

Psychological and Theological Reflections on Grace and Its Relevance for Science and Practice

Robert A. Emmons
University of California, Davis

Peter C. Hill
Biola University

Justin L. Barrett
Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California

Kelly M. Kopic
Covenant College

The concept of grace has, in the psychology of religion, been largely neglected as a legitimate topic for empirical inquiry. We define grace here as a gift given unconditionally and voluntarily to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver, the giver being either human or divine. We explore the concept of grace within a variety of religious traditions, and then review the small research base on grace. In that the potential ramifications of grace are considerable, greater scientific attention to it seems warranted in both of its dimensions: Perceptions of divine grace received and grace enacted in one's life. Our working hypothesis is that humanly experienced divine grace has the capacity to profoundly enhance and elevate human flourishing: thus grace fits well within the field of positive psychology, particularly as it intersects with the psychology of religion and spirituality.

Keywords: grace, gratitude, religious experience, giver, gift

The concept of grace, we contend, is foundational to spiritual life and to human well-being, yet is virtually ignored in the social scientific study of religion. While theological doctrines have been developed around the various meanings, classifications and definitions of grace, empirical research is scant. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a spiritual concept that has received less scientific attention than grace. This article is written in the spirit of addressing that omission.

In this article for the special issue of *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, we unpack the concept of grace, and review the research that has been conducted to date. We address the following specific questions: What is grace? In what ways is grace fundamental to human existence and well-being? How has grace been measured in psychology of religion research? What are the obstacles and barriers to perceiving and receiving grace? We discuss potential directions for the future study of grace, including a

consideration of ways in which grace may contribute to well-being and protect against psychological and relational distress. By applying the insights of psychological science, we also consider the question of why the concept of grace may often seem so counter-intuitive or even paradoxical. What basic working assumptions about ourselves, the world, and the divine does it violate? We will conclude that theologically informed psychological research will increase not only academic interest in this largely neglected topic, but also will catalyze renewed interest in and understanding the powerful spiritual realities of grace in religious institutions and in psychotherapeutic settings.

An assumption undergirding our focus is that grace is a necessary prerequisite for human flourishing. We propose that grace reflects a vital psychological need held by all people, reflected in the Rogerian notion of unconditional acceptance as well as by theologian Paul Tillich in his famous sermon *The Shaking of the Foundations*, in which he considered grace to be “the unity of life” and the solution to the human predicament of separation and estrangement from self, others, and from God. Grace is more than a feeling of acceptance, however. In grace, a person accepts the fact that they are accepted (Ortberg, 1981). Grace could even be thought of as sanctified acceptance (Hook & Hook, 2010).

Popular writings extol the virtues of grace, and the need for it in the modern world. We live in a culture that is “stripped of grace” (Volf, 2006). One of the influential religious books of the past two decades called grace “the last best word” (Yancey, 1997). Yet this same prominent author recently declared that grace is “vanishing” (Yancey, 2014). A best-selling book declares the need for “God’s inexhaustible grace for an exhausted world” (Tchividjian, 2013), and the role that grace plays in developing strong inner character is a robust theme in the highly acclaimed *The Road to Character* (Brooks, 2015). The success and popularity of these books that

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Robert A. Emmons, Department of Psychology, University of California, Davis; Peter C. Hill, Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University; Justin L. Barrett, School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California; Kelly M. Kopic, Department of Theological Studies, Covenant College.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Robert A. Emmons, Department of Psychology, University of California, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616. E-mail: raemmons@ucdavis.edu

carry the message of grace is clearly speaking to a strong need in contemporary life, a need to reconcile a quest for significance, meaning and value with the desire to gain acceptance and approval from sources outside the self all in the service of the never-ending quest for contentment, wholeness, and spiritual fulfillment. Feeling accepted in life despite our perceived unacceptability reflects an important psychological need held by all people and is a cornerstone to psychological well-being.

Grace Defined

Ask a person on the street to define grace, and few would draw a blank. Responses might include “a female name,” “what you say at the dinner table,” or “unusual finesse or poise” as in grace displayed under pressure. Widespread use of the word “grace,” however, and the often unexamined assumption that one knows what it means may hide a more complex reality. Spiritually, grace is defined as undeserved merit or divine favor. This common definition is not without merit (no pun intended), but a closer examination of psychological and theological discussions will hopefully yield a deeper, more accurate, and ultimately more useful understanding of grace.

Grace may be approached and defined both theologically and psychologically, as there are many legitimate vantage points from which to view grace. We define grace as the gift of acceptance given unconditionally and voluntarily to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver. The gift is given without regard to the worthiness of the recipient. The giver may be a human agent or a supernatural agent. If we take divine grace as a model of what constitutes grace, we can begin to disambiguate “unconditional acceptance” and add three more features of grace: that it is exercised in the context of social/relational obligation of a dyadic sort, it is extended with awareness of relevant obligations, and is intentional. Grace is the deliberate, knowing violation of social obligation on the part of the one to whom obligation is due (the “unobligated giver”) for the benefit of the one in a state of obligation (the “undeserving person”). Grace, it seems, requires that the agent—the one extending the grace—to be acting under no obligation. It follows that the recipient is undeserving, for if the receiver was deserving, the agent would have obligation. In this definition, “obligation” refers to social expectations concerning how the agent and patient should normally act due to differences in status, role, or whether the receiver has wronged the agent. Indeed, grace involves the agent being antiobligated to act, not merely unobligated, in that it operates under conditions of complete discharge of such social obligations.

Grace is also predicated on intentionality and freedom. One cannot accidentally or passively extend grace and one cannot be coerced into extending grace. The concept of grace is not exhausted by this definition, yet we believe it contains the essential components that are consistent with various spiritual traditions while achieving the specificity needed to move research forward.

This is not to say, of course, that the concept of grace is monolithic nor always means the same thing, even within a religious tradition. In Christianity, for example, theological differentiation of grace into such categories of justifying grace, sanctifying grace, prevenient grace, created and uncreated grace, common grace and redemptive grace, and so on are not viewed here as different types of grace but are terms describing one grace in

various modes of operation (Bassett, 2013). Various theological formulations within different traditions have described the impact of divine grace on the human agent, including what humans can accomplish with or without grace, and the extent to which they can obtain grace through their own efforts. Underlying these various distinctions is the central idea that grace reflects divine action, not human initiative. However, one would think that persons who believe that God has given them unmerited favor would be inclined to share the same toward others. Given the potential ramifications of grace, greater scientific attention to it seems warranted in both of its dimensions: divine grace received and grace enacted in one's life, something that may not necessarily occur (Bufford, Blackburn, Sisemore, & Bassett, 2015).

Divine Grace as a Special Case of Grace

Though presented without direct reference to God's grace, this analysis finds support and inspiration in consideration of divine grace as an ideal case. God's asymmetrical status as supreme creator means that God can make certain demands on human lives that humans cannot make on God. That is, according to most world religions, humans have obligations (in the sense used here) to God including showing respect, deference, obedience, and gratitude toward God. Furthermore, violation of these obligations (in what may be called sin) may add additional obligations (e.g., to repent and offer restitution and/or penance). An omniscient God is considered to know full well what the relevant obligations are in relation to any given individual, and as a fully free being God may choose to extend grace or not. That is, divine grace is not owed; God would still be perfectly good without extending grace. In many traditions, God is perceived as enacting or extending grace in a very large number of ways that may be characterized as acts of forgiveness, generosity, kindness, and mercy, but grace is not merely redundant with these virtuous acts. God may be seen as forgiving, generous, and kind in times and ways that do not meet the criteria for grace sketched here. Similarly, an act of mercy may be an act of grace (depending upon how mercy is construed) but not all acts of grace are acts of mercy.

The concept of grace is embedded in multiple religious traditions, especially the Abrahamic faiths, but parallels have been found in various branches of Hinduism and Buddhism (Ward, 1998). Grace captures the characteristic of God that underlies a caring nature and love for humans. Within Christianity, the doctrine of grace is intrinsically linked to the doctrine of sin, teaches that God forgives humans of their sin and offers unmerited kindness and love to whomever acknowledges a need to be made right or united with their Creator. A Christian theology of sin does not leave a person in a state of despair or distress, but points toward a gracious God who offers forgiveness, acceptance, and love (McMinn, Ruiz, Marx, Wright, & Gilbert, 2006). There is little in the life of the Christian believer that is not related to grace, as grace has, since the beginning of the Church, been considered foundational to the Christian faith (McMinn et al., 2006). The Christian who sees his or her life as redeemed from God's wrath by God's own grace could well be transformed by this belief both personally and interpersonally. Apprehensions of divine grace may impart psychological benefits, and just as the Lord's Prayer assumes one who is forgiven will be forgiving, one might allow that the person

who receives grace would be inclined to bestow grace on others, enacting it into his or her life.

Allah is described in the Qur'an as being gracious to those who follow him obediently (Sanneh, 1989). The Qur'an teaches that human beings are totally dependent upon a God who is the "cherisher and sustainer of all worlds, most gracious, most merciful, the master of judgment" (Qur'an 1:2–4). Judaism esteems the *hesed*, or loving-kindness, of Yahweh in showing unmerited and exceptional kindness and goodness to his people. God's three acts of grace, as described in medieval, philosophic, and Jewish mystical traditions, are creation, covenant, and forgiveness (Blumenthal, 1985). The Torah itself is evidence of God's grace (Rowe, 2015) and current formulations of Jewish thought maintain that divine grace is everywhere in early Judaism (Barclay, 2015).

Grace appears not only in monotheistic traditions. Streams of Hinduism and Buddhism contain doctrines of divine grace. Tengalais is a branch of Vaishnava Hinduism that teaches salvation is possible through total surrender to Lord Vishnu and trust in his unmerited grace (Tennent, 2007). Mahayana Buddhism, particularly Pure Land Buddhism espoused by Shinran Shonin, contrasts "practicing the deeds of merit" with total abandonment of human effort and reliance instead on the reception of the Buddha's unmerited grace. Self-justification, or reliance on the self, is seen as an elementary stage of spiritual development in contrast to an exclusive relinquishing of control to "the Other Power." This turning from self-power to Other-power is a spiritual rebirth and the key to attaining nirvana (Tennent, 2007). That there are parallels in other spiritual traditions should not be surprising in that faith systems offer ways of conceiving of the human predicament of separation or estrangement and offer means of reconciliation to reduce the estrangement within the self, between self and others, and self and the divine thus "we should learn to expect doctrines of grace rather than be surprised by them" (Tennent, 2007, p. 158).

Further Elaborating the Nature of Grace: The Six Perfections

A thorough understanding of grace will require multiple perspectives beyond the psychological, including theological thought and insights from the comparative study of religion. In the words of Jesuit priest and psychoanalyst W. W. Meissner a half-century ago: "What grace is, what the conditions of its operation are, and what are its effects are all questions that must be derived from theological reflection . . . they direct the course of psychological inquiry" (Meissner, 1966, p. 7).

The traditional Augustinian interpretation of grace/gift is that the Apostle Paul, by arguing that one is saved by grace alone through "faith" rather than "works," provides a stark contrast with the Jewish stance that salvation is achieved by keeping the law. Though there are alternative views of grace among Christian theologians (e.g., Sanders, 1977), this has been the primary Christian understanding of grace for centuries and provides a reference point from which we can further grasp the theological richness of the construct.

Barclay (2015) describes six "perfecting" graces as a way to make sense of various ancient conceptions of gift and grace, and then as a way to distinguish how the Apostle Paul and early Christianity distinguished their concept of gift/grace from others. We believe that Barclay's analysis can shine a light on the concept of grace represented in our psychological definition in a way that

unpacks various elements of grace and connects the theology of grace with psychological conceptions. Barclay borrows from the literary theorist Burke (1954, 1966) the term *perfection* to signify a way to follow a concept to its end or extreme, understanding where it was leading. Whether one speaks of a "perfect storm" or someone as a "perfect pain," teased out to its logical conclusion one is called to imagine the full implications of the storm or the pestering person. Not every idea is necessarily 'perfected,' but its perfection is latent in the meaning. After extensive study, Barclay concludes that six perfections of grace emerge from the ancient literature.

Superabundance

The first perfecting grace is superabundance. Here the gift/grace is not so much about the content of the gift, but about the supreme scale, lavishness or excessiveness of the it. This quality refers to the size, scope, and significance of the gift. Such an emphasis is common when speaking of a divine gift, since the gods should be supreme, including their ability to give gifts of grand extravagance. The classic example would be God sacrificing his son for the redemption of all humanity, past, present, and future.

Singularity

The perfecting grace of singularity turns attention more toward the giver rather than the gift. As Barclay (2015) defines it, singularity here means "the giver's sole and exclusive mode of operation is benevolence or goodness" (p. 71). For the early church leader Marcion, deemed a heretic because of his singularity view on grace, God's gift/grace in Christ is driven by a "pure benevolence" such that in no way could one associate God with judgment. Doing so would feed into distancing the Christian "God" from the Jewish "God" of the Hebrew bible. Against this assumption, Jewish and Christian theologies usually recognize a tension here, for God is truly and fully good, but pitting the attribute of benevolence against divine righteousness is deemed inappropriate. Concepts of grace must uphold the true character of God's holy love. Thus, the Divine cannot be blindly benevolent; God's benevolence must accord with justice and holiness. It is for this reason that Catholic Christianity has historically anchored its view of God's benevolence in the cross of Christ, where, it is said, God's justice and mercy meet (cf. Rom. 3: 21–26). But this is also why the perfection of "singularity" is often not found in orthodox Christian conceptions of grace.

Priority

Priority serves as a perfection of grace by concentrating on the *timing* of the gift. Here the giver is free from obligation when she gives it. The point of concern is to make sure that any gift/grace that is given is not tainted by the recipient's initiation of the action. Accordingly, the recipient could not have manipulated the potential benefactor, but instead is wholly in a posture of beneficiary. In terms of divine grace, this means God must be the "first giver" who is unconstrained by prior circumstances. If this is not the case, then one must ask if the benefactor in one way or another owes the recipient the gift/grace, which would undermine its perfection of priority.

Incongruity

Incongruity is the perfection of grace in which a gift is given without regard of the worth of the *recipient*. Gifts/grace were commonly employed in the ancient world, and whereas people often gave generous gifts, in order for these gifts to be “good gifts” it was widely believed that the giver must take into account the worthiness of the potential beneficiary. According to this ancient model, a genuinely good gift must be suitable and appropriate for the recipient who is found worthy to receive it. As Barclay (2015) makes clear, the incongruous perfection of grace is what Paul most highlights, and in many ways, what sets early Christian conceptions of gift/grace apart from others in the ancient world. A Christian conception emphasizes that God’s grace is irrespective or incongruous with the recipient’s worth.

Efficacy

Efficacy is a fifth perfection, highlighting the promise that a good gift/grace accomplished what it was designed to do. Here the focus is on the *effect* of the gift and how it changes the nature or agency of the recipient. As when a mother gives life to her child in the birthing process, the gift/grace fully achieves what it was meant to realize—life! When it comes to a Christian conception of divine gift/grace, this perfection was used as a way to stress that divine agency accomplishes what it desires (e.g., life, forgiveness, etc.). In the context of divine grace, this accomplishment is not a strictly empirical question, since what God intends cannot necessarily be measured. We can however, assess beliefs about divine intentions and measure the association between these beliefs and psychological functioning.

Non-Circularity

Noncircularity represents the perfection of grace that allows one to escape from an ongoing cycle of reciprocity. Gift giving was a key way social relations worked in many traditional societies, with three movements: one is obliged to give, receive, and return (Mauss, 1990). Such gift/grace giving was never merely about the artifacts given and received, but about the relationships which were created and maintained in such a framework. However, as beautiful as this potentially can be for social relations, it can also be easily perverted, where those in power entrap and abuse others through this cycle. Therefore, the perfection of noncircularity would break any potential abuses because return would not be required or even expected. As Barclay (2015) makes clear, the Apostle Paul is subversive on this point, breaking the potential for abuse while still upholding some form of circularity that avoids lapsing gift/grace into a transactional framework and also freeing one from the worry of being abused by the Giver. From a Christian perspective, only a sovereign God who needs nothing and is perfectly loving and holy can break the chain, liberating people to freely accept God’s gifts without any potential of abuse and thus establishing a relationship that allows one to give to others even if they never return kindnesses.

Distinguishing Grace From Related Constructs

Grace is not synonymous with, consist of, or necessarily produce kindness, generosity, tolerance, justice, mercy, graciousness

or gratitude, though it may consist of or generate any of these close associates. Each of these differ from grace in important ways. Grace received can shape one’s attitudes toward life and toward others, in what might be called *enacted grace*. Grace is different from the concept of graciousness, or what Young (2013) referred to as Aristotelian grace, a force operating within and between people when they pay back kindness received. Grace—in a sense meaningfully different than kindness, generosity, tolerance, acceptance, forgiveness, and charity—requires that the patient or recipient of grace is in a position of perceived social obligation in relation to the agent or extender of grace, and the agent is acting against that perceived obligatory situation.

Altruism is at some level sacrificial on the part of the person performing the behavior and the recipient may or may not be deserving of the sacrificial behavior. In contrast, the unobligated giver can demonstrate grace without it necessarily involving sacrifice on the giver’s part and the recipient, by definition, is undeserving. Love and kindness are broader concepts; grace is but one of the many ways in which love or kindness might be manifest.

Mercy involves withholding of a consequence for an offense or wrongdoing. It has been defined as “the inclination of the judgment toward leniency in selecting penalties” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 365). Mercy is thus more related to a forgiving of a debt or harm; while grace may encompass giving mercy, its essence lies in granting a free and undeserved gift. Mercy is not getting what you deserve and includes deliverance from deserved judgment. Mercy is also not the same as clemency, which only forsakes punishment without renouncing culpability for the wrongdoing (Comte-Sponville, 1996). The slate of the guilty is not wiped clean. It is a reduction of punishment, not the erasure of an offense.

Forgiveness, though closely related to both grace and mercy, is distinct from grace in that forgiveness requires an offense. Like grace, forgiveness is unmerited; like mercy, forgiveness involves addressing harm or wrongs. Unlike mercy, however, forgiveness may occur even after the penalty or consequence of a wrong has been exacted.

Justice exists in many forms. In general, justice is receiving an outcome that is deserved, as when wrongdoing results in retribution. This would be retributive justice. Distributive, procedural, and restorative refer to other forms of justice (Hill, Exline, & Cohen, 2005), but it is retributive justice that is most closely aligned with mercy, forgiveness, and grace. In contrast to retributive justice, grace involves an act of unmerited kindness that is unearned or undeserved, apart from a context in which punishment may be relevant or applicable.

Finally, gratitude is an appropriate response to having received grace. It may also lead to the recipient extending grace to another. The word gratitude is derived from the Latin *gratia*, meaning “grace,” “graciousness,” “gratuity,” or “gratefulness.” All derivatives from this Latin root have to do with kindness, generousness, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing. Grace and gratitude “go together like heaven and earth,” wrote theologian Karl Barth. Gratitude lends significance and meaning to relationships, events, experiences, and ultimately, to life itself. Setting aside time on a daily basis to recall the graces one has received has the potential to interweave and thread together a sustainable life theme of highly cherished personal meaning just as it nourishes a fundamental life stance whose thrust is decidedly positive. As a consequence, when stirred to profound

gratitude, we are led to experience and interpret life situations in ways that call forth from us an openness to and engagement with the world through purposeful actions in order to share and increase the very good we have received. While grace may mobilize gratitude, giving thanks is not a precondition for receiving divine favor in that in line with the superabundance quality of grace, grace is promiscuously distributed without regard to anticipated gratefulness on the part of the recipient. Even in the context of divine superabundance, gratitude is far from guaranteed (see [Sanneh, 1989](#), for a discussion in the Qur'an of the human response to the apprehension of divine bounty).

The concepts of self-compassion and self-forgiveness bear some overlap with grace. Self-compassion consists of three interacting facets: being kind rather than judgmental toward personal failings or inadequacies; remembering that imperfection is part of the shared human experience; and becoming aware of negative self-relevant thoughts and emotions in a clear and balanced manner ([Neff, 2016](#)). Self-compassionate individuals experience less depression, stress, anxiety, and perfectionism compared to those lacking in self-compassion ([Felder et al., 2016](#)). Self-compassion also correlates positively with life satisfaction, happiness, optimism and wisdom ([Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007](#)).

In self-forgiveness, a person extends grace to themselves in order to maintain a sense of self-worth in the face of possible guilt or self-condemnation. Self-forgiveness has been defined as a "willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one's own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself" ([Enright, 1996](#), p. 115). It involves placing an offense in a larger perspective and realizing that one is an imperfect human, and such realization is and it is accompanied by a shift from self-estrangement to self-acceptance. Empirical research has shown that self-forgiveness is associated with lower levels of depression anxiety and with higher levels of hope and self-esteem and is unrelated to religiousness ([Kim & Enright, 2014](#)).

Empirical Research on Grace

In making a strong case for the importance of the formal exploration of grace in the psychology of religion, [Tjeltveit \(2004\)](#) noted that "although we can't measure the reality of grace, we can measure people's experience of, and beliefs about, grace, and then empirically establish what other measurable dimensions of human life correspond to those experiences and beliefs" (p. 110). As a divine attribute, grace can neither be quantified nor manipulated. What we must rely on is access to people's report of experiences they interpret and label as divine grace. We can then examine whether people subjectively report having apprehended divine grace behave, think, or feel differently in any one of a number of ways compared to people who make no such attributions of having experienced divine grace.

There is a modest body of research on grace. Grace has been defined and measured psychometrically in several projects. In these studies, grace is conceived of as a trait, a stable individual difference, though to our knowledge the stability of grace has not been examined overtime. Other approaches (e.g., [Sells, Beckenbach, & Patrick, 2009](#)) have viewed grace in a relational context as that which is shown by one romantic partner to another.

Psychometric Work

Researchers have developed survey instruments designed to examine individual differences in experiences of, beliefs about, and attitudes toward grace. Psychometric analysis of three previously published self-report measures of grace ([Bufford, Sizemore, & Blackburn, 2017](#)) yielded a five-factor solution which the authors labeled Experiencing God's Grace ("God's unconditional love for me gives me the capacity to admit my faults to myself and others"), Costly Grace ("Knowing God will forgive lets me do anything I want"), Grace to Self ("I accept my shortcomings"), Grace from Others ("My mother or father keeps bringing up my past failures"), and Grace to Others ("Others must earn my forgiveness"). The authors did not conduct a confirmatory factor analysis based on an a priori theory of the multidimensionality of grace. Rather, these 5 factors were empirically derived from a series of exploratory factor analyses, replicated across samples. The pattern of correlations with criterion variables (e.g., religious coping, shame, gratitude, adverse childhood experiences) varied across factors, suggesting their relative independence from each other.

Preliminary data indicate only weak-to-moderate correlations between grace and the constructs of gratitude, forgivingness, humility and empathy. Additionally, grace predicts outcomes of flourishing independently of these strengths ([Bufford et al., 2015, 2016](#)). Most importantly, a grace-oriented life should manifest itself in the "fruit of the spirit" and other characteristics that flow from the apprehension and internalization of divine unmerited favor in a person's life. Grace also has positive relationships with self-esteem, mental health and spiritual growth ([Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1988b](#)). [Bassett \(2013\)](#) found a small but significant positive correlation with age as well. Conversely, grace has been found to be inversely related to shame, psychological distress, childhood adversity ([Bufford et al., 2015](#)), and depression and hopelessness ([Watson et al., 1988a, 1988b](#)).

Grace as a Transformative Moment

In the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, ([James, 1902](#)) the word grace appears 49 times, most often when William James described the process by which people sense they have been acted upon by external forces during the process of a spiritual conversion. A key question to ask is whether grace is necessary for any kind of significant personal growth or change. Is it the case, as James suggested, that the apprehension of grace precedes radical conversions and transformations?

While the psychometric approach is one legitimate methodological pathway to understanding the impact of grace in people's lives, we believe that it would also be highly useful to undertake qualitative work on grace as well. Open-ended interviews could explore how people think about grace, how they've experienced grace, their perceived obstacles to receiving grace, and how they perceived that grace changed them ([Bronte & Wade, 2012; Dreyer, 1990; Hook & Hook, 2010](#)). For example, [Bronte and Wade \(2012\)](#) examined grace as "divine assistance" in the lives of 25 adults between the ages of 25 and 66. Grace was construed as a supernatural or divine force outside the self and perceived as efficacious in bringing about a positive change or improvement in one or more aspects of life. The interview protocol included the following questions: (a) How would you define and describe

grace? (b) What was/were your experience(s) of grace? (c) How did you know you experienced grace? and (d) What were the distinguishing features of grace?

In this exploratory study, participants were asked to describe the circumstances leading up to the experience of grace and to give a comprehensive description of the experience. Five circumstances were shown to precede the experience of grace: Logistical/practical, psychological/emotional, addiction, physical, and miscellaneous stressors. Fear, uncertainty, distress, self-doubt, grief, desperation and depression were the most frequently felt emotions preceding the grace experience. Four elements characterized the experience of grace: (a) its mode of transmission, including intuition, other people, auditory, vision, presence, and dreams; (b) a subjective impulse that was the actual change element, including guided movement, cessation, spontaneous surrender, and effortlessness; (c) the emotional experience of grace, which included feeling enlivened, startled, loved, comforted, calmed, humbled, and sometimes pained; and (d) external effects of grace in the objective world, including an accelerated timeline, synchronicities, and positive impact on others. The experience of grace positively influenced the participants' relationships with the Divine by strengthening, renewing, and for some, confirming, the reality of God. The overall pattern pointed to the subjective experience of perceived grace as an essential element of a personal growth process. This qualitative examination of grace nicely complements the psychometric work of Bufford and colleagues, each shining a light on different aspects of grace.

Future Directions

In this last section of the article, we sketch an agenda for future work by exploring several promising areas of grace research: Its connection to well-being and mental health, obstacles to the perception of and receptivity to grace, children's receptivity to grace, grace from the perspective of religious cognition, and cultural factors influencing receptivity to grace.

Grace and Well-Being

The initial research by Bufford and colleagues (2015, 2017) suggests the relevance of perceived and experienced grace for mental health functioning. Additionally, the six perfections of grace identified by Barclay (2015) shape specific predictions concerning the connection between grace and well-being. What are the ways in which grace contributes to well-being and protects against psychological and relational distress? In what ways does a belief in, and experience of divine grace enable a person to flourish psychologically, morally, spiritually, and physically? Does grace protect against loneliness, depression, alienation, anxiety, shame and guilt? Does grace promote such mental health outcomes as happiness, self-esteem, empathy, forgivingness, generosity, gratitude, purpose, hope, joy and contentment? Does a "positive psychology" of grace have some connection with humility and possibly self-forgiveness? Is the experience of grace correlated with greater self-understanding and humility? Another intriguing question involves the distinctions between grace and the related constructs of mercy and forgiveness. Do people who report that they have experienced God's grace show differences compared to people who report that they have experienced God's forgiveness or

mercy? Would these differences be reflected in greater capacity of positive emotions, reduced tendency to experience stress, or motivation to engage in prosocial actions?

A consideration of the relational context for grace leads to a number of important questions. For example, in what relationship does grace stand to attachment and God image? Do attachment type and God-image mediate or moderate the consequences of belief in or experience of grace? Would a deep experience of grace have a greater impact on a person whose God-image (e.g., stemming from an abusive father) is very negative and who had an anxious attachment to others than the same deep experience of grace would have on a securely attached person with a positive God-image? Or, are persons in the former category even capable of experiencing grace? To what degree would the perceived singularity of God's benevolence provide a counterbalance to threatening God images?

The apprehension of grace may be a potentially powerful therapeutic tool. The work of McMinn et al. (2006) indicates that psychologists' historical misunderstanding of sin and grace in working with religious clients hinders therapeutic progress, and empirical research findings may benefit professional counseling. Ellens (2007) claimed that divine grace is "the most therapeutic psychological concept ever hatched on this planet with life-shaping implications and applications" (p. 158). Are those who believe they need not be perfect in order to obtain God's grace more willing to examine themselves and work at making positive changes (and/or be more willing to allow God's grace to transform them) than those who think they need to be flawless (or at least sufficiently worthy) in God's eyes? Belief in the incongruity of grace would appear to serve as a corrective to perceptions of undeservingness of the gift.

Obstacles to Grace

Grace is difficult to accept and experience in many cases. The word grace is often qualified by the terms counterintuitive, contradictory, radical, paradoxical and scandalous, implying impediments to its apprehension. There are a number of intrinsically interesting issues concerning the "difficulty" of grace. For example, does grace violate basic working assumptions about ourselves, the world, and the divine? Does the reception of grace, or lack thereof, violate our need for control by putting us at the mercy of another? Can the offering of grace serve as a disguise for the maintenance of interpersonal control? Does grace contradict our perceptions of a just world, where people deserve what they get and get what they deserve? Given the strong need for control that humans desire, the perception that we lack the leverage to earn our positive outcomes can be cognitively problematic.

Extending grace also violates common intuitions about social reciprocity and obligation. When grace is directed by someone at another (not ourselves), we are likely to perceive "unfairness" of two sorts: that the recipient of grace is getting away with a social violation (e.g., the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son), or that the recipient of grace is getting more than what is socially contracted (e.g., the biblical parable of the landowner and the workers). When grace is directed by someone at one's self, it may be resisted because of the intuition that one has not discharged one's obligations to the other and so one remains in an indefinite and ambiguous state of obligation. Consequently, the recipient of grace may

desire to reject grace and fulfill perceived obligations (e.g., as when a child requests punishment that a parent has declined to give, or the commonly reported experience of Roman Catholics in relation to penance). The alleged implications above are predicated upon the common existence of intuitions concerning various social obligations and one's or another's duty to discharge them. Such obligations have been the subject of some empirical research, particularly by evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 1989) but this research has not been applied to how individuals perceive divine grace extended to one's self or to others. Do people hold the same or similar intuitions concerning the detection of 'defection' from social obligations when God (or a god) is one of the social exchange partners? Are the obligations considered similar?

Lerner (1980) posited that a belief in a just world is vital in maintaining one's own well-being. When faced with irrevocable evidence that the world is not just, people may resort to causal attributions that blame the victim and thereby reduce their own vulnerability to injustice. Whether received or given, grace may violate one's underlying philosophy that behavior carries with it predictable and appropriate consequences; that grace will impede the learning benefits of such consequences. Some people may apply this principle to themselves as well—that indeed, it is better for me in terms of my own growth to fully experience the consequences of my failings, even if difficult, than to be unconditionally accepted by an unobligated giver.

Grace may be resisted because it is so easily misunderstood. One form of misunderstanding is what the Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Bonhoeffer, 1995) referred to as *cheap grace*, a perceived license to behave without accountability. In contrast, Bonhoeffer suggested that grace, properly understood, is a *costly grace*, in that one must accept, with remorse and humility, one's limitations and a willingness to acknowledge a need for a continuous offering of grace even as one is accountable to live at a higher righteous standard.

We are sure that the obstacles to grace extend far beyond the few possibilities presented here. At this point, these are only rudimentary ideas, but ones that we suggest deserve empirical attention.

Religious Cognition and Grace

Thinking about grace is, in effect, thinking about God and thus involves the cognitive processes and representational states involved in knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and experience relating to gods and other supernatural agents. As with other types of social cognition, cognitive representations of gods contain multiple types of content. For example, a person's representation of the grace of God could include such information as (a) attributions of psychological characteristics (e.g., compassion, graciousness, fairness, distance, harshness), (b) attributions of feelings and emotions (e.g., what God's grace conveys about God's emotions toward me and my emotions toward God), (c) relational schemas (e.g., secure attachment to God facilitating the perception of God's grace, avoidant attachment as signaling a lack of grace; Hall et al., 2009), (d) attributional frameworks for understanding God's causal involvement and action in the world in relation to different events (e.g., the extent to which grace is perceived to be responsible for an event), and (e) relational scripts (e.g., patterns of

interpersonal interaction with supernatural agents) beyond or in addition to God that are capable of displays of grace in action or in communications.

Furthermore, insights from the cognitive science of religion (CSR) could be very valuable in moving research on grace forward. We can pose a number of potentially important questions about grace from the perspective of CSR. Can concepts and methods from CSR advance our understanding of divine grace? Is grace an attribute of God per se, or rather does it represent God's presence, power and action in the world? How and when do people account for events in terms of the actions of a supernatural agent? What attributional processes are involved in everyday experience of God? Is knowledge of God's grace (a) propositional, "head-level", explicit, or rational cognition or is it (b) implicational, "heart-level", implicit, or experiential cognition?

Abrahamic traditions assert that grace is not merely something that God does, but is what God is, unconditionally gracious, with this reality defining God's very nature. In reviewing the extensive literature on God representations, Johnson, Okun, and Cohen (2015) showed that God concepts map onto two dimensions: supportive/benevolent and punitive/authoritarian. Descriptions of God as "gracious" typically load on the benevolence factor, and Johnson et al. found that "gracious" had the highest single loading on the benevolence factor and overall, was the 5th highest rated attribute of God (after forgiving, compassionate, accepting, and caring). This study suggests important avenues for further inquiry. How is the grace of God represented in the human mind? How does it fit with mental tools like the Theory of Mind Module (ToMM) or the Agency Detection Device (ADD)? Can the cognitive science approach to religion make sense of the paradoxical, counterintuitive, radical nature of God's grace?

Developmental Origins of Receptivity to Grace

It may be that during the development of intuitions governing social exchange, a sensitive period exists during which acquiring an understanding and acceptance of grace is more readily accomplished. If there are different sorts of reactions to grace along the lines sketched above, do they vary with life span development? Do children find grace easier to understand and accept? Is there an age range during which exposure to discourse about and expressions of grace have greater impact than at other ages?

It may be that children are more receptive to grace than adults not merely because they are less familiar with expectations of reciprocation and indebtedness that govern adult social exchange, but also because they typically find themselves in the role of patient rather than agent—they are in the position of less power and are dependent on the goodwill of others. Consequently, they may feel less reciprocal obligation or dissonance surrounding acts of grace directed toward them. They know they cannot repay grace and so they do not feel like they may have to.

To what extent would children's self-reports about grace vary depending on how questions are framed? Would questions asking about constancy of love result in children's affirming steadfast love and grace, while questions couched in terms of justice (e.g., "One child obeys Mom and Dad's rules and works hard around the house, even when not expected to; that child's sibling breaks the rules often and makes messes around the house for parents and sibling to clean up. What would you think of a parent who gave

special unexpected privileges to both siblings? What would you think of a parent who only gave special unexpected privileges to their good child?") may suggest a rejection of grace (it wouldn't be fair for the parent to give unmerited favor to the bad kid, though it would be fair for the parent to give the good kid some special favor). What competing predictions could be made that empirical research could adjudicate between?

Cultural Factors

If humans are generally less receptive to some expressions of grace than others, we might wonder how this receptivity varies with cultural factors. Common human intuitions about social obligations may not be the only potential dynamic that drives attitudes toward grace. Context-specific variations on social obligations may, in fact, play a much greater role. Inspired by the fact that divine grace is an act of condescension, we have made some antiobligation condescension a feature of our working definition of grace. We might wonder, then, whether societies that have clearer power and status asymmetries that create opportunities for grace may have different receptivity to grace than societies in cultural contexts that do not have such clear or salient asymmetries. Furthermore, might any enhanced receptivity to human grace related to cultural context lead to more (or less) receptivity to divine grace? For instance, perhaps in hierarchical societies in which people are accustomed to receiving occasional grace from the aristocracy people find divine grace more understandable and acceptable.

Conclusion

The conceptual difficulties surrounding the various types and meanings of grace are quite challenging; ignoring these difficulties is tempting but may result in a body of research that would be exceedingly difficult to interpret, as researchers use the term in different ways that are not transportable across studies, let alone diverse religious traditions. Grace is a word used by those who are not religious and by those of varying religions. We hope that we have provided some initial clarity as to the meanings of grace across traditions and how the concept might be profitably examined in research and clinical contexts. Defining grace in psychological investigations related to grace should thus be shaped, in the long term, by empirical findings. We suggest starting by focusing on commonalities; if the data later indicate that subcategories of definition are needed, we should, of course, include such distinctions.

Over half a millennium ago, Lutheran reformer Martin Luther said that

Faith is well-founded confidence in the grace of God. Such confidence and personal knowledge of divine grace makes its possessor joyful, bold, full of warm affection toward God and all created things . . . eager to do good to everyone, to serve everyone. (Willard, 1999, p. 39)

Compared to other constructs in the pantheon of human spiritual experience, grace has received very little scientific scrutiny. We believe that it is time for this situation to change. We believe that the notion of grace is necessary for flourishing. We hope that in this article we have made a convincing case for why grace matters for human functioning, that although it represents divine action it

can still be studied scientifically, and that we have articulated what the most promising areas for future research might be. We are sanguine that modern science will be able to ratify the insights expressed by Luther and others over many centuries' worth of conceptual forays into the nature of amazing grace.

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