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978-0-521-08805-3 - Events of Grace: Naturalism, Existentialism, and Theology

Charley D. Hardwick

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Many contemporary Christians feel a compelling need to believe that faith is consistent with the modern scientific view of the world. Standing in the liberal theological tradition dating from Schleiermacher, *Events of grace* addresses this need by contending that modern Christianity can be made compatible with a scientific, naturalistic world view. To do so “religion” and “God” must be understood valuationally, not ontologically. This approach to “religion” permits an existentialist account of faith entirely in terms of “modes of existing.” *Events of grace* thereby weds Rudolph Bultmann’s demythologizing program to Henry Nelson Wieman’s naturalistic concept of God as creative transformation. Defending a strong doctrine of “justification by faith,” Hardwick shows how both God and the knowledge of God can be conceived in terms of “events of grace” that transform possibilities of existence toward “openness to the future.” On this basis, *Events of grace* gives a complete existential and naturalistic account of sin, faith, God, the knowledge of God, Christology, and the eschatological symbols that articulate Christian hope in the encounter with suffering and death.

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EVENTS OF GRACE

Naturalism, existentialism, and theology

CHARLEY D. HARDWICK

The American University, Washington D.C.



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*For my wife
Christina*

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Lo, I tell you a mystery . . . We shall all be changed, in a
moment, in the twinkling of an eye . . .
(1 Cor. 15:51f.)

What have you that you did not receive? If then you received
it, why do you boast, as if it were not a gift?
(1 Cor. 4:7)

I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by
which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And
this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the
gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which merciful
God justifies us by faith. . .
(Martin Luther)

It is not we who handle these matters, but we who are handled
by God.
(Martin Luther)

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Preface

This work is conceived entirely as an essay in constructive theology. Its distinctive viewpoint is an austere physicalist naturalism, dependent largely on John F. Post's nonreductive physicalism defended in *The Faces of Existence*. The choice of this theological strategy rests on my conviction that theologians must take far more seriously the possibility that naturalism provides the true account of our world, and indeed in its materialist or physicalist version. Theologians too readily – and too facily – dismiss philosophical naturalism. They assume not merely that it is philosophically deficient but that its truth would render the Christian witness of faith impossible. The contemporary philosophical discussion presents ample reason to believe the first of these assumptions mistaken. This work aims to render the second mistaken as well. Even if I have failed, I remain convinced that the goal remains the deepest challenge facing theology in our time.

The evidence for the entirely theological motives underlying this work is that the single audience I am most in mind to reach are those responsible for training candidates for the Christian ministry in the care of souls. Generally speaking, the discipline of “practical theology” is doing a decent job in two of the three areas under its jurisdiction, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. But the care of souls is a shambles today. At one end it ministers to one or another version of the latest self-actualization psychological gruel. At the other end, it has little if anything to offer to the troubled circumstances of tragedy, loss, suffering, and, most especially, death, except tired old eschatological symbols. These it continues to serve up largely unreflectively in mythological forms that scarcely any educated person believes today. Far more plain candor is required of the Christian ministry today, but there are few theological resources around to provide the basis of such honesty. This work offers one effort to provide them.

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This motive also accounts for my admiration for the work of Stanley Hauerwas in Christian ethics, to which reference is made from time to time in what follows. Hauerwas's genius is to identify with unusual insight precisely those hard issues of "practical living" under the Christian "form of life" for which the care of souls is responsible and to make clear the commitment to honesty, candor, and truth demanded by faith itself. Where I depart from Hauerwas is on his persistent refusal to clarify the theological foundations that permit his insights; instead he falls back unreflectively on theological formulations that amount simply to mystification. I try to show that what is most valuable in his work can be grounded on much more austere, but also much more transparent, philosophical and theological foundations than he is willing to entertain – though it will also be clear that I depart from him entirely on his unwillingness to engage these ethical issues on the basis of common reason. This work attempts to show that there need be no conflict between the normative character of the Christian "form of life" and human reason. Ethically this means that the witness of faith requires Christians, especially Christians, to have reasons which all in the human community can share for the requiring that our ethical reasons require us to require of others.

I must acknowledge my indebtedness to a number of persons and agencies whose support – and criticism – have been invaluable. Most especially I wish to recognize Schubert Ogden whose example as teacher, theologian, and friend has inspired much that follows. Though this work disagrees profoundly with Ogden's antinaturalism, the reader will see that in certain respects, especially in the last half, it is an extended engagement with his position. The reason is that in my opinion, and despite our ultimate disagreement over ontology, no one more consistently identifies the nub of theological issues with greater precision than Ogden. He is especially good at holding theology tight to the existential point of theological issues, and this has the effect oftentimes (and with the most important theological doctrines) of transforming our conception of what the proper theological questions themselves are. Consequently, I have been compelled time and again to develop my own arguments as a counterpoint to his. Thus, despite the great differences in the two positions, I am grateful to acknowledge my indebtedness to him. This extends so far as my having borrowed two of his titles for the last two chapters.

Some types of intellectual growth can occur only through conversations that are ongoing over extended periods of time, but it is

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rare after graduate school to find colleagues with whom one can be in constant and deep conversation over many years. I am gratified therefore to have the opportunity here to acknowledge four of my colleagues from The American University who have played this role in my life: Jeffrey Reiman, Phillip Scribner, Jon Wisman, and Barry Chabot (now of Miami University of Ohio). Our discussion group has provided me with an unparalleled opportunity for a vibrant intellectual life. None of them is a theologian and all have difficulty imagining how my efforts to do theology can succeed, or why I should care, yet their criticism, encouragement, and constant engagement with the widest theoretical issues of our day have provided the context for my intellectual growth for over twenty years. It was through this ongoing conversation that I gradually came to realize how my commitment to an existentialist method in theology also required a commitment to philosophical naturalism.

My thanks go to a number of others who have also provided criticism, support, and encouragement: the late Larry Axel, Fritz and Elsa Buri, James Duke, Nancy Frankenberry, the late Hans Frei, Langdon Gilkey, Ray Hart, Van Harvey, Robert Neville, Creighton and Frissy Peden, Wes Robbins, Marvin Shaw, Sarah Truelove and Jim Woelfel. I am grateful to the Highlands Institute for American Religious Thought which, under the leadership of Creighton Peden, Larry Axel, Nancy Frankenberry, and Marvin Shaw, devoted an entire week in 1991 to a seminar discussion of an earlier version of this work. I also want to thank Harley Chapman, Don Kleinfelter, Charles Milligan, and Jerry Stone, who were presenters at this seminar. Their criticisms and responses were extremely helpful in the final revisions. I am also happy to say a special word of thanks to Robert Neville and his wife Beth. They intervened with a crucial and delightful brainstorming session over lunch at a 1990 meeting in Highlands, North Carolina when I was having difficulty coming up with an acceptable title for this work. The present title grew out of that conversation. I probably would never have arrived at it without their help.

I also wish to acknowledge several agencies without whose support this endeavor surely would have been impossible: The Danforth Foundation, for support and encouragement during my years of study, and the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies for fellowships that made leisure and freedom from financial worries possible during the early stages of this project. I

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wish to thank Richard Berendzen, the outstanding former President of my university, and Milton Greenberg, Frederick Jacobs, Ann Ferren, all administrative officers in his administration, and Betty Bennett, Dean of our College of Arts and Sciences, for providing the overall context of faculty development that has made The American University a satisfying place to teach and work over the last decade. I am also indebted to the Faculty Research Committee at The American University for several summer research awards, stretching as far back as 1976, that have enormously facilitated the development of this project, and then, at last, for a sabbatical support grant during 1988–1989, that made its final writing possible.

Finally, I must thank two enchanting and beloved ladies: my wife, Christina, and the city of Paris. The city of Paris was my constant muse for a year while, day after day, I lost myself in the delights of writing. Each time I surfaced it was to be surrounded anew with loveliness and fresh inspiration. Little did I know that the same loveliness and inspiration would surround me again when I returned to Washington, DC to bring the draft to completion. For this I thank Christina, who has made my life richer in every way and who already knows. The dedication is for her.

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Abbreviations

- CM** Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).
- CPA** John B. Cobb, Jr. *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975).
- FE** John Post, *The Faces of Existence: An Essay in Nonreductive Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).
- HB** Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1966).
- HMF** Rudolf Bultmann, "The Historicity of Man and Faith," in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1960).
- KBT** James Hall, *Knowledge, Belief, and Transcendence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975).
- MUC** Henry Nelson Wieman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958).
- NTM** Rudolf Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung," in H. W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma und Mythos*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Herbert Reich-Evangelischer Verlag, 2nd ed., 1951). English translation = "On the Problem of Demythologizing," in Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1–43. Hereafter, citations to the English translation will be indicated by "ET." If the translation is my own, the reference to the German original is given first; otherwise Ogden's translation is cited first.
- PC** Schubert M. Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982).

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Abbreviations

- RESM* Henry Nelson Wieman, *Religious Experience and Scientific Method* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1954 [reissue of Macmillan, 1926]).
- RG* Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963).
- RR* Rem Edwards, *Reason and Religion: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972).
- SHG* Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).
- SMG* Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1963).
- SZ* Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 9th unveränderte Auflage, 1960). Parentheses following are to the English translation, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1962).
- ZPE* Rudolf Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung," in H. W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma und Mythos*, Vol. II (Hamburg: Herbert Reich-Evangelischer Verlag, 1952). English Translation = "On the Problem of Demythologizing," in Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 95–130. Hereafter citations to the English translation will be indicated by "ET." If the translation is my own, the reference to the German original is given first; otherwise Ogden's translation is cited first.