

M. Laubscher

Rev. M. Laubscher, Department
Practical and Missional
Theology, University of the
Free State

(orcid.org/0000-0002-4240-1991)

laubschem@ufs.ac.za

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BOOK REVIEW

GRACE UPON GRACE. REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

Cilliers, J. (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2020)
96 pp. ISBN: 978-1-928314-71-4 (R230); e-ISBN:
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What is *Grace upon grace*? It is indeed (not your ordinary) “reflections on the meaning of life”. But it is also so much more. Knowing Cilliers’ work, we should expect that one take on him or his subject will not suffice. In fact, he himself sets the tone of expectancy and promising creativity when he states in the opening sentence of the preface: “This book wrote itself. ... I could not resist the voice(s) of this book calling out to me” (p. xi). It is a deeply inspirational and personal book on knowing grace “now”. It is his first book post-retirement, but also the completion of the unplanned trilogy on grace. It is about a threefold grace, in which we simultaneously confess by the lavish grace (upon grace) of God to know “that you do not know, fully”, “you will know, fully”, and “you are being known, fully”. It is a simultaneous search *and* celebration of finding meaningful knowledge in this life. The trilogy’s circle might be completed, but it is not closed, nor set in stone. In this instance, the dynamic movement of the open space, well timed and timely, is set in motion for us to join the familiar



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dance and playful spirit in Cilliers' oeuvre. In short, this book is not merely about grace (upon grace), but an existential testimony to, and embodiment of *Grace upon grace – Reflections on the meaning of life*.

Those familiar with Cilliers' work will not be surprised to find yet again another aesthetical expression in the (theological) search for meaning. Art in various mediums fill these pages, and it is especially the interesting inclusion and reflection upon some of his children's early art works (pp. 25, 31), which adds to the depth of gracious sharing within the meaning of life. In fact, there is even, towards the end, a specific reference and short pondering upon the creative and (comfortable) knowing touch of his wife's hand in his life (p. 66).¹ Besides these hospitable invites into the inner circle of their lives, we are also graced yet again to find numerous new paintings of Cilliers (with some commentary) in this beautiful little book. These works – as well as some other more famous and influential works of other artists – form an integral part of his argument. Cleverly and creatively, he frames his existential meditative take on life with “the search for meaning could not be undertaken without aesthetic expression” (p. xii); only to reiterate and conclude at the end – once he has shown his sense(s) for the question – with his core conviction that “it is by way of aesthetics that we can juggle interpretations” (p. 79). Cilliers summarises his by now well-known approach anew with the following introductory words:

[A]esthetics would be one of the most helpful spaces to enter in any endeavour to link grace with the quest for the meaning of life. Why? Because aesthetics constitutes the exact opposite of moralism, of rigid knowledge, of cause-and-effect structures. While moralism, for instance, clamps down on immovable 'laws', aesthetics says: what if? While cause-and-effect structures know about one, inescapable outcome, aesthetics is not impressed by cul-de-sacs (p. 4).

Whether it is the aesthetics of grace, or the grace of aesthetics, these two key concepts are integral to Cilliers' understanding of knowledge. For Cilliers, the beauty of grace consists, one could perhaps say, in an all-important threefold manner of “knowing that you do not know, fully” (Chapter 1), “knowing that you will know, fully” (Chapter 2), and “knowing that you are known, fully” (Chapter 3). To experience his well-known reference to “the *pre-sencing* of a Presence in the present” of his previous book (*Timing grace*), the “(k)now(ledge)” becomes indeed a reality of grace upon grace upon grace that is grace. Such fullness of grace has first of all the appreciative capacity for living with a healthy uncertainty (p. 24). In the grace of “knowing that you do not know, fully”, Cilliers introduces the concept of “fragment”. It is “in fragments” that “fullness as not-being-there is present as being-there” (p. 20). In this kind

1 The book is also dedicated to the three of them.

of grace, we discover indeed that “faith means not to be intact, but to live as fragment” (p. 19). Stated differently, “sin can be understood as a form of identity that seeks security in set and final statuses, directly opposed of being a fragment” (p. 19). “Then we no longer are sunflowers, but sin-flowers” (p. 37). The healthy uncertainty he imagines within the idea of fragment is further complemented by the introduction of “bricolage”, meaning to “tinker around” and “play with possibilities, continuously asking: what if?” (p. 27). The grace of not knowing is, in essence, about “an openness, a stance of expectancy, an embracement of being led into the mystery” (p. 27). As Christians we are not called to be “security guards, patrolling along the borders of ecclesial dogma”, but rather to be “bricoleurs” who love “playing with perspectives” (p. 30). Ideas such as, to state a few, “creativity”, “improvisation”, “imagination”, “interruption”, “preaching as play”, or “liturgy as dancing with Deity”, which we came to know in Cilliers’ work over the years, thicken as we appreciatively embrace even more fully the idea of the “preaching fool” who knows the grace of not knowing fully. In short, we know “now” that we do not know (fully), and thus we are called to create and dismantle our God images.

In knowing that we do not know fully, we do in fact know something (read: Someone). It is not in confessing our not-knowing that we become nihilistic or actually know nothing at all. In knowing, there is also “Someone” to know, and it is “now”. Chapter 2 is another beautiful section in the text that further explores the familiar distinction in his work between “future” and “advent”. Cilliers coins, in this regard, a new illuminative concept of “intology”, whereby “eternity does not bypass time and space, but simultaneously penetrates and transcends them – ‘as’ eternity” (p. 46). “Intology” is thus about “the infinite instant(s) of being taken ‘into’ Christ, of being ‘in’ Christ” (p. 46). Whereas the previous chapter was about the art of interpretation, which guards against the temptation to succumb into nihilism or activism (being mere wind-chasers), this chapter on “intology” wants to school us further in the art of expectation that does not drift into any form of futurism or escapism (being mere cloud-watchers) (see p. 79). “Intology” as a concept provides us with an emphatic witness of a lavish and full grace within this life. First, all of this life (read: suffering) is taken “into” Jesus’ life; secondly, God’s future in Christ is brought “into” our present, and thirdly, not to escape reality as such, but embrace it all anew (pp. 46-47). Thus, “[i]ntology does not negate ontology but brings it to fruition” (p. 47). In short, we “now” know that we shall know (fully), and thus we are called to create and dismantle our God images.

Knowing all of the above perhaps concerns the fact that we are being known, fully. What we know neither starts nor ends with us. Coupled to the above critique on the overestimation of what we know, or underestimation of what we do not know, our epistemic arrogance often projects itself as

the beginning and end of all our knowledge. We are also, thirdly, especially in need of the art of healing, in order to be saved from quietism or pietism (being mere bench-sitters) (see p. 79). God knows us, fully, and turns our knowledge of God graciously on its head. This spells out the beginning of poetic possibilities such as:

The Black Swan of unexpected events might indeed be the disguise of the White Dove of Pentecost. The wind that snuffs out the candle, and extinguishes the last glimmerings of the dying light, might be the wind that kindles a new Light, might be the wind that carries us 'into life' (p. 61).

Again, by the grace of God, we "now" know in Christ that we are being known (fully), and thus we cannot but continuously create and dismantle our God images. This, in short, with so much more still between the pages, is what Cilliers' fully embodied witness of *grace upon grace* is about. Let us continue to ponder the questions he leaves us with and celebrate yet another beautiful achievement by Cilliers. May the discussion of his work in South Africa (and wider) continue to stimulate, challenge, and develop further. *Kyrie eleison!*