot bring himself to accept any possible future harmony.²⁰

Ivan would rather deny himself entrance to any future harmony if it “seems to deny love itself, by saying that suffering is unreal.”²¹ How does Dostoevsky move beyond Ivan’s impasse? He must begin at the foot of the Cross, which at first exacerbates the problem. Grant recounts Dostoevsky’s meditations on Hans Holbein’s painting, *Descent from the Cross*,²² which represents for him the vast distance between necessity and the Good, where even beyond our moral objections, at a cosmic level, nature itself crushes the

¹⁶ Christian, *A Biography* (1993), 177–8.

¹⁷ Grant, “Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 412–3.

¹⁸ Grant, “Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 414.

¹⁹ Grant here references the chapters in *The Brothers Karamazov* entitled “Pro and Contra” and “The Grand Inquisitor” (*CW* 2: 414, 417–8).

²⁰ Grant, “Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 414. At this point in the talk, Weil is already introduced to illustrate the same impasse from Weil, *NB* 1: 255.

²¹ Grant, “Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 415.

²² Grant, “Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 415–6.

innocent Christ with overwhelming force. Dostoevsky cannot reconcile this disunity between the claims of Goodness and the brutishness of creation, but while it is an agony for him, he *can* cling to the crucified Christ: “I should prefer to stay with Christ rather than with truth.”²³ This is his theology of the Cross.

For his part, Grant concludes with a presentation of how the “Grand Inquisitor”²⁴ narrative might bring a tentative unity to Dostoevsky’s torment—how grace might span the distance, even to perpetrators who torture the innocent.

The terrible picture of Holbein can be seen in a triumphant setting. This is the Being of whom Alyosha spoke, who alone has the right to forgive everything, *all and for all*. But even with Ivan’s eloquence, the reconciliation cannot be made explicit either for him or for us. Jesus speaks not a word to the Grand Inquisitor, but only kisses him. Here is the infinite weakness in which the Second Person of the Trinity crosses the void of separation.²⁵

About a quarter century later, after repeating Dostoevsky’s “I should prefer to stay with Christ rather than with truth” for a third time, Grant records Simone Weil’s counter-statement:

One can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. *Christ likes us to prefer truth to him* because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.²⁶

Weil does not rescue Grant or us from the wrestle; in fact, she leaves him with even more questions. But she also offers hope that there is finally a unity between necessity and the Good, between our experience of reality and the Reality outside this world. However incomprehensible, she suggests such a reconciliation might be experienced at this same Cross.²⁷

²³ Grant, “Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 416.

²⁴ Cf. Grant’s commentary on the Grand Inquisitor in “Five Lectures,” *CW* 4: 946–50.

²⁵ Grant, “Dostoevsky,” *CW* 2: 418.

²⁶ Grant, *TE*, 70 (citing Weil, *WG*, 27).

²⁷ Weil, *G-G*, 37.