

# GRACE IN DISLOCATION: THE ABYSS



By Dr. Gerald Boodoo 2004

In this paper I want to present my continuing reflection on the notion of dislocation and how it can articulate the possibilities of salvific transformation for our region. I want to do this by giving it more contextual and theological footing. I will begin by first presenting the notion of dislocation again. I will then look at a paper of Jason Gordon presented on Bob Marley as Postcolonial Critic at a musicology conference in 1997 where he explores Marley's Redemption Song and configures "bottomless pit" in terms of abyss. The term abyss will then be explored in reference to an unpublished paper presented by Grace Jantzen at a recent conference in Leuven on Postmodernism where she presented an understanding of abyss in a positive manner. At this point I will be arguing that the possibility of salvation and positive transformation in dislocated contexts and peoples can be articulated in terms of the possibility God's grace in the abyss. As a result I will then look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church in its article on Grace and Justification as the basis of some concluding remarks.

## **I. Dislocation**

In a short essay entitled "The Limbo Gateway", ( Wilson Harris, "The Limbo Gateway", in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1995, pp. 378-382.) Wilson Harris (not Joseph Harris) explores a philosophy of history for the Caribbean region. He sees in the African myth of limbo "a certain kind of gateway or threshold to a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles."(p.379) For Harris, *limbo* is a new sensibility that can translate and "accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures". He goes on to say:

"It is my view- a deeply considered one - that this ground of accommodation, this art of creative coexistence born of great peril and strangest capacity for renewal -

pointing away from apartheid and ghetto fixations - is of the utmost importance and *native* to the Caribbean, perhaps to the Americas as a whole”.(p.380)

This art of creative coexistence is created by, and creates, a “dislocation of interior space” which serves “as a corrective to a uniform cloak or documentary stasis of imperialism”. In other words, Harris sees in limbo the possibility of creating a space different from that imposed on the region which has disadvantaged the Caribbean population externally and internally. Limbo can thus allow peoples of the Caribbean to “participate in the genuine possibilities of original change”. Interestingly, it is out of a maneuver born from the necessity to contort oneself in a confined space (slaves in the hold of slave ships) in order to attain movement comes a “creative phenomenon of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates”(p.381). Harris sees this as an original phenomenon, and as earlier stated, native to the Caribbean.

What I find interesting in Harris’ essay is the use of the notion of dislocation and how it takes on positive and negative aspects. It is out of the dislocation that takes shape in a specific form in the belly of the slave ship that limbo is created. This is not the result of some inner reshaping of the imagination, nor of a deliberate will to live but a reflexive survival tactic borne out of the material relationships shaped by the context forced on persons. It is in the continuous “mapping” of these material relationships that we begin to understand how new growth and possibility is both generated and sustained.

In a slight departure from Harris, I would like to use the term to describe not just physical and mental space but a people. I think dislocation historicizes the discontinuity characteristic of the historical, spiritual and cultural contexts of the Caribbean, and also adequately describes the nature and state of its current context.

In presenting on this notion last year I listed five points I thought were significant to flesh out this notion of dislocation as well as four ecclesiological implications to this notion. I will not repeat them here. Instead, as following up on my suggestions, I will try to give an articulation to the notion that might be more appropriate first, contextually and then theologically.

## **II. Bottomless Pit**

How can we approximate the notion of dislocation in our historical experience in the Caribbean? Perhaps Marley’s idea of the bottomless pit may be of help. Let me make it clear here that I am not using literature nor culture as the basis for theological reflection, but am using both of the former as means to articulate, to give words to, our historical context in a manner that allows an analogous understanding of theological terms and categories.

In his presentation entitled “Bob MarleyAs (Post)-Colonial Critic: In Search of a Liberative Potential for the Caribbean” at a musicology conference at the the University of Leeds, England, 1997, Jason Gordon explores Marley’s *Redemption Song*. In this presentation he explores Marley’s verse from *Redemption Song* “Minutes after they took I from the Bottomless pit” in terms of what he calls the time space matrix.

Gordon’s analysis of this verse revolves around understanding the middle passage as a cosmological shift in consciousness, a history of consciousness if you will. He writes:

The line “minutes after they took I from the bottomless pit” speaks of reality on a new level. This introduction of time as measurement-minutes-and space as abyss while speaking about the middle passage, is really documenting another history. The history of consciousness, the psycho-spiritual middle passage from a collapsed world of meaning, the cosmological abyss-bottomless pit-into which the Africans were thrown through systematic violence on every level of reality.

Gordon sees the bottomless pit as an infinite space of upheaval and dislocation that forces a reorientation or reconfiguration of the worldview of the African by means of an irrevocable rupture of their native African worldview by the introduction of time as measurement which unhinges lived existence from nature or the local geography of the people involved. I have spoken of this in a presentation at this conference in Jamaica in 1998. But Gordon in this instance is using Jean Gebser’s work *The Ever Present Origin* as a way to understand how and why the middle passage as bottomless pit, as abyss, was so dread in its reality and consequences. Gordon sees bottomless pit as a “cosmological abyss into which the slaves were thrown”. He goes on to affirm that this continues to be the experience of the exploited in our region today, the “experience of existential vulnerability” and the lack of secure and humanizing habitation. On a positive tone he notes that this experience of abyss (or dislocation as I call it) though prone to capitulation to new forms of oppression is also the reason for our creativity.

I find Jason’s analysis of bottomless pit to be very helpful in contextualizing dislocation. It introduces in to the historical description not just social, political and economic realities, but the reality (no matter how difficult it may be) of human consciousness. At this level, dislocation as abyss is not only about material relations but about the consciousness generated and reconfigured by material relations (slavery, indentureship, immigration, violence etc.). The forced change of worldview (which I prefer to use that cosmology) does create a context that dislocates so completely in its length and breadth that it would seem one literally exists in an abyss.

One other note I would like to add. I think this understanding of bottomless pit gives a way to understand how the Indian indentured laborers can also be said to have experienced dislocation. Because, try as they might, they could not recreate their worldview here in Trinidad nor Guyana nor in any of the smaller East Indian communities in the region. This was forcefully brought home to me when Percy De Souza S.J., serving in San Fernando parish in the late 70's and early 80's looked at all things that were deemed East Indian in Trinidad as peculiar bastard expressions of the real thing.

Like Jason, I would like to state as disclaimers that this notion of abyss is not like the Jewish experience of Holocaust nor like the French existentialist sense of dread, because in both instances their worldview was not ruptured and they still used and kept their existing worldview as a way to understand and exist in their prevailing conditions. I would also like to add that these notions of dislocation and abyss are also not akin to ideas of liminality. This is why in reading Wilson Harris I did not focus on limbo, a process of existing in the passage, but on dislocation, the historical effect of the passage.

Anyway, Jason's interpretation of dislocation in our region in historical terms has brought the notion of abyss to the fore. I would like to pick up on this and carry it further by looking at how Grace Jantzen, a feminist writer, presents the term with a more positive spin.

### III. Eros and Abyss.

In a paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology on Theological Epistemology, Grace Jantzen, an English Feminist writer, and who is a Quaker, spoke on "Eros and the Abyss: Reading medieval Mystics in Post/Modernity".

In her paper, Jantzen read medieval mystics, and in particular Hadewijch of Antwerp as a means to reconfigure the postmodern imagination in an attempt to change what might be understood in postmodern (and postcolonial) contexts as a loss of all values into the possibilities of new growth. Her reading of the term abyss was central to this and is an interesting attempt to invest abyss with positive value and meaning.

Jantzen basically wants to show that reading abyss from a feminine rather than male perspective invests it with fecundity (it's more fertile) instead of the customary chaos, destruction and dread that it has been invested with in the Western tradition. She uses the bible to support this by using the Septuagint's translation of the term in Gn 1: 2 "God's spirit hovered over the *abussos*". For her, this Greek feminine translation of the Hebrew masculine term TEHOM indicates that even the biblical text gives a more positive view of abyss when rendered in feminine form. In addition she shows how in Hadewijch especially, abyss is experienced as that chasm of love that can be understood as giving birth, as natality. Here abyss takes on the possibilities of generating new life and meaning. In contradistinction to the Western philosophical tradition that sees abyss in violent, negative and life-ending terms (typified by Nietzsche and Heidegger) a feminine use of abyss invests it with fecundity, natality and life-giving meaning.

This is interesting stuff! Jantzen does an interpretation of abyss that I find very helpful in understanding dislocation in philosophical and theological terms. Whereas I disagree with her need to feminize the term abyss to make it generative of new growth, and I think her reading of Western philosophy is a bit of a stereotyping of it as misogynist, I think what she tries to accomplish adds a dimension to our understanding of abyss that will allow understandings and articulations of dislocation in positive transformational ways. The one point that I would like to expand on in her presentation, because it adds something specific to our understanding of dislocation, is her attempt to use a biblical interpretation of abyss to invest it with positive meaning.

Jantzen shies away from using the Hebrew TEHOM, and prefers the Greek *abussos* because the latter is grammatically feminine and the former masculine. More importantly, *abussos* means "bottomless" or "unfathomed" while TEHOM, though literally meaning "the deep" retains characteristics of chaos and destruction. This, to her mind, adds weight to her argument that abyss understood in a feminine manner can allow a reinterpretation of the term that is more natal in its tendencies (in conjunction with female mystical traditions). I think that one need not feminize the term, nor shy away from the original use of it in Ancient Near Eastern cosmology to invest it with life-giving and life enhancing characteristics. We can use the term abyss in a manner that is both true to its original context(as TEHOM) yet generative of possibilities for new growth. Understanding abyss as a violent dislocation or discontinuity of material relationships, or as forcing the creation of a new worldview offers the possibility of original creative expressions that would not otherwise "naturally" be generated. Though the violence of these material conditions are dehumanizing in nature, their contextual application tends to "Let there be light" (Gen.1.1-2.) because of the human need to create and sustain material relationships that humanize. This is echoed in the duty of the King in Ancient Near East cultures, who, though prone to tyrannical rule, must take care of the widow and the orphan which guards against oppressive tyrannical rule. We can even go further and speak of the event of Jesus' death on the cross, as Sobrino calls it, as a theological abandonment that leaves all existence in a darkness, but a darkness which calls forth from within its own depths a solidarity and faith among those committed to saving our humanity that thereby literally breaks out the grace of God.

I am trying here to present to you a notion of dislocation that by its very nature forces on us the need to generate humanizing possibilities for our communities, our region and our world. That such possibilities can quite easily become dehumanizing is no secret to our region. Thus there must be a theological sense that despite our dislocated condition (as sinful) there is and always will be the grace of God present, even if only as an absence, a trace, in the abyss. To understand how this may be possible let us now turn to the Catechism of the Catholic Church's teaching on grace. Though one can go through the history of theological thought on the matter (Augustine, Aquinas, Barth, Rahner, Segundo etc.), and it has been done many times, I would like to take a different approach by attempting to glean from the catechism some contemporary rudimentary ideas for a theology of grace

#### IV. The Grace of God

Listed under Part Three: Life in Christ, Section One: Man's Vocation Life in the Spirit, Chapter Three: God's Salvation Law and Grace, Article 2, the catechism's understanding of grace immediately links it with sin. The first line reads, "The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins..."(1987).

So let us briefly look at the catechism's article on sin to understand what grace cleanses us from. Found in Chapter One of the same section under Article 8. The article clearly spells out that sin "is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity..." (1849) The article further elaborates the different kinds of sin and their proliferation. Though the "root of all sins lies in man's heart"(1873) it is the activity of sinning that "creates a proclivity to sin"(1865). Hence it is our actions, or our lack of action, which create and perpetuate sin and sinful structures. In keeping with the mystery of the Christ event however, the catechism states:

As St. Paul affirms, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more"(Rm 5:20). But to do its work grace must uncover sin so as to convert our hearts and bestow on us "righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"(Rm 5,21). (1848)

So we see that justification by grace requires some convincing of sin such that we are compelled (forced) to seek and live in the grace of God. Such convincing can only be had, I would suggest, by an understanding of our dislocation and an embrace of abyss (TEHOM) which force and compel us to seek that grace which humanizes. So the sin that grace cleanses us from is the same compelling reason to seek and live in this grace. In this sense, grace "is a participation in the life

of God”(1997) which is a “favor”(1996), a gift “that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it” (1999). In addition,

The divine initiative in the work of grace precedes, prepares, and elicits the free response of man. Grace responds to the deepest yearnings of human freedom, calls freedom to cooperate with it, and perfects freedom. (2022)

We have from the preceding, the basic components of a theology of grace. First, grace in the midst of sinful conditions, (dislocation, abyss) is the context for both the necessity and human possibility of sharing in God’s grace. Second, grace abounds in the human activity that works to uncover and eradicate sin and its effects in our human condition. Third, as an activity that works to eradicate sin, it is at the same time activity that participates in the life of God, the Body of Christ. Fourth, grace must work in concert with human freedom so that it is not an imposition. And fifth, as a gift freely given and freely chosen it is an act of love.

## Conclusion

From dislocation to abyss to grace seems like quite a journey in such a brief presentation but it hopefully has emphasized some ways to understand our context in a theological manner. My aim in this presentation is to further the reflection on dislocation I began at our conference last year and to articulate in a more contextual and theological manner how such dislocation, as both a description of, and an option for, our region is one that can take into account the complexities of our existing as well as the possibilities of transforming our context in a more humanizing mode (and I would say the world). The analogy of abyss gives dislocation a contextual basis that more readily lends to a theological bent and also makes it clear why a theology of grace is integral to dislocated contexts and peoples. Only in grace can the following event of dislocation generate new life and love-

When the sixth hour came there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?*’ which means, ‘*My God, my God, why have you deserted me?*’. (Mk 15,33-34)