

# Zeal for God as a dangerous idea

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The authors of 'Dangerous Ideas: Five Beliefs That Propel Groups Toward Conflict' are concerned to name and encourage further research into those ideas that cause 'death, suffering and displacement', which they see as being in 'staggering proportions over the past decade.' Such beliefs are manifested in individuals and in groups, and the dynamic between these may contribute to the cultivation or to the restraint of hatred and violence. That is, groups may influence individuals either way, and vice versa. It is wise to keep this dynamic in play, since individuals are formed (and deformed) by the groups and communities to which they belong, and in turn can influence the culture of the group for good or ill.

There are five 'belief domains' named in 'Dangerous Ideas' that are suggested as being important for further study: superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust and helplessness. While these may cut across different ethnic and religious groups, I don't believe that any of them quite name what is a central motivating force for religious violence. In my response to 'Dangerous Ideas' I will look at 'zeal' for God as a religiously sanctioned motive that can lead to violence, suffering and death. I will focus on the Christian religion, the one that I inhabit and have some responsibility for as an individual within it. This article will first examine the connection between zeal and violence in God's name. While such a connection is not a necessary one, it is there in scripture and in the history of the Christian church and so needs attention if we are to move beyond it. I will then consider how we might discern the difference between zeal that leads to violence and 'zeal for good works'

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(Tit. 2:14), and how we might be enabled to move from the former to the latter in our hearts as well as in our ideas.

I was first alerted to the problem of zeal by Robert Hamerton-Kelly in his book *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*.<sup>1</sup> It is a problem that Paul had to grapple with himself. Before his conversion he had been 'zealous for God,' such that he 'persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women' (Acts 22:3–5. See also Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:6). He was at the stoning of Stephen, an act to which he consented, and was 'ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison' (Acts 7:58–8:3). For Paul, zeal for God meant persecution and murder (Phil. 3:6; Acts 9:1) of any who threatened God's ways.

In his zeal, Paul (as Saul) stood within a tradition that linked righteousness and exclusiveness, which justified killing to prevent contamination by outsiders. Phinehas was the prime example.<sup>2</sup> Numbers 25:1–16 tells the story of Israel's infidelity and the Lord's anger being kindled against them. He ordered Moses to '[t]ake all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the Lord' (v. 4). Then Phinehas, in keeping with this jealousy for the Lord, slew an Israelite man and his Midianite woman and in so doing turned back the wrath of the Lord, stopped the plague that was sent as a punishment upon Israel and was granted a covenant of peace. In Numbers 31:1–12, Phinehas is further involved with Moses in a war against the Midianites, 'killing every male' and 'the kings of Midian.' For this Phinehas is upheld as an example of a righteous man. Psalm 106:30–31 states that Phinehas, in interposing and stopping the plague, had righteousness reckoned to him (like Abraham). 1 Maccabees 2:54 continues this tradition: 'Phinehas our ancestor, because he was deeply zealous, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood.'<sup>3</sup>

Hamerton-Kelly argues that in Paul's conversion he came to see that his zealousness had persecuted the son of the very God that he worshipped. The meaning of righteousness was at stake. As Paul argues in Galatians 3, righteousness comes through faith, not through the law. Everyone who relies on the law lives under a curse (v. 10). Christ became that curse for us to redeem us from it (v. 13) and as a consequence revealed to us the consequences of violence and scapegoating in God's name. 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' (v. 13) recalls the chiefs of Israel who were 'hung in the sun before the Lord' (Num. 25:4). Paul is astounded that the Jewish Christians in Galatia seemed blind to this. They could not see the difference

between righteousness by faith and righteousness by the law: 'You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!' (Gal. 3:1).

For Paul, zeal for God could no longer be manifested in the kind of violence that killed Christ. From then on Paul preached Christ crucified (revealing to us *our* violence) and the gospel of grace. Abraham was upheld as our example, as one who had righteousness reckoned to him because of his simple faith in God's promises. Phinehas was dropped as an example of one who had righteousness reckoned to him due to his works under the law.

Hamerton-Kelly argues this in more detail, but I hope this brief summary is enough to show that there is something about Paul's conversion and living by grace that is key for us in discerning the difference between zeal that leads to violence and zeal for goodness.

Let me be very clear here. I am not contrasting the Jewish faith with Christianity as if zeal and violence belonged to Judaism and its alternative (grace) to Christianity. For one, Paul became a follower of Jesus, who lived from the peaceful and Spirit-led traditions of Judaism, as seen in a paradigmatic way in his reading from the scroll of Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry in Luke 4:16–21. Further, Christianity has not unambiguously lived by grace in its history and mission. The same zeal that Phinehas and Saul expressed is evident in such examples as the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. Each of the Abrahamic religions carries these different traditions concerning zeal, which vie against each other in scripture and practice as right expressions of our passion for God.

A similar point was made recently at a conference held in Melbourne on violence and religion.<sup>4</sup> While the focus of that conference was on contemporary Islamic terrorism, the speakers were careful to situate that within the broader picture of what makes for violence in religion generally. One speaker towards the end of the conference, a Christian theologian, pointed out that the best in all religions (with a focus on Christianity, Judaism and Islam), was their teaching and practice of solidarity with the least—the poor, the oppressed, the afflicted. One could say that this is a zeal for justice and compassion, which these religions identify with the heart of God.

This speaker continued, arguing that the *worst* in each of these religions came from the same soil—solidarity with victims and a sense of justice. He pointed out that all religious extremists and terrorist groups justify their actions precisely on the basis that they and their people are victims—of

Western imperialism or other injustices and humiliations. The violence they commit is only a matter of justice, payback for the wrongs committed against them, according to their views. They believe that their acts of violence are for a good cause.

Even zeal for those who suffer is therefore ambiguous and does not necessarily lead to good outcomes. This was illustrated by another paper given at this conference which showed a link between Christians identifying with Christ's suffering on the cross and Christian persecution of the Jews that blamed them for killing Christ. While there is a terrible and complex history of Jewish persecution by the Christian Church and Christian nations, part of that has been driven by compassion for Christ's sufferings and the misguided next step of looking for someone to blame—more zeal which has led to the 'death, suffering and displacement' that is a mark of dangerous ideas.

There are many examples one could give within the history of the Christian church that demonstrate that the gospel of grace has not been understood and lived out as it might. Yet living by grace does not mean that we need to repress our passions. We are called in fact to be passionate and uncompromising about God, to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength (Mk. 12:29–30). Paul exhorts the Romans: 'Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord' (Rom. 12:11).

There is almost a sadness in this task of discerning good zeal from bad, as it is often people with good intent that find themselves overly passionate in the moment and spilling into violence against their better judgement. One example of this happened recently in Melbourne.<sup>5</sup> A small group of anti-Islamists staged a street demonstration to make their views known. At the same time, an anti-racist group staged a counter-demonstration nearby. One might guess that the anti-racists stood for an open, tolerant and safe society for all. Nevertheless, they became so passionate about their cause that they chased some of the 'racists', as they called them, caught one man in a park, pushed him down and kicked him. The police found themselves protecting the anti-Islamists against the anti-racists, who were busy creating their own victims of intolerance and violence! The anti-racists may have had good intentions, but their zeal led them to the very acts they deplored.

How, then, are we to respond? While the authors of 'Dangerous Ideas' are psychologists and interested in the contributions psychologists can make to this issue, I am interested in what might be a genuinely *theological* response to the problem of zeal. In reflecting on this, I kept coming back

to the difference grace makes, and that is because of the nature of grace as well as the fruit it bears. Living by grace works from a different 'economy', drawing the passions toward God in humility, thankfulness and hospitality to others. After thinking about the economy of grace, I will consider Sarah Coakley's propositions for a theological resolution to the questions of desire. Coakley reminds us that we need to do more than thinking if we are to transform our desires. We need to engage in an ascetic life that transforms us over a lifetime, one that 'unifies, intensifies and ultimately purifies desire in the crucible of divine love.'<sup>6</sup>

### **The economy of grace**

There are many ways one could express the difference grace makes as a response to dangerous zeal, one of which might be a biblical study of Paul's doctrine of grace developed in response to his revelation about his previous death-dealing zeal for God. While that may be well and good, I am not a biblical scholar but a theologian, and one of the notions that has helped me better understand grace has been that of grace as a qualitatively different kind of economy from the economy of works. Thinking through that difference would be a constructive first part of a response to zeal as a dangerous idea.

To speak of grace as an economy is to consider the kind of resources it has for distribution, how these resources are distributed, and the kinds of people and social relations these arrangements engender. In short, grace is God's free gift to us of God's own love and life, known most clearly in Christ who was 'full of grace and truth' (Jn. 1:14). It is distributed as unconditional free gift and is made available to all—Jews and Gentiles (and there is no-one who does not belong to one of these biblical categories). By breaking down all barriers between us, God's grace draws us beyond exclusiveness into a radically inclusive, non-competitive way of being. We need not fight among ourselves for God's good resources—they are abundantly available for all.<sup>7</sup>

According to English theologian David Ford, to live by God's grace is to 'live in a presence inexhaustibly creative, wise, good, merciful.'<sup>8</sup> Mark McIntosh similarly refers to grace as 'loving abundance', characterised by Jesus' acts of hospitality, generosity, mercy and forgiveness during his ministry.<sup>9</sup> Ford also draws on Paul Ricoeur to refer to grace as an 'economy of the gift' and an 'economy of superabundance'.<sup>10</sup> This economy is characterised by overflowing generosity, extravagance and blessing.

In contrast, an economy of works is based on what people deserve, rewards and punishments, sometimes known as works-based righteousness. Such a logic can be punitive, mean and competitive (since it derives from lack due to finite resources), and marked by sin, law and death. It is characterised by a grasping after what one wants, over against others, whether that is material goods or identity and power. Such grasping is evident in any act of violence or abuse. In such cases there is a grab for power and control, taking the law into our own hands, grasping weapons or victims, and shutting our eyes to the suffering we are causing.

The question of justice is caught between these two economies, with punitive or retributive justice being founded on what people 'deserve' by way of punishment, and restorative justice on a more generous and gracious model concerned with healing the wounds caused by the wrongdoing, in terms of human and community relations. There is a qualitative difference between these two approaches.

To understand the economy of grace better we will follow David Ford's lead. He suggests that the gospel of grace can be seen in concentrated form in the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper or the Mass, as it is variously known. What happens in the Eucharist, according to Ford is: 'the blessing of Jesus as the blessing of God'.<sup>11</sup> At the Last Supper, on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus was forming community with those who would betray, deny and abandon him. He did so, but not only from his own loving-kindness and hospitality towards his 'friends' on that night. Jesus was also creating the conditions for the possibility of community after the rupture in their relationships, where trust, forgiveness and hospitality might live again.<sup>12</sup>

Ford points out that neither we nor the disciples at the Last Supper need be right and good to be invited into God's hospitable life, to feast at God's table.<sup>13</sup> There is nothing we can do to 'deserve' God's grace. Not only do we fall short of being who we are called to be as humans, individually and as communities (as is obvious in reading any newspaper), but the economy of grace works beyond and outside of any such notions of who deserves what. That belongs to an economy of works. Grace has a quality about it that is simply not caught up with being measured against some standard. It is like the love parents give a new born child who is completely helpless and unable to do anything to deserve their love. The child is loved gratuitously, freely, unconditionally. Such love is pure gift, a blessing.

The economy of grace is based on receiving the gifts God offers and sharing them with others. In the Eucharist, we share God's astounding gifts, exchanging the greeting of peace, the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Over time, the 'Eucharist generates a habitus of blessing and offers a hospitality which incorporates people and the material world by blessing.'<sup>14</sup> Ford reminds us that on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13–35) Jesus is recognised by the two disciples only in the breaking of the bread, in his hospitality and his blessing, which he offers this time with pierced hands.<sup>15</sup> The source of Jesus' life is way beyond all human notions of what people deserve and what Jesus may have felt in undergoing his passion. Jesus continues to meet with us in peace and blessing. To be transformed into Christ-likeness, then, is to *want* to be a blessing to others. This is in stark contrast to the dangerous zeal that we considered at the beginning of this article.

To live consciously within the economy of grace, it helps first to 'get' grace, in heart and mind. Whenever I really get the grace of God towards us, glimpse its height, depth and abundant generosity, I am both attracted to it and undone by it. I miss goodness in the world and want to be part of God's good kingdom and see it flourish. But, as the scriptures and mystics teach us, that requires a change of heart, dying to my old self and rising into Christ, being transformed over a lifetime, slowly being knitted into the life of God. Living by grace includes this longer term transformative work by the Spirit, letting grace do its work in us. While grace is free and unconditional, a response is required of us if we are to live more and more from the gracious life of God, to be more and more Christ-like, and to bear the fruits of God's Spirit.

For Sarah Coakley, thinking about the transformation of our desires (zeal referring to our strong desires) needs to be accompanied by spiritual practices if our desires are to be transformed genuinely from corrupt, violent and abusive expressions into more generous, gracious and God-like ones. While upholding the belief that God is the source and goal of all human desire, Coakley maintains that we need practices that will shift us over time from our corrupted desires and enable 'processes of formation, self-knowledge, humility and (of course, from the perspective of Christian theology) progressive reliance on divine grace.'<sup>16</sup> Through such processes—contemplation, prayer, meditation, attentiveness, participating in liturgy and Eucharist—in regular practices in the presence of God, our desires become progressively God-directed, meaning both that they are directed toward God and directed

by God, as the Holy Spirit prays for and through us in 'sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8:26).<sup>17</sup>

Coakley wrestles with some paradoxes that emerge when considering the spiritual life and its effect on our desires.<sup>18</sup> One has to do with the question of self-control. On the one hand, self-control is a positive, adult, responsible skill that is better than self-indulgence and is a discipline that is needed by individuals if they are to engage in and form healthy communities. On the other hand, the whole thrust of spiritual practices are aimed at undoing our self-control so that God may live more and more in us, as Paul came to experience (Gal. 2:20: 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'). We cannot shift the centre of our attention and desires from ourselves to God without relinquishing ego-centred control and allowing ourselves (kicking and screaming?) to be guided more and more by the Spirit so that our life is lived from the life of God. What are we to say, then, about self-control?

There is a difference between being irresponsible and out of control, on the one hand, and on the other being responsible (meaning responsive to the call of God upon us) and gradually relinquishing control in order that God may live more fully in us. The latter is a spiritual journey that does not hold autonomy and self-control as the highest value, but rather lives by the assumption that I am truly myself when I am fully alive in God. It is also a discipline that relies on tried and true practices whose wisdom is held within the Christian tradition, particularly within mystical theology, and whose current practitioners draw upon this theory and practice by which one can test and discern one's own spiritual life. Coakley's book title, *The New Asceticism*, is part of a retrieval of older spiritual practices for the contemporary church. There is always room to be suspicious of disciplines that lead to loss of self-control, but within the parameters mentioned, including trusted paths and communities of discernment, these spiritual practices are worthy counters to dangerous zeal.

Related to this paradox of having and losing self-control are different theologies of grace. While I have been using the term 'grace' rather loosely, it is worth being more precise in terms of how it relates to different theological doctrines. Both Coakley and Kathryn Tanner hold that the grace of creation and justification are entirely the work of God. We could not do anything to create or redeem ourselves. However, our *response* to God's grace does require something of us: our reception of God's good gifts, our repentance and being

open to a life-long transformation in God's Spirit. This is more formally the doctrine of sanctification, which Coakley describes as 'co-operative grace'.<sup>19</sup> Without our openness and co-operation, the work of God's grace will be limited in us. For Coakley, then, both Reformed and Catholic theologies of grace have a place in the more general notion of living by grace.

Coakley is concerned to make a genuinely theological response to the problem of desire in our times. Her response is therefore centred on our right relation with God, and specifically with God as Trinity. She speaks of God's graced ways with us being triadic: 'It is *one* experience of God, but God as simultaneously (i) doing the praying in me, (ii) receiving that prayer, and (iii) in that exchange, consented to by me, inviting me into the Christic life of redeemed sonship'.<sup>20</sup>

More significantly, Coakley sees the relations within the Trinity, and the relation of the triune God toward creation, as the paradigm that we would reflect if we are to be anything like God in the way we love, in our zeal. And this involves, at the very least, 'a fundamental respect of each "person" for the other, an equality of understanding and exchange, and a mutual *ekstasis* of attending on the other's desire as distinct, as *other*. Such a vision is the *opposite* of abuse'.<sup>21</sup>

A similar point is made by Ian Coutts in his recent doctoral thesis, 'A Trinitarian Theology of the Family'.<sup>22</sup> Coutts has found within Trinitarian theology a theological foundation for right human relations, particularly for the family. If the marks of the Trinity—respect for each person (*hypostasis*), the mutual and personal affirmation in communion (*perichoresis*) and other-oriented attentiveness (*ekstasis*)—are reflected in human relations, then we have a sound and healthy foundation for human life. By implication, that leaves no room for neglect, violence or abuse in God's name. For Coutts these Trinitarian dynamics, taken together, are aptly called 'grace'.<sup>23</sup>

This paper has attempted to discern the difference between zeal for God as a dangerous idea, which issues forth in 'death, suffering and displacement', from zeal for God that comes from living by grace, and issues forth in humility and thankfulness into good works and blessing. I have always liked the opening prayer in the Morning Prayer services in the Anglican *Prayer Book for Australia*: 'As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you; now and forever. Amen'.<sup>24</sup>

This is actually a prayer for zeal, for having our hearts set on fire for God. Our desires are called forth, not repressed, but in a right ordering and right direction, and for love. I have argued that such zeal is fostered when we live by grace and allow ourselves to undergo God's grace in our lives over a lifetime. Then we begin to live by the gracious life of God, sharing in God's own humility and blessing. By all means be zealous for God, but in doing so live by grace.

## Endnotes

1. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1992.
2. For what follows, see Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, pp. 74–5.
3. More references that link zeal with slaying can be found in 2 Samuel 21:2; 2 Kings 10:16; Isaiah 37:32.
4. The Annual Conference of the Colloquium on Violence & Religion (COV&R) and 6th Annual Conference of the Australian Girard Seminar, Wednesday 13–Sunday 17 July 2016, St Patrick's Campus, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne.
5. An account of these rallies can be found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/far-left-rightwing-groups-rally-antiislam-antiracism-groups-protest-in-melbourne-20160626-gps0p6.html>.
6. Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015, p. 6.
7. Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2005. Tanner describes the economy of grace as unconditional, universal and non-competitive (see especially pp. 63–85).
8. David Ford, 'What Happens in the Eucharist?' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 1995, p. 376.
9. Mark McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2008, p. 118.
10. David Ford, *Self and Salvation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 85, 101.
11. Ford, 'What Happens in the Eucharist?', p. 377.
12. Ford, 'What Happens in the Eucharist?', p. 373.
13. Ford, 'What Happens in the Eucharist?', p. 373.

14. Ford, 'What Happens in the Eucharist?', p. 376.
15. Ford, 'What Happens in the Eucharist?', p. 377.
16. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, pp. 10, 20.
17. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, pp. 86, 89.
18. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, pp. 19–25.
19. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, pp. 103–4. Coakley recommends Alister E McGrath's book, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Doctrine of Justification*, 2 Vols, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986 (especially vol. 1, ch. 4) for a discussion of different theologies of grace. See also Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, p. 66.
20. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, p. 90.
21. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, p. 98.
22. Ian Coutts, 'A Trinitarian Theology of the Family', PhD thesis, Charles Sturt University, 2015.
23. Coutts, *A Trinitarian Theology of the Family*, p. 356.
24. The Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Shorter Edition, Broughton Publishing, Mulgrave, Vic., 1995, pp. 390, 396, 401, 407–8, 413, 419.