

RENUNCIATION

**A Compilation of Articles from The Mystic's Vision
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The Conflict Between Nature And Grace: A Study of The Theology of Thomas á Kempis

One of the most beloved Christian texts outside of the Holy Bible is the Imitation of Christ by Thomas á Kempis. It is this book that held the primary place in my early years of devotion and holds a central place in my heart to this day. I even published a condensed version of that book which I entitled Thomas á Kempis: On The Love of God. ¹ In a few chapters of the Third Book of my edition of this classic devotional text, Thomas describes the differences between Nature and Grace. This analysis plays a great part in Thomas' theology, and it had a great effect on me in those early years in my Santa Cruz cabin, and has continued to hold great significance for me up to the current time.

When I think about this conflict between Nature and Grace, many questions come up in my mind. And, so, I would like to focus on this theology of Thomas' for a time to see if I can resolve some of those questions: First, it is necessary to acknowledge that Nature is God's creation, and so, if His Grace is contrary to our Nature, then, it is contrary to what He Himself has produced. Has He not, through the process of biological evolution, instilled in us the procreative urge, the instinct for self-preservation, and a love for the pleasures of life? And while most people would object that following these instincts and urges is only 'natural', it is these very natural instincts and urges that, while they are conducive to a 'natural' life, are, in Thomas' theology, in conflict with Grace.

So, is this notion of a conflict between Nature and Grace, then, simply a carryover from an anachronistic medieval Christian ascetic ideal, or is it a universally valid observation? In the Vedanta tradition, Nature and Grace are represented as Maya and Brahman, or Prakrti and Purusha; in Sufi theology, they are Khalq and Haqq; in Buddhism, they are samsara and nirvana (Tathata). And, though the notion that these two are opposed cannot be understood or accepted by everyone, it is a timeless spiritual truth that in order to fully love God, one must renounce the

love of the world; to ascend to the Creator, one must transcend the [attractions of the] Creation. Only those who aspire to God and are familiar with the interior operation of God's Grace will understand what Thomas intends to communicate regarding the opposition of Nature and Grace. Here, let him explain it himself in the following passage:

Chapter II.
That Grace Will Not Be Mixed
With Love Of Worldly Things

“My son, Grace is a precious thing and will not be mixed with any private love nor with worldly comforts. It behooves you to cast away all hindrances of Grace if you will have the gracious gift thereof. Choose therefore a secret place and love to be alone and keep yourself from hearing of vain tales and fables. Offer to God devout prayers and ask earnestly that you may have a contrite heart and a pure conscience. Think all the world is nothing and prefer My service before all other things; for you may not have your mind on Me and therewithal delight in transitory pleasures. It behooves you, therefore, to withdraw yourself from your dearest friends, and from all your acquaintances, and to sequester your mind wholly from the inordinate desire of worldly comfort as much as you may.

“O how sure a trust shall it be to a man at his departing out of this world, to feel inwardly in his soul that no earthly love nor yet the affection of any passing or transitory thing has any rule in him! But a weak person, newly turned to God, may not so easily have his heart severed from earthly desires, and the worldly-living man knows not the freedom of a man who is inwardly turned to God. And, therefore, if a man will perfectly be spiritual and holy, he must as well renounce strangers as kinsfolk; and especially before all others he must be most wary of himself, for if he overcomes himself perfectly he shall the sooner overcome all other enemies. The most noble and most perfect victory is for a man to have the victory over himself. He, therefore, who holds himself so much subject that sensuality obeys to reason, and reason in all things is obedient to Me, is the true overcomer of himself and the lord of the world.

“But if you covet to come to that point, you must begin manfully, and set your axe to the root of the tree and fully cut away and destroy in yourself all the inordinate inclination that you have to yourself or to any private or material things. For of that vice, that a man loves himself inordinately, depends nearly all that ought summarily to be destroyed in man. And if that

is truly overcome, immediately shall follow great tranquility and peace of conscience. But inasmuch as there are but few who labor to die to themselves, or to overcome themselves perfectly, therefore many lie still in their fleshly feelings and worldly comforts, and may in no way rise up in spirit above themselves; for it behooves him who will be free in heart and have contemplation of Me, to mortify all evil inclinations that he has to himself and to the world, and not to be bound to any creature by an inordinate or private love.”

The above passage should give the reader a sense of the great difficulty and hardship undertaken by a soul in pursuit of the intimate contemplation of God. Indeed, it could not be done at all were it not for God’s Grace that buoys and uplifts the devout soul, preventing it from reverting to its inherent Nature. Nonetheless, just as, from the perspective of Vedanta, Maya claims many victims, it is not surprising that, in the Christian context, many spiritual aspirants occasionally succumb to Nature—since Maya and Nature are one and the same. Here, in the following passage, Thomas goes on to explain more fully the need to renounce the things of Nature in order to embrace more fully the things of God:

Chapter III.
***How We Should Forget All Created Things
In Order That We Might Find Our Creator***

“Lord, I have great need of Thy grace, and of Thy great singular grace, before I may come thither where no creature shall hinder me from the perfect beholding of Thee; for as long as any transitory thing holds me or has rule in me, I may not fly freely to Thee. He coveted to fly without hindrance who said: ‘Who shall give me wings like a dove that I may fly into the bosom of my Lord!’

“I see well that no man is more restful in this world than is that man who always has his mind and his whole intent upward to God, and nothing desires of the world. It behooves him therefore who would perfectly forsake himself and behold Thee, to rise above all creatures, and himself also, and through excess of mind to see and behold that Thou, maker of all things, hast nothing among all creatures like Thyself. Unless a man is clearly delivered from the love of all creatures, he may not fully tend to his creator, and that is the greatest cause why there are so few contemplatives; that is to say, because there are so few who will sequester themselves willingly from the love of created things.

“For contemplation great grace is required, for it lifts up the soul and ravishes it up in Spirit above itself. And unless a man is lifted up in Spirit above himself and is clearly delivered in his love from all creatures and is perfectly and fully united to God, whatsoever he knows or whatsoever he has, either in virtue or learning, is worth but little before God. Therefore, he shall have but little virtue and long shall he lie still in earthly pleasures, who accounts anything great or worthy to be praised but God alone; for all other things besides God are nothing and are to be accounted as nothing. There is great difference between the wisdom of a devout man, enlightened by grace, and the learning of a subtle and studious scholar; and that learning is much more noble and much more worthy that comes by the influence and gracious gift of God than that which is gotten by the labor and study of man.

“Many desire to have the gift of contemplation, but they will not use such things as are required for contemplation. And one great hindrance of contemplation is that we stand so long in outward signs and in material things and take no heed of the perfect mortifying of our body to the spirit. I know not how it is, nor with what spirit we are led, nor what we pretend, we who are called spiritual persons, that we take greater labor and study for transitory things than we do to know the inward state of our own soul.

“But alas for sorrow, as soon as we have made a little recollection to God, we run forth to outward things and do not search our own conscience with due examination, as we should, nor heed where our affection rests, nor sorrow that our deeds are so evil and so unclean as they are. In ancient times, the people corrupted themselves with fleshly uncleanness, and therefore followed the great flood; and truly, when our inward affection is corrupted, our deeds following thereon are also corrupted, for of a clean heart springs the fruit of a good life.

“It is oftentimes asked what deeds such a man has done, but of what zeal or with what intent he did them is little regarded. Whether a man is rich, strong, fair, able, a good writer, a good singer, or a good laborer, is often inquired; but how poor he is in spirit, how patient and meek, how devout, and how inwardly turned to God, is little regarded. Nature beholds the outward deed, but grace turns her to the inward intent of the deed. The first is often deceived, but the second puts her trust wholly in God and is not deceived.”

And here, in this beautiful chapter, Thomas sets down the foundation for his theology as he explains more intricately how Nature and Grace differ from and oppose one another:

**Chapter IV.
Of The Differences
Between Nature And Grace**

“My son, take good heed of the motions of Nature and Grace for they are very subtle and much contrary, the one to the other, and hardly may they be known asunder, unless it is by a spiritual man who is inwardly illumined in his soul through grace. Every man desires some goodness and pretends somewhat of goodness in all his words and deeds, and therefore under pretense of goodness many are deceived.

“Nature is wily and full of deceit and draws many to her whom she oftentimes snares and deceives; and ever she beholds her own wealth as the goal of her work. But Grace walks simply without deceit, she declines from all evil, she pretends no guile, but all things she does purely for God, in whom finally she rests.

“Nature will not gladly die, nor gladly be oppressed or overcome; neither will she be gladly under another nor be kept in subjection. But Grace studies how she may be mortified to the world, and to the flesh; she resists sensuality, she seeks to be subject, she desires to be overcome, she will not use her own liberty. She loves to be held under holy discipline and covets not to have lordship over any one creature but to live and to stand always under the fear of God, and for His love is always ready to bow herself meekly under every creature.

“Nature labors for her own profit and advantage, and much beholds what winning comes to her by others. Grace beholds not what is profitable to herself, but what is profitable to many. Nature gladly receives honor and reverence, but Grace refers all honor and reverence to God. Nature dreads reprovings and despisings; but Grace joys, for the name of God, to suffer them both and takes them, when they come, as special gifts of God. Nature loves idleness and bodily rest; but Grace cannot be idle without doing some good deed, and therefore she seeks gladly some profitable labors.

“Nature desires fair and curious things. But Grace delights in meek and simple things; she despises not hard things, nor refuses to be clad in poor

clothing and simple garments. Nature gladly beholds things temporal, she joys at worldly winnings, is heavy for worldly losses, and is quickly moved by a sharp word. But Grace beholds things everlasting. She trusts not in things temporal, and is not troubled with the loss of them, nor grieved by an angry word; for she has laid her treasure in God and in spiritual things, which may not perish. Nature is covetous and more gladly takes than gives; she loves much to have property and private things. But Grace is piteous and liberal to the poor, she flees singular profit, she is content with little and judges it more blessed to give than to take.

“Nature inclines to the love of creatures, to the love of the flesh, to vanities and runnings-about, and to see new things in the world. But Grace draws a man to the love of God and to the love of virtues; she renounces all created things, she flees the world, she hates desires of the flesh, she restrains liberty and wandering-about, and avoids as much as she may to be seen among gatherings of people. Nature gladly has some outward solace wherein she may delight in her outward senses. but Grace seeks only to be comforted in God and to delight her in His goodness above all things.

“Nature does all things for her own winning and singular profit; she may do nothing free, but hopes always to have the same back again, or more, or applause, or favor of the people; and covets much that her deeds and works be greatly pondered and praised. But Grace seeks no temporal thing, and no other reward for her hire but only God. She will have no more of temporal goods than shall be needful for the getting of the goods everlasting, and cares not for the vain praise of the world.

“Nature joys greatly in many friends and kinsfolk, and glories much in a noble place of birth and in her noble blood and kindred; she joys with mighty men, she flatters rich men, and is merry with those who she thinks similar to her in nobleness of the world. But Grace makes a man to love his enemies, she has no pride in worldly friends; she regards not the nobleness of kin, nor the house of her father, unless the more virtue is there. She favors more the poor than the rich, she has more compassion for an innocent than for a mighty man; she joys ever in truth and not in falsehood, and always comforts good men more and more to profit and grow in virtue and goodness, and to seek daily more high gifts of Grace, that they may through good virtuous works be made into the sons of God.

“Nature immediately complains for the wanting of a very little thing that she would have or for a little worldly sorrow. But Grace bears gladly all

neediness and wantings of the world. Nature inclines all things to herself and to her own profit as much as she may; she argues for herself and strives and fights for herself. But Grace renders all things to God, of whom all things flow and spring originally; she ascribes no goodness to herself and presumes not of herself; she strives not and prefers not her own opinion before other men's, but in every sentence, she submits her meekly to the eternal wisdom and judgment of God.

“Nature covets to know and to hear new secret things. She will that her works be showed outwardly and will have experience of many things in the world by her outward senses; she desires also to be known and to do great things in the world, whereof applause and praising may follow. But Grace cares not for any new things nor for any curious things, whatsoever they may be; for she knows well that all such things come of vanity, and that no new things may long endure upon earth.

“She teaches to restrain the outward senses and to avoid all vain pleasure and outward show, and meekly keeps secret things that in the world would be greatly marveled at and praised. And, in everything and in every science, she seeks some spiritual profit to herself, and praise and honor to almighty God. She will not that her good deeds nor her inward devotion be outwardly known, but most desires that our Lord be blessed in all His works, who gives all things freely of His great and excellent love.

“This Grace is a light from heaven and a spiritual gift of God. It is the proper mark and token of elect people and a guarantee of the everlasting life. It lifts a man from love of earthly things to the love of heavenly things and makes a carnal man to be a man of God. And the more that nature is oppressed and overcome, the more Grace is given, and the soul through new gracious visitations is daily shaped anew and formed more and more to the image of God.”

Thomas continues in this vein, reiterating the great value of God's Grace in bringing the soul to a transcendence of its own Nature, so that it may become the true servant of God and know its identity in Him:

Chapter V.
Of The Corruption Of Nature
And Of The Worthiness Of Grace

“O Lord God, who hast made me to Thine image and likeness, grant me this Grace that Thou hast shown to be so great and so necessary to the health of my soul, that I may overcome this wretched Nature which draws me always to sin and to the losing of my own soul. I feel in my flesh the law of sin fighting strongly against the law of my spirit, which leads me as a slave to obey my sensuality in many things; nor may I resist the passions thereof unless Thy grace doth assist me.

“I have therefore great need of Thy grace, and a great abundance of it, if I shall overcome this wretched nature which always from my youth has been ready and prone to sin. In my inward self, that is, in the reason of my soul, I delight myself in Thy laws and in Thy teachings, knowing that they are good, righteous and holy; and that all sin is evil, and to be fled and avoided. Yet in my outward self, that is to say, in my fleshly feeling, I serve the law of sin when I obey my sensuality rather than my reason. And of this it follows also that I will good, but I may not for weakness perform it without Thy Grace. And sometimes I intend to do many good deeds but, because the Grace that should help me is lacking, I go backward and fail in my doing. I know the way to perfection, and I see clearly how I should do; but I am so oppressed with the heavy burden of this corrupt body of sin, that I lie still and rise not to perfection. O Lord, how necessary therefore is Thy Grace to me, to begin well, to continue well, and to end well; for without Thee I may do nothing that is good.

“O heavenly Grace, without which our merits are worth nothing, and the gifts of nature to be considered nothing; and beauty, strength, wit, and eloquence may avail nothing! Come Thou, shortly, and help me! The gifts of Nature are common to good men and to bad; but Grace and Love are the gifts of elect and chosen people, whereby they are marked, and made able and worthy to reach the kingdom of God. This Grace is of such worthiness that neither the gift of prophecy, nor the working of miracles, nor the gift of wisdom and knowledge, may avail anything without it; nor yet may faith, hope, or other virtues, be acceptable to Thee without Grace and Love.

“O blessed Grace, that maketh the poor in spirit to be rich in virtue and him who is rich in worldly goods to be meek and low in heart! Come and

descend into my soul, and fulfill me with Thy spiritual comforts, so that I do not fail and faint for weariness and dryness!

“I beseech Thee, Lord, that I may find Grace in Thy sight, for Thy Grace shall suffice to me; though I am tempted and vexed with troubles on every side, yet I shall not need to fear while Thy Grace is with me. For she is my strength, she is my comfort, my counsel and help. She is stronger than all my enemies and wiser than all the wisest of this world. She is the mistress of truth, the teacher of discipline, the light of the heart. She is the comfort of trouble, the driver-away of heaviness, the avoider of dread, the nourisher of devotion, and the bringer-in of sweet tears and devout weepings. What am I then, without grace, but a dry stock to cast away! Grant me, therefore, that Thy Grace may prevent me and follow me, and make me ever busy and diligent in good works unto my death. So, may it be!”

And here, in the following chapter, Thomas brings to a close his impassioned rationale, and ends with a paean of praise for God:

Chapter VI.
That It Is Sweet And Delectable To
Serve God, And To Forsake The World

“Now shall I speak yet again to Thee, my Lord, and not cease. And I shall say in the ears of my Lord: My God and King who is in heaven! O how great is the abundance of Thy sweetness which Thou hast hidden and kept for those who dread Thee! But what is it then to those who love Thee? Truly, it is the unspeakable sweetness of contemplation that Thou givest to those who love Thee. In this, Lord, Thou hast most showed the sweetness of Thy love to me, that when I was not, Thou madest me; and when I wandered far from Thee Thou broughtest me again to serve Thee, and commandest me to love Thee.

“O fountain of love everlasting, what shall I say of Thee! How may I forget Thee who hast promised thus lovingly to remember me! When I was about to perish, Thou hast shown Thy mercy to me above all that I could have thought or desired, and hast sent me of Thy grace and of Thy love above my merits. But what shall I give to Thee again for all this goodness? It is not given to all men to forsake the world and to take a solitary life and only to serve Thee. And yet it is no great burden to serve Thee, whom every creature is bound to serve. It ought not therefore to seem any great thing to me to serve Thee, but rather it should seem a great wonder to me that Thou

wilt receive so poor and so unworthy a creature as I am into thy service, and that Thou wilt join me to Thy well-beloved servants.

“Lo, Lord, all things that I have and all that I do Thee service with is Thine. And yet Thy goodness is such that Thou rather servest me than I Thee. For behold, heaven and earth and the planets and stars, which Thou hast created to serve man are ready at thy bidding and do daily that which Thou hast commanded. And Thou hast also ordained angels to the ministry of man. But above all this, Thou hast promised to serve man Thyself and hast promised to give Thyself unto him.

“What then shall I give to Thee in return for this thousand-fold goodness? Would to God that I might serve Thee all the days of my life, or at the least that I might one day be able to do Thee faithful servicem for Thou art worthy all honor, service, and praising, forever. Thou art my Lord and my God, and I Thy poorest servant, most bound before all others to love and praise Thee; and I never ought to grow weary of the praising of Thee. This is what I ask and desire, that I may always laud Thee and praise Thee. Promise therefore, most merciful Lord, to supply whatsoever is lacking in me; for it is great honor to serve Thee, and for Thy love to despise all earthly things.

“They shall have great Grace who freely submit themselves to Thy holy service. And they shall find also the most sweet consolation of the Spirit and shall have great freedom of spirit here who forsake all worldly business and choose a hard and strict life in this world for Thy name.

“O glad and joyful service of God, by which a man is made free and holy, and blessed in the sight of God! O holy state of religion, which makes a man similar to the angels, pleasing to God, dreadful to wicked spirits, and to all faithful people very highly commendable! O service much to be embraced and always to be desired, by which the high goodness is won, and the everlasting joy and gladness is gotten without end!

NOTE:

1. My book, *Thomas á Kempis: On The Love of God*, from which these excerpts are taken, is available as a free downloadable PDF document on my website at www.themysticsvision.com.

I Have Given Sweets That Decay

In the gracious revelation given on November 18, 1966, the Lord said:

“I have given sweets that decay to those that crave them,
I have given my wealth unto the poor and lonely.
My hands are open; nothing is concealed.”¹

In this brief exposition, the Lord explains that all that He offers is displayed openly, and that it is we who must choose. In the one hand lies the material world and all that’s in it—the delights of the flesh, and all the luxurious objects that appeal to the senses. You may choose this if you wish, but understand that it provides but a momentary satisfaction, and that all these ‘sweets’ will rapidly decay and vanish, leaving you with nothing.

In God’s other hand lay all His true wealth: the blissful awareness of His all-embracing presence. If you choose this, you must renounce self-interest, and become His instrument; you must make His will your own. This bestows a wealth of happiness that only the blessed of heaven know. For when you give over your individual self to Him, you become Him. Then all the riches of heaven and earth are your own.

Why is His divine wealth given only to the poor and lonely? Because the self-interested pursuit of worldly wealth and the freedom to attend to God are mutually opposed to one another. Poverty is not in itself a necessity, but for one who has renounced self-interest, whose mind is busy solely with the things of God, and whose heart longs only for the company of God, some degree of poverty and solitude become likely and welcome companions.

The true poverty of the saints, the poverty to be embraced, is not the poverty of goods at one’s disposal, but a poverty of distractions, poverty of concerns, poverty of worldly responsibilities—so that one is free to attend to the responsibility of remaining conscious of the Divinity in oneself and in serving that Divinity in the world. To be poor in the world’s wealth is no virtue if there is no devotion to God; the true poverty is to be poor in needs, having but one need only: to be aware of the presence of the Divine at every moment. A lack of necessities will not make you holy, but a lack of desires will make you free. With no other goal or wish but to serve as God’s instrument, a man becomes a millionaire.

The poverty that acquiesces to indolence and squalor is ugly and demeaning to man; but that poverty which is undertaken for the sake of contemplating the Divine

essence of the soul and serving as its instrument is very beautiful and praiseworthy, and much to be desired. It is such as these who are the blessed poor. It is they who shall inherit not only the earth but the infinite cosmos; and they shall live throughout their days in the wakeful knowledge of God's sweet presence.

NOTE:

1. "I have given sweets that decay to those that crave them.
I have given my wealth unto the poor and lonely.
My hands are open; nothing is concealed."

Some might feel that this statement is unjustifiable; but they are the words of the Divine Self, written while in union. Quoted from "The Song of The Self" in my book, *The Supreme Self*, Atma Books, Fallsburg, N.Y., 1984.

**What Should Be The Life Of A True Religious Person
(from Thomas á Kempis, *On The Love of God*)¹**

It behooves you to break your own will in many things if you will have peace and concord with others. It is no little thing to be in monasteries or in congregations, to continue there without complaining or gainsaying, and faithfully to persevere there unto the end. Blessed are they who live there well and make a good end. If you will stand surely in grace and much profit in virtue, hold yourself as an exile and as a pilgrim here in this life, and be glad, for the love of God, to be held in the world as a fool and a vile person, as you are.

The donning of religious clothing helps little, but the changing of life and the mortifying of passions makes a person perfectly and truly religious. He who seeks any other thing in religion than God and the health of his soul, shall find nothing there but trouble and sorrow; and he may not stand long there in peace and quietness who does not labor to be least and subject to all.

It is good, therefore, that you remember often that you came to religion to serve, and not to be served, and that you are called thither to suffer and to labor, and not to be idle nor to tell vain tales. In religion a man shall be proved as gold in a furnace, and no man may stand long there in grace and virtue unless he will, with all his heart, humble himself for the love of God.

NOTE:

1. Thomas á Kempis, *On The Love of God*, Book One, Chapter XV, ed. by Swami Abhayananda, Olympia, Washington, Atma Books, 1992, pp. 33-34.

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