

GRACE AND COMMON LIFE

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Grace and Common Life
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Foreword to *Grace and Common Life* by David Baily Harned

India played an important role in the life of Prof. David Harned (1932–2017). Lectures that he delivered there during his first visit to the subcontinent in 1969 and then in 1970 became his third book, *Grace and Common Life*, and years and several more visits later resulted in his last book, *Mrs. Gandhi's Guest* (originally published as *Strange Bedfellows: Growing Up with India*), a fascinating memoir of his initial and later encounters with India and a wonderful introduction to Indian architecture and sculpture.

The origins of the present volume lay in lectures and research into secularization and its relationship to religion, but it became the book it now is when Harned presented a series of lectures at the Punjabi University in Patiala, in the Indian state of Punjab. It is important to situate this book within the biographical context outlined here. Harned's encounter with India enabled him (forced him?) to more clearly articulate several convictions which had long gestated within him. Perhaps the most significant of these was in relation to natural theology. Harned cut his theological teeth in a Protestant atmosphere which had become allergic to the concept of natural theology. First, it was associated with Roman Catholicism, and secondly the leading light of Protestant theological renewal, Karl Barth, had proclaimed it not only at a dead end but an actual obstacle to accurate knowledge of God located exclusively in special revelation. In spite of this, Harned held out a place for natural theology not, as he would frequently write, as a preamble to the knowledge of God but as a discipline which could interpret and reintegrate aspects of the "natural" into the knowledge of God.

Those aspects of the natural or commonly shared life with all people which most drew Harned's attention were family, the principles and dynamics of play, and human creativity. The latter aspect formed the basis of his doctoral dissertation and first book, *Theology and the Arts*. Also central in Harned's research was the concept of secularization, which he addressed in great detail in his second book, *The Ambiguity of Religion* and which receives attention in these pages.

Grace and Common Life, first published in 1970, was followed in short order with *Faith and Virtue* and *Images for Self-Recognition* and formed an intentional trilogy of books fleshing out the implications and applications of those basic areas of interest which had animated Harned's life and scholarship, centering on manifestations of the divine in and through the mundane. This is not to suggest that special revelation played no part in Harned's work, as he would publish *Creed and Personal Identity: The Meaning of the Apostles' Creed* in 1981, a brief but highly suggestive exploration of the enduring relevance of orthodox confession.

The ambiguities of life in a fallen world, the recalcitrance of words in the struggle toward truthful communication, the opaque and frequently distorted appearances of divine reality, occupied David Harned's research and writing all his life. Looking back across forty years of scholarship, teaching and academic administration, Harned effectively summarized his own thought, as well as the thrust of this present volume, when he wrote:

Revelation means a gift of sight, something we cannot give or will to ourselves. It is conferred on us from we know not where. Revelation means an expansion and enhancement of our vision so that we can capture and learn to love aspects of reality that have long been present with us but which have been unrecognized or dismissed or thought of little value. There is a circularity in this: revelation affords us a store of new imagery and the new imagery further sharpens our vision and perhaps inspires a new love. Seeing is the prius and foundation of moral life, the indispensable prelude to action, as I have written so often. Everything depends upon the health and acuity of our sight and imagination, both literally and figuratively understood. [from *Mrs. Gandhi's Guest*].

Grace and Common Life is one of the earlier expressions of these central convictions, and remains a relevant contribution to the renewal of natural and moral theology now underway which his work helped reignite.

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For
Christopher, Timothy, and Elaine

PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

Grace and Common Life consists of lectures given at a center for the study of world religions in northern India during the autumn of 1970. In that situation there was little reason for extensive debate with Protestant theological positions other than my own, much more for the exploration of some motif shared by many traditions—grace—and for an interpretation of man—as player—that is at least not incompatible with other faiths. In the Hindu scriptures, for example, the universe is regarded as the play (*lila*) of God, who is, indeed, understood to be ever engaged in play (*nitya lilanurakta*). In the Sikh tradition, too, grace and playing are prominent themes. These lectures contain numerous refer-

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ences to secularization; the very ambiguous consequences of that process are, increasingly, realities in the Orient as well as in the West.

While skeptical of "natural theology" as an independent discipline, I am convinced of its significance as an element within the structure of confessional statements. It is important not only for purposes of dialogue with those of other traditions, but also so that we might not move too far from the texture of our ordinary experience—the pleasures and cares of family life, the games we play, the changing social processes that shape and threaten these and, therefore, ourselves.

I want to record several debts. First, to the National Endowment for the Humanities, for a fellowship that enabled me to prepare these lectures for publication as well as to pursue further some of the motifs I touch upon briefly here. Second, to Miss Charlotte Kohler and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, for permission to reprint in altered form some material that first appeared in the Winter 1971 issue of that periodical under the title, "The Image of the Player."

DAVID BAILY HARNED

June 1971

INTRODUCTION

This small essay is not an attempt either to map the contours of Christian faith or to defend its truth. Instead, the purpose of these pages is simply to show how this particular faith is born from and nourished by quite ordinary and common experiences which are, in one form or another, perhaps the lot of every man. It would not serve the interests of either piety or scholarship if the differences between Christianity and other traditions were ignored. They are many and they are profound. On the other hand, it would be equally unwise to claim that Christianity rests upon experiences that are less than fully and universally human. Then the stranger might well despair of understanding and the Christian of his own humanity. The attempt to illuminate the relationship between the faith of Christians and some varieties of experience that

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most men share—whether religious or secular, oriental or western, Christian, Sikh or Hindu—might not only render this one tradition more intelligible to the outsider, but also serve to remind all of us how rich and mysterious is the daily bread of experience upon which everyone feeds.

In the West, man has become whatever he is because of the decisive influence of two factors—the family, and playing with peers. The argument of this essay is that the first furnishes the primary motive for faith in God as well as the fundamental imagery for the expression of that faith, while the latter provides our best understanding of what authentic existence means and affords the most important clue to the nature of the self. Christianity and its future are integrally and, indeed, inseparably bound to the fates of playing and of the family. Perhaps this will seem a rash assertion, especially in the light of contemporary cultural disarray in the West. Robert Ardrey, among many others, recently commented in *The Social Contract* that “what we watch today is the disintegration of the family which we were taught was universal and eternal. It is neither.” Speculations equally bleak might be offered about the prospects of play, when so many find surrogates for it in the usage of drugs or the shabby “entertainments” of the mass media, which do nothing to introduce the

self to those elements of competition and cooperation, tension and struggle, from which men derive some of their greatest nourishment. But the play impulse is deeply written into the nature of every animal, man not least of all; if his future keeps faith with his past, that impulse will still find avenues for its expression. Whether Ardrey is correct it is far too soon to know. But the interpretation of secularization offered in this essay suggests that while the role of the family will certainly alter, we have no evidence that such change will diminish its importance. We have few certainties, except the knowledge that Christianity has little to hope for if there is no comfortable habitation for families and games in the world of tomorrow.

Some of the dominant motifs of these pages certainly do not represent a consensus among Christians. The emphasis upon the cruciality of the imagination in all human life but especially in the life of faith, the interpretation of the man of faith as above all else a player, the insistence upon the affinities between grace in the households of man and in the household of God, the contention that neither the sacred nor the religious is integrally related to the holy, the reinterpretation of the polarity of nature and grace in the language of play and the everyday, and the stress upon the importance of creativeness—

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others, and there are many of them within the Christian camp, will want to disagree with the priority awarded to these themes. But few will quarrel with the claim that grace is a consistent and critical refrain in the New Testament and in later Christian thought.

Grace is a theme worth exploration not only because of its importance in Christian eyes, but also because of its cruciality for several other traditions. Perhaps for none of them is it more central than for the community in which I am now a guest—the Sikhs. In the interpretation of grace, what we share seems far more important than where we differ. In *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, W. H. McLeod writes of “the stress which Guru Nanak lays upon what is normally referred to as divine grace. It is an aspect which is integral to his total thought and it is one to which constant reference is made in his works.” Grace is not, however, only the property or preoccupation of men of faith. In the life of every man there is grace, perhaps not in any fully theological sense of the word, perhaps unrecognized or scorned, but still present at least in the simple gestures and human concern which grant the newborn a chance for life, a measure of security, some frail grip upon identity. Grace is there, for the secular as well as for the religious, as common as the air we

breathe, and as precious. There is little we have that we have not received.

The two parts of this essay conclude with theological arguments. The first is that if the family is as crucial as I contend, then the principal concern of faith is with the holy and the human, not with what is putatively religious or sacred. The second is that if playing is as central as I believe, then the traditional distinction between nature and grace might be much better phrased in terms of play and the everyday. Semantics are not unimportant. The change might render the polarity more intelligible to those who are not Christian and the emphasis upon playing and the player might enable us to recognize the convergence of certain occidental and oriental theological assumptions about the nature of man and his world.

These pages were originally written in conjunction with a seminar on secularization that I taught at the University of Virginia in 1969, then revised for presentation to my colleagues in the Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies at Punjabi University in 1970. Several pages on the religious and the secular were first written for an international seminar on the teachings of Guru Nanak at Punjabi University in the autumn of 1969, and these were subsequently published in the inaugural