

CHANGING SOTERIOLOGY IN ECUMENICAL CONTEXT: A CATHOLIC REFLECTION

Martin Luther has been credited with unifying theology around soteriology by bringing it back into intimate, acknowledged association with religious experience.¹ The same may be said in varying measure and mode both of the spontaneous Catholic reformation which we associate, for instance in Spain, earlier with Cardinal Cisneros and later with Ignatius of Loyola, and even of the Catholic counter-Reformation which we associate more generally with the Council of Trent and such post-Tridentine leaders as Cardinal Bellarmine.

It may well be that the tortuous paths taken by the justification debates in Reformation and post-Reformation times² have obscured a far more important process set in motion by the Reformation and some of its predecessors, such as John Wyklif and John Hus. In our more ecumenically minded era, in which theology is not being done in denominationally sealed compartments,³ it is becoming clear that the sixteenth century Reformation may be viewed in some startlingly contrasting ways. For instance, rather than being simply (as we tend to see it in retrospect) a Catholic-Protestant struggle, it was certainly also (and seems to have appeared to the main protagonists as chiefly) a contest between those who envisaged a common future of reform and fidelity and those who insisted that the rift had already happened and was inevitable—a contest, in other words, between those who saw the whole situation as an either/or challenge and those who saw it as a both/and task.⁴

Fortunately, we have come, in the post-Vatican II era, into the inheritance of the several strands of tradition formerly separated, and find ourselves immensely enriched thereby. As the dust and debris of the polemics are being cleared away, we are again finding common ground today in a radical refocussing of theology around soteriology, though one surmises that neither Luther nor the Fathers of Trent would have been entirely happy with the emphasis that soteriology is being given, while the predecessors of the Reformation could scarcely have imagined it. Yet what

¹ The point was carefully traced in the writings of Luther by Jared Wicks, S.J. in "Justification and Faith in Luther's Theology," *Theological Studies*, March 1983 (44, 1), 3-29.

² These are not discussed in this paper, but the present-day legacy of complexity in the issue may be seen in the Catholic-Lutheran bilateral conversations as reported in *Righteousness in the New Testament* by John Reumann with responses by Joseph Fitzmyer and Jerome D. Quinn (Paulist Press/Fortress Press, 1982).

³ One might note in passing the considerable convergence in recent American studies such as *Living by Grace* by William Hordern, a Lutheran, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) and *The Experience and Language of Grace* by Roger Haight, a Catholic, (New York: Paulist, 1979).

⁴ For this thesis see particularly: Giuseppe Alberigo and Piergiorgio Camaiani, "Reform" in *Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. K. Rahner *et al.* (New York: Herder, 1970), Vol. V, pp. 202-15.

is happening today is not entirely new in the tradition. Our reorganization of our understanding of the Christian faith in terms of a Christian anthropology has, after all, strong roots in the traditions of Israel, and expresses the focus of the New Testament, more especially of the letters of Paul. Moreover, this emphasis and focus is not strange to the Fathers of the Church, both Eastern and Western,⁵ though it does seem that by the time of the Reformation it had to be rediscovered.

What is new, of course, in our own age, is the perception of the human situation with which we face questions about salvation. As in biblical and patristic times, we are concerned with an analysis of the human situation in the corporate as well as the individual dimension, and we are concerned with the dynamics of salvation in its broader historical as well as the personal development. Unlike our forebears, however, we are looking at the issues with the Enlightenment behind us and the consciousness of existentialism, phenomenology and process thought all about us. Moreover, the world and the human situation as we see it are interpreted already by empirical psychology, by economic theory, by sociology and statistical analysis. The possibilities of human life appear quite differently, even bewilderingly, in consequence of our experiences of cultural, linguistic, and religious plurality on a world-wide scale. Human hopes, as well as human suffering and deprivation, are transformed by the centuries of experimentation in democracy, the decades of trial runs in Marxist socialism, the unexpected developments in the later stages of capitalism, and the post-modern recurrence of dictatorships maintained by longterm violence and a general climate of fear.

All these factors have moved our theological questions into such radically new perspectives that it often appears as though the questions themselves were new. Yet the questions are fundamentally the same. They concern human freedom before God. They deal with the discernment of what is of God's good creation and what is of sin in the order of the world as we experience it. They probe how saving grace enters into sinful human existence and in what manner it transforms that existence. Most of all, they ask what it is that we may hope for and what is the human response appropriate to that hope. In the light of contemporary experience, these age-old questions brook no answers that remain evasive ethereal abstractions. The contemporary bent is to demand clarity as to the "cash value" of our answers in the market-place of our common human transactions.

Perhaps most important in the changing focus of soteriology in the ecumenical context of our times, is the fully conscious and deliberate recourse to continuing contemporary experience as a source for our theologizing. Surely it is this aspect among others that accounts for the pervasive and powerful influence of Karl Rahner both within and beyond Catholic circles in our times. The existentialist focus on analysis of the

⁵ Cf. Agnes Cunningham, S.S.C.M., "The Greek Fathers: an Alternative to St. Augustine," in *Chicago Studies*, Fall 1982, (21, 3), 239-53, which is mainly a comparison of the soteriology of St. Gregory of Nyssa with that of St. Augustine.

most basic human experiences and dilemmas offers a universal platform for discussion as well as a special appeal to the contemporary sense of what is real. Moreover, Rahner has built two very important bridges for us in the matter of soteriology.

The first of these is the comfortable admission of the Feuerbach thesis that all our theology is in truth anthropology in projection—an admission adroitly turned around with the added thrust that Christian anthropology is Christology, offering thus the key to interpretation of what is truly human in the divine image, because that validates an answering projection out of the truly human as a hint of the divine.⁶ The second bridge that Rahner has built for us, all the stronger because it was tested and validated quite independently by Henri de Lubac from all the resources of the tradition,⁷ is the bridge between the common sense observations of our experience and the language and doctrine of grace. A great deal of traffic has been moving over that bridge since it was opened to the public.

With the first of these two bridges we come into a theology that is necessarily focussed upon soteriology. With the second we come into a soteriology that has "cash value" in the marketplace of our common human transactions. Yet it seems that the actual entry into that marketplace is more immediately attributable to other theologians than Rahner or de Lubac. Among the Catholic theologians of our own time it is surely Edward Schillebeeckx who has been insisting for more than three decades that encounter and relationship are fundamental in human existence, and that many of our traditional theological dilemmas are not such when the notions of encounter and relationship are introduced into the analysis.⁸ To take human encounters and relationships seriously as constitutive of the human is to bring soteriology into direct conversation with the human and social sciences. And this, indeed, is what has happened, both in Schillebeeckx' own work⁹ and among those he has influenced.

Another author who has helped to propel soteriology into the marketplace is Piet Schoonenberg, whose work in this direction is not acknowledged as often as it should be. His groundbreaking study on the evolution and implications of the Christian doctrine of original sin,¹⁰ setting us on the way to recognition of what was loss of meaning and what has been recovery of meaning, has been like a long, slow earthquake, rearranging the landscape in which our soteriology takes place. The question whether, upon mature consideration, original sin should perhaps be identified with the sin of the world in its broadest sense, leads inexorably to a discovery of

⁶ See: *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), "Some Epistemological Problems," pp. 14-23.

⁷ *Le surnaturel. Etudes historiques*, published in the original French in 1946.

⁸ In the Dutch original, *Christus, Sacrament van de Godsontmoeting* was published in 1960, being a summary of *De sacramentele Heilseconomie*, published in 1952.

⁹ Most obviously in the lengthy earlier part of *Jesus: an Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

¹⁰ *Man and Sin* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) summarizes the conclusions from the earlier four volume exhaustive study.

sin and sinfulness as not only a quality of actions and of individuals but also as precipitated from the flow of our actions to be concretized or objectified in sinful structures and systems. This is the foundation for the socio-critical theologies of our times.

The movement exemplified by all of these is a movement to take real, accessible experience of contemporary people seriously in the process of theology. That movement appears to be converging with another one, mainly from Protestant sources, namely the movement towards an eschatological emphasis in Christian theology. Associated especially with the names of Juergen Moltmann¹¹ and Wolfhart Pannenberg,¹² the German "theology of hope" has recalled us all to the realization that the Christian gospel is concerned with a future yet to come. We look to the past, not as sealing the reality of our redemption in a finished package, but rather as a past of promissory events opening a future that is not yet.

This in itself would not be particularly significant, for we have always differentiated in Catholic theology between grace as the transforming divine life that draws us towards our intended fulfillment in union with God, and salvation as the definitive conclusion of the journey (though it may be true that we have not sufficiently distinguished in the corporate dimension between church and kingdom). What seems to make the "theology of hope" particularly significant is the political and social context out of which it arose, for the original question concerned the immediate hope for the reconstruction of Germany after World War II, and the issue was joined as between Christians and Marxists concerning the proper content of hope for the human race, and the human action appropriate to that hope.

This eschatological emphasis in the context of Christian-Marxist dialogue forces the soteriological discussion to turn from the questions concerning the operation of grace in the individual and to consider in some very practical ways what is the operation of grace in the society as a whole—in public policies, political power plays, social structures and economic affairs. It did not take us long to discover that we were ill at ease in that discussion, because our inherited categories and traditional theses for the discussion of sin, justification, the life of grace and the role of the church and its sacramental system in that life of grace, did not seem able to accommodate the discussion once it moved into the public aspects of human lives. Neither Catholics nor Protestants had any monopoly on the attendant discomfort. This at least was entirely ecumenical in scope.

It is in this context that Catholic voices began to be raised in Germany pointing out that the Enlightenment had left us with a "privatized" vision of Christian faith and life and of the process of redemption and the role of

¹¹ *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1968) was copyrighted originally in German in 1964, and all the subsequent publications of Moltmann seem to have flowed from it.

¹² The work of Pannenberg has been more diffuse. His English essays in *Theology and the Kingdom of God* capture the thrust of his "theology of hope".

grace in the world. It is the thesis which in the English speaking countries we tend to associate with the writings of J. B. Metz.¹³ It traces an understanding of the whole economy of salvation from biblical roots and early patristic times in which it concerns the salvation of the world by a profound transformation yet to come, through the era of the "Constantinian establishment" which envisages a saving of persons by the already established Christian order of church and state, and further through the modern era of Enlightenment privatization of religion in reaction against the assumptions and power structures of the Constantinian establishment, to a post-modern era of de-privatization.

This brought the understanding of grace and salvation back into the whole range of human affairs including the public realm. However, there was never any intention on the part of the authors involved in the discussion, of promoting a new type of Constantinian establishment. J. B. Metz makes this clear throughout his writings in an interesting way. While stressing the corporate nature of the redemption and the working of grace within, not alongside, human freedom, and while seeing a crucial role for the church in the political realm, he insists that that role is always counter-cultural, always a prophetic or oppositional role. Metz assigns to the church the task of discerning and protesting whatever is oppressive, unjust, inhuman, of coming to the defense of the defenseless, and to the rescue of the abandoned, not only in the traditional ways of remedial service to those in need, but also by power plays affecting public policies and institutional action.

Metz's view would see the church and its redemptive ministry essentially in a revolutionary role, questioning, opposing and overturning the sinful ways and structures of the world, albeit without military force. It is the kind of role with which even the most conservative churchmen have no difficulty if those sinful ways and structures that are to be overturned are of the Communist powers or are explicitly hostile to religion. Side by side with this more revolutionary conception of the way that grace operates in the world is the perspective connected with the name and vision of Teilhard de Chardin. In this view the way grace operates in human history is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The Incarnation of the Word of God draws all things to their appointed consummation. As the world becomes Christified, one may take a rather benign view of technology and social structure even when the experimental process results in some major tragedies, for all is on the way to salvation. Precisely because so much of what goes on in the world is simply affirmed, there tends to be less action here for soteriology, yet this view also is future oriented and concerned with the dynamics of salvation in world history.

It is perhaps inevitable that the movement to a theology that places great emphasis on present experience as a theological source, and the

¹³ This thesis is set out in a number of his writings, e.g. "The Church's Social Function in the Light of a 'Political Theology'" in *Faith and the World of Politics*, ed. J. B. Metz (New York: Paulist, 1968), pp. 2-18.

movement to a theology that is future oriented and concerned with the dynamics of the redemption in the public aspects of human life, should not only tend to converge but should raise a resounding response from those whose experience has not been taken seriously in theology (such as women and black minorities of the northern hemisphere) and from those who seemed to have no stake in the future (such as the poor, the oppressed, the colonized or formerly colonial peoples). The decade of the seventies exploded with theologies that may be loosely gathered under the title of "liberation theology." They are characterized by four general features: an implicit definition of the content of theology as soteriology, so that the two terms are practically co-extensive because soteriology is the comprehensive category within which all else must be understood; a dogmatically proclaimed understanding of method in theology as the critique of the praxis of the Christian life; a freely confessed agenda which, like that of Marx, seeks to change the world and not to explain it; and an over-riding assumption which has recently been made quite explicit, that there is an hermeneutic privilege of the poor and the oppressed, whereby they more readily grasp the good news of the redemption.¹⁴

Needless to say, every one of these features has been passionately disputed in the more conventional circles of theologians. Perhaps they need to be explained in more detail. It seems that, at least for the Latin American liberation theologians,¹⁵ soteriology was at first seen as the starting point and only later became the comprehensive category. Their claim is that while we have disputed through the ages about who may be saved, about the dynamics of saving grace in the psychology of the individual, and about the role of church, ritual, and priesthood in the salvation of the individual, we have given very little attention to what salvation is in terms of human experience. Taking the model of redemption, or liberation from the bondage of sin, they ask hard questions about the relationship of liberation from sin to liberation from severe material and psychological privation, or from oppression by others, or from ignorance and superstition and a prevailing sense of impotence and personal worthlessness. They refuse to equate liberation from sin with any or all of these, but they also refuse to treat of it as though it were quite independent from them,¹⁶ and they do this strictly on the basis of a critique of Christian praxis which is constantly uncovering the structures of oppression as deposits of sin and expressions of sinfulness objectified.

¹⁴ An excellent, brief statement describing liberation theology is the article, "Fulfillment, Liberation and Salvation" by Lee Cormie in *Chicago Studies*, April 1983, (22), 83-96.

¹⁵ The best introduction to these theologians is probably the Concilium volume, *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, ed. by Claude Geffre and Gustavo Gutierrez (New York: Herder, 1974). Featured in this volume, besides Gutierrez, are Catholic liberation theologians, Segundo Gaililea, Enrique Dussel, Leonardo Boff, Joseph Comblin and Ronaldo Munoz, to whose number should now certainly also be reckoned Jon Sobrino, Hugo Assmann, Ignacio Ellacuria and Arturo Paoli. The volume includes only one Protestant Latin American liberation theologian, Jose Miguez Bonino, with whom should certainly also be mentioned Rubem Alves and Julio de Santa Ana, to mention only a few.

¹⁶ Perhaps the clearest statement of this was made by Gustavo Gutierrez in *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973), pp. 36-37.

The understanding that theology is critique of Christian praxis is indeed modeled on the Marxist view of human thought, but it may be noted that it is also not very different from the approach explicitly taken by Rahner or Tillich except in its emphasis on the social dimension and on the disclosure of the experience of those whose experience has usually not been taken into account because it has usually not been intimately shared by theologians. For the liberation theologians, the significant hermeneutic circle is the one that swings between the Christian life (as we are ready and willing to commit ourselves to it in risk and receptivity to the redemptive process in human society and history) and the Christian vision (as the horizons open to the future out of the promissory events as well as the suffering of the past). If there is one non-negotiable principle that offers a pivotal criterion in the process, it is the God-given dignity and worth of each person in a non-exclusive community of persons.

It may be their agenda to change the world that renders all brands of liberation theologians particularly suspect in an cautious and sedentary profession which tends to suspect that anyone with a clear plan of action could not possibly have understood the complexities of the problem. However, they really do not deserve the opprobrium heaped upon them as ideologues, for they do not come with any prefabricated program or platform. They come with a quest and a volley of questions, intending to raise a more critical Christian consciousness to discern between the patterns of nature and of culture, between the structures of creation and the distortions of sin, between freedom and licentiousness, between law and bullying, between needs and wants, in order that that critical consciousness will require change in the structures of society.

To those who object that salvation comes from God and not from human efforts and actions, the liberation theologians reply that these two categories cannot in practice be mutually exclusive. The gift of God's grace is the empowerment of our human response, it is the liberation of our authentic freedom. This understanding is not significantly diverse in the Catholic and Protestant liberation theologians of Latin America,¹⁷ probably because the real issues here no longer hinge on the traditional justification debates.

The claim of a hermeneutic privilege of the poor and the oppressed has also come into heavy criticism from other theologians. The claim is perhaps best stated for the liberation theologians by J. B. Metz, who would not describe himself as one of them. Metz suggests¹⁸ that the cross as it stands at the center of Christian faith and Christian history, challenges us all to look at the meaning and movement of history upside-down, so to speak, from the viewpoint of the vanquished, the excluded, the discarded, because it is quite especially from that viewpoint that the

¹⁷ See, for instance the annotations and bibliographies in the publications of any of these authors.

¹⁸ "The Future in the Memory of Suffering", in *New Questions On God*, a Concilium Volume also edited by J. B. Metz, pp. 9-25.

agenda of the redemption emerges with startling clarity and immediacy. Metz also expresses the same insight somewhat differently when he writes of the future emerging in the memory of suffering.¹⁹ In more prosaic terms one might add that those who are aware of their misfortune are more likely than others to be alert to good news of rescue from it.

It does seem that liberation theology is at the cutting edge of the changing soteriology of our times and that it defies the traditional denominational classifications. It is concerned with the delineation of a properly Christian anthropology out of continuing experience of trying to live as followers of Jesus and members of the Christian community. It also picks up the Reformation impetus to unify theology around soteriology by bringing it back into intimate, acknowledged association with religious experience in all its dimensions, public and private.

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