

JESUS AND SALVATION

INTRODUCTION

In early April I witnessed two dramas about salvation, each with vastly differing sensibilities. One was the award-winning Broadway play about AIDS, "Angels in America." Full of sadness, fury, and humor, this Job-like play gives voice to deep, unsatisfied religious yearnings in the midst of suffering. "There are no angels in America anymore," one protagonist laments; we have lost our spiritual bearings. Even the magnificent angel who crashes through the ceiling from heaven brings no solution to the characters' painful problems. The daunting message of this huge drama is that humankind will save itself, or no one will. "The Great Work Begins," says Prior Walter as the curtain falls. He is looking right at us.¹

The second drama was the liturgy of the Holy Week Triduum. On Thursday, amid washing of the feet and hymns of charity and love abiding, bread and wine were blessed, broken, and given in remembrance of Jesus; on Friday an instrument of torture was carried in procession while an antiphon proclaimed, "Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the salvation of the world. Come, let us worship;" and on Saturday, that always incredible spark of fire was struck in the darkness, quickly spreading from candle to candle, while the community exulted, "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, that gained for us so great a Redeemer."

While the theatrical drama had searing insights and deeply moving power, it occurred to me that the more familiar liturgical drama is ultimately bolder and more radical. It memorializes nothing less than the event of *God's* compassionate approach amid the suffering of history, releasing hope for nothing less than *ultimate* healing and well-being for *all*.

This drama has its focal point, its experiential, imaginative, and conceptual center, in Jesus the Christ. Indeed, belief in Jesus as the mediator of the divine gift of salvation is at the very heart of the whole Christian scheme of things. It has been continuously depicted in liturgical, poetic, iconic, popular, and erudite forms for two thousand years.

¹Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, part 2, "Perestroika," (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994) 148.

The question before us is: how are we to understand this relation between Jesus and salvation?² More precisely, given the theme of this convention, how in the light of historical consciousness are we to understand Jesus as the concrete foundation of salvation coming from God through the power of the Spirit? I take it that historical consciousness is having an impact on the doctrine of soteriology in two ways. First, it heightens awareness of the contextual nature of events, so that even the events of "salvation history" are now seen to be the result of intramundane causality. In this connection, historical consciousness shapes a critical approach to the interpretation of texts and their contexts, so that, for example, we now discern differences between the written Gospels, the oral traditions that lie behind them, and the probable historical events at their origin. Second, historical consciousness underscores the contingency of real history, by which I mean events as they occur in time. Christian soteriology is thus plunged into the maelstrom of an unpredictable history with its disruptive evils and surprising grace.

An illuminating example of both these effects at work can be found in Raymond Brown's *The Death of the Messiah*. After tracing the progression of Jesus' Jewish and Roman trials and analyzing the legal structures that intersected with the personal character traits of the judges, Brown comments that in Pilate, "Jesus had not met either the best or the worst of Roman judges."³ One wonders: what would have been the outcome if a man of more judicial integrity, one more interested in questions of innocence or guilt, had been Prefect of Judea in 30 AD? Again, appraising the meaning of Jesus' death cry, Brown notes as of first importance that Mark intensifies the crucified's experience of distance from God by introducing words from Jesus' own Aramaic tongue. In Gethsemane Jesus had prayed with the intimate term 'Abba/Father ("Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me," Mark 14:36). But now at the end, Jesus is enveloped by the power of darkness, hearing nothing but the silence of God amid his endless agony. So he relinquishes this privileged address for a term common to all persons, *Eloi/God* ("My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Mark 15:34). While this cry is intended literally by Mark and Matthew's theology, is it actually historical? This is not inconceivable, writes Brown, for Psalm 22 is the prayer of the just one under persecution and may well have been used by Jesus. But neither is it essential to the text that the cry be historical. In truth, we don't know.⁴

²A decade ago the CTSA addressed this question in two presentations: Monika Hellwig, "Changing Soteriology in an Ecumenical Context: A Catholic Reflection" and Joseph Burgess, "A Lutheran Reflection," *CTSA Proceedings* 38 (1983) 14-28.

³Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 1:722.

⁴*Ibid.* 2:1043-58.

This historical approach makes traditional construals of Jesus and salvation rather more difficult to maintain. Not only do biblical texts not deliver bare factual information, which traditional formulations presumed and built upon, but the very genius of the evangelists who constructed meaningful narratives out of the whole of Jesus' history allows us, when appreciated, to glimpse the more radically contingent historical nature of events in the case just cited, the disaster of the cross. The question returns with full force: how do we understand Jesus and salvation within the framework of reason gone historical?

I propose to engage this question in three points:

- First, an examination of how historical consciousness is reshaping our reading of Scripture and tradition.
- Second, an assessment of contemporary formulations.
- Third, a charting of issues still outstanding that provide the agenda for ongoing theological work.

I. READING SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Historical studies make three things clear about the genesis of Christian belief in Jesus and salvation: its origin lies in lived experience; the language used to interpret the experience is narrative and metaphoric; and diversity of historical contexts leads to a plurality of interpretations.

It began with encounter between Jesus the Christ and those women and men who became his disciples. Their encounter with Jesus in his ministry, death, and new resurrected life in the power of the Spirit unleashed positive religious experiences. They perceived that through Jesus the redeeming God of Israel, the God of boundless *hesed* and *emeth*, of loving-kindness and fidelity, had drawn near to them in an intensely gracious way and moved their lives into a changed direction, symbolized by their new community and its mission. Where there was sin and guilt, they found infinite mercy and forgiveness. Where there was ostracism and marginalization, they discovered, at least in a fragmentary way, the power of reconciling community that overcomes estrangement. Where there was death and fear of death, they found new courage and hope in the promise of life victorious in Jesus Christ. The impact of encounter with Jesus reshaped their human memory, imagination, action, and hope.

An event becomes a meaningful force in history by being narrated. The early communities of disciples began "telling the story" of Jesus the Living One in the context of their new life praxis. In the context of these narratives, they employed a dazzling variety of imaginative metaphors to interpret their experience of salvation in Jesus.⁵ They spoke in financial categories of redemption or release from

⁵For a thorough presentation of disciples' experience of Jesus and their interpretive categories read by historical scholarship, see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979) and *Christ: The Experi-*

slavery through payment of a price; in legal categories of advocacy, justification, and satisfaction; in cultic categories of sacrifice, sin-offering, and expiation; in political categories of liberation and victory over oppressive powers; in personal categories of reconciliation after dispute; in medical categories of being healed or made whole; in existential categories of freedom and new life; and in familial categories of becoming God's children by birth (John) or adoption (Paul). The word salvation itself is one of these metaphors which in both its Hebrew and Greek forms connotes being rescued or snatched away from peril as well as being healed or preserved in well-being.

All of this language, taken from the Jewish and Hellenistic cultural contexts of the times, is highly figurative, symbolic, even at times mythological. As metaphor, it is not to be interpreted literally. As time-conditioned, it cannot simply be transposed from its own cultural world into ours without proper hermeneutic mediation. What is important for our consideration is that these biblical metaphors, pointing to salvation as a gift from God, always have an imaginative, intentional, and referential bond with Jesus. More precisely, they function within the narrative memory of Jesus present in the power of the Spirit. At their heart is a common memory: Jesus' solidarity with sinful and suffering persons as a result of his radical fidelity to God even unto death, and God's creative, life-giving acceptance of Jesus in divine solidarity and faithfulness. The result is the offer of salvation, the healing and making whole of each and every individual, the human community, and the whole world itself, a gift already given in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit but still to be accomplished in the historical world.

In the postbiblical world, the vigor of interpretations of salvation in differing historical contexts continued unabated. One key example is the differentiation that developed between the churches of East and West, each with its own basic mentality.⁶ More mystical, creation centered, and optimistic about grace, the East's metaphor of choice was divinization: thanks to rebirth in the Spirit of Christ, humanity participates in the divine nature to such a degree that we finite mortals are ultimately freed from corruption and death. Irenaeus' recapitulation theory and Athanasius' divinization theology are prime examples of this approach. In the West with its legal tradition, psychological interest, and pragmatic bent, the metaphor of choice became forgiveness: thanks to the cross which repays our debt, we sinners are freed from sin and reconciled to God. Tertullian's

ence of Jesus as Lord, trans. John Bowden (New York: Seabury, 1980).

⁶See analysis of early Christian centuries by Michael Slusser, "Primitive Christian Soteriological Themes," *Theological Studies* 44 (1983) 555-69; description of East and West by J. Patout Burns, "The Economy of Salvation: Two Patristic Traditions," *Theological Studies* 37 (1976) 598-619; and the classic study by Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

satisfaction theory and Augustine's sacrificial theory are prime examples of this approach.⁷

In the eleventh century the biblical and patristic pluralism so characteristic of interpretations of Jesus and salvation began to recede in the West due to Anselm's brilliant restructuring of the satisfaction metaphor into a full-fledged, ontologically based theory. To wit: God became a human being and died to pay back what was due to the honor of God offended by sin. I sometimes think that Anselm should be considered the most successful theologian of all time. Imagine having almost a one-thousand-year run for your theological construct! It was never declared a dogma but might just as well have been, so dominant has been its influence in theology, preaching, devotion, and the penitential system of the Church, up to our own day.

In recent years the satisfaction theory has come under severe criticism for the following reasons: for its focus on the death of Jesus to the virtual exclusion of his ministry and resurrection, thus truncating the biblical witness; for its methodological mistake of literalizing what is meant to be, in truth, a metaphor, turning it into an ontological reality; for its promotion of the value of suffering, easily exploited to maintain situations of injustice; and for its effective history which has fostered the idea of an angry God who needs to be recompensed by the bloody death of his Son.⁸

In defense of this theory, scholarly retrieval points out that historically it is entirely congruous with the feudal context in which Anselm wrote; that it does have a sense of the world as a collective whole, threatened by chaos and needing to be restored to order; and that it gives proper weight to Jesus' human freedom as well as to human responsibility before God.⁹ I myself was struck, upon first reading *Cur Deus Homo?*, with Anselm's conclusion pressed upon the hapless Boso: "And so you see, God's mercy is incomparably greater than anything that

⁷It should be remembered that during these centuries concern about salvation was the engine that drove developments in conciliar Christology. Only God can save: thus Nicea opted for the *homoousios* doctrine to confess Christ's divine nature. What is not assumed is not redeemed: so Chalcedon endorsed the two nature doctrine to protect the integrity of the human nature of the Word made flesh. At the same time, there was never any attempt to regulate the metaphors of salvation through conciliar definition, nor to specify precisely how Jesus is its concrete foundation.

⁸For versions of this criticism, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (New York: Seabury, 1969) 172-74; Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1976) 421-24; and Karl Rahner, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Morland (New York: Seabury, 1979) 16:208.

⁹See Gilbert Greshake, "Erlösung und Freiheit: Zur Neuinterpretation der Erlösungslehre Anselms von Canterbury," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 153 (1973) 323-45; and Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (New York: Paulist, 1976) 219-21.

can be conceived."¹⁰ According to his intent, the whole book is an extended argument for the mercy of God! And indeed, once you have accepted his premises, the argument works.

And yet, even when given these positive spins, and even when modified by Aquinas to make Jesus' death fitting rather than necessary, and even when preached with Luther's rediscovery of the gratuity of grace, the fundamental connection made by the satisfaction theory between God's mercy and the suffering of an innocent person is repugnant to contemporary sensibilities. There is growing consensus that theology today needs to interpret Jesus as the concrete foundation of salvation in ways other than the primarily juridical and cultic notions that have accrued around this theory, although it continues to dominate in some quarters.

Historical scholarship, I am suggesting, makes clear that Catholic soteriology has only recently emerged from the narrow end of a funnel. Instructed by the experiential, metaphoric, contextual, and pluralistic character of Scripture and tradition, we face the task of thinking beyond the dominant construal of the satisfaction theory toward interpretations of Jesus and salvation suitable for our own times and places. We turn, then, to contemporary discussion.

II. CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS

To draw some order out of the present scene, I am going to propose two theses. First, I suggest that Christian soteriology has basically a narrative structure. Even when very abstract concepts are used (such as in baroque scholasticism), they ultimately refer to the foundational narrative of Jesus as bringer of salvation.

The Christian soteriological story shares certain characteristics common to all foundational narratives.¹¹ The aim of such a narrative is to bring together past, present, and future in a consistent world of meaning. Rooted in contingent events, foundational narrative simultaneously expresses peoples' desire to live meaningfully in terms of some reality not confined within the contingent, but signalled by it. Thus the contingent events open up a horizon of meaning from which people draw vigor and direction for life. Furthermore, by its construal of

¹⁰Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?* II:XX, in *Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle IL: Open Court, 1974) 286.

¹¹I am indebted to David Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery: Revitalizing the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 304-308 for the following analysis. See also Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 291-311; Johannes B. Metz, "A Short Apology of Narrative," *The Crisis of Religious Language*, J. B. Metz and J. P. Jossua, eds. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973) 84-96; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 275-81; Michael Root, "The Narrative Structure of Soteriology," *Modern Theology* 2 (1986) 145-57; and Terrence Tilley, *Story Theology* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1985).

certain events, narrative shows how they offer the promise of freedom, new life, and blessing, thus placing them at the very heart of being. At the same time, by the very stress on events having happened once in time, narrative allows for the absence of what it represents. Events are not present as though naively reoccurring here and now, but are both revealed and veiled in their representation in the story. It is clear from this description that a foundational narrative is not simply the telling of a tale. In Paul Ricoeur's wise observation, "To narrate is already to explain."¹² To be engaged in Christian soteriology is to be engaged with narrative in this basic sense.

The second thesis is this: I suggest that current work in soteriology can be classified according to three different types of narrative being used, themselves reflective of three different stances toward historical consciousness.¹³ A caution: typologies are never completely adequate to the reality they seek to model. But they can be helpful.

The first type of narrative is mythological narrative, used by a premodern mentality innocent of historical consciousness and its critical methods. Mythological narrative begins and ends beyond time, features prototypical events that have universal consequences, and, while admitting events that occur in time, interprets them within archetypal patterns. It is this type of narrative that historical consciousness has made so difficult to maintain. If there never was an Adam and Eve, a Fall, or a prehistoric promise of a Redeemer, and if the troubles of world history have gone on pretty much the same after Jesus as before, how does Jesus' story gain universal salvific meaning?

The second type of narrative is totalizing historical narrative used by a modern mentality conscious of historicity.¹⁴ Stemming from the Enlightenment with its enthusiasm for the critical use of reason rather than authority to arrive at the truth, modernity uses critical methods to discern the probability of events and the contexts of texts. At the same time, shaped by the Enlightenment's confidence in human capabilities and belief in the universality of reason's structures, modernity tends to read history as a march of progress, from darkness to the light.

The type of narrative expressive of this mentality is historical insofar as it takes its cues from observable or critically probable events. It is totalizing insofar as, marked by modernity's optimistic and universalizing tendencies, it subtly utilizes patterns that embrace everything. Totalizing historical narrative attempts to interpret all of history, including its disruptions, in an intelligible way. In its telling, reflective of a sociological base in power and well-being, history is given the appearance of a well-ordered, even if dialectical, progression. The succession of events has meaning and they are subject to some prevailing and intelligible

¹²Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 1:178.

¹³This discussion is confined mainly to theologians who operate with an analogical imagination, admmissive of a certain metaphysical interest.

¹⁴For this and the following type of narrative, see David Power, *Eucharistic Mystery*, 308-16.

pattern, whether that be intrinsic to nature, the result of human invention, or divine providence.

An example *par excellence* of soteriology in the modern framework of thought utilizing totalizing historical narrative is Karl Rahner, who reinterprets Jesus as the absolute bringer of salvation within the thought patterns of transcendental Thomism. There is a unity of the human race, Rahner argues, founded on a common origin, history and goal. Within this unity, there is an intercommunication of persons so that actions for good or ill on the part of one affect the whole. As God's own self-expressing Word uttered into this history, and thus in his humanity the Real Symbol of God, Jesus lives a genuinely human life marked by the nescience and need for free, risk-taking decisions characteristic of all human beings. His life of utter faithfulness to God's will comes to a climax in his self-giving death on the cross. God's own fidelity does not abandon Jesus, but affirms the historical validity of his life in the resurrection. Through this three-part event—God's self-offer, human free acceptance, and God's endorsing the acceptance—the human search for salvation is brought to a new and final phase: Christology is fulfilled anthropology. In Rahner's words, "We are saved because this man, who is one of us, has been saved by God, and God has thereby made his salvific will present in the world historically, really, and irrevocably."¹⁵ In and through Jesus, history now embodies the definitive pledge that it is directed toward the saving goal of communion with God, and does so irreversibly, for the whole world.¹⁶

There is obviously much more richness to Rahner's soteriology than time permits to be explored here. His contribution lies, I think, in the way that he interprets Jesus and salvation through the skillful interplay of transcendental and categorical moments, so that the link between the gracious mystery of God, Jesus' historical life, and salvation for all becomes intelligible in a modern, historically conscious framework of thought.

And yet . . . the problem, as Johannes B. Metz has most famously articulated, is that Rahner's optimism of grace is so strong (so modern) that the tragedy, disruptiveness, and radical open-endedness of real history are not taken ade-

¹⁵Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978) 284. See Richard Viladesau, *Answering for Faith: Christ and the Human Search for Salvation* (New York: Paulist, 1987) 196-220, for further explanation.

¹⁶Concerned that the satisfaction theory has consistently obscured the simple fact that the event of the cross did not originate in an angry God who demanded reparation, Rahner has tried to retrieve the proper causality of the cross. The cross, he suggests, is not an efficient cause of divine mercy. Rather, it originates from a gracious God of merciful love, who posits in the world this sign of the divine self-gift of grace. The cross thus functions as a sacramental cause: it effects by signifying. What it signifies is the irreversibly victorious saving love of God, active in the world through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Foundations*, 282-85.

quately into account as functioning elements in his system.¹⁷ In the effort to do justice to the excessive character of historical suffering and the search not just for its meaning but for release, Metz, Schillebeeckx, and other European political theologians as well as liberation and feminist theologians on every continent construe a third kind of narrative. This may be called contingent historical narrative, characteristic of a post-Enlightenment mentality.¹⁸

This mentality is often called *postmodern* because while not rejecting the humanistic and historical critical gains of modernity, it reprises them within a different horizon. Postmodernity is conscious of the ambiguous character of progress advanced through so much suffering and defeat, and it questions the claim to universality of thought patterns that are in reality the result of privilege. In David Power's felicitous description, postmodern thinking does not try to pretend that the twentieth century has not happened. Sprung from the disruptive, out-of-control evils of this century, it is aware of the chaotic, contingent, threatened character of existence and the fragility of the human project.

With this awareness, the post-Enlightenment mentality employs a historical narrative that enfolds contingency into its telling. Contingent historical narrative does not claim to know an ideal pattern of the whole even though it expresses desire for the whole. Attentive to the irrationality of suffering, it refrains from imposing notions of order on events which are in principle inexplicable. Rather, it expresses hope beyond the disruptions of history, which it cannot tame.

Contingent historical narrative tells the story of the joyous, Spirit-filled ministry of Jesus, his unjust suffering and death, and his rising to new life in such a way that God can be seen to draw near in the midst of historical discontinuities, rather than in bypassing them. Historically there is no discernible pattern that makes either Jesus' life or its outcome either preordained or absolutely predictable. It happens. Indeed it happens amid the confluence of historical forces as all lives happen. But this narrative generates such hope because it signals divine mystery unpredictably present in the very midst of contingent events of suffering, community, struggle, and joy, present where least expected, even with the disinherited and brokenhearted, irrepressible in vitality.

This kind of narrative is not devoid of metaphysical overtones. It reveals a deep structure of being within history whereby life and communion remain possible even in the midst of discontinuity, repression, and suffering because of the

¹⁷Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980) esp. 154-68.

¹⁸For efforts to describe postmodernity, see David Griffin, ed., *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), esp. Griffin's "Introduction: Postmodern Spirituality and Society," 1-31, and Catherine Keller, "Toward a Postpatriarchal Postmodernity," 63-80; Frederic Burnham, ed., *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); and Paul Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990) chap. 7, "Catholicism and Postmodernity."

God who comes in historical contingency, ineffable but close, bringing forth being.¹⁹ Hope is possible in and beyond the agonies of history because these contingencies themselves are the locale of the advent of God.

Whether mythological, totalizing historical, or contingent historical, all three types of narrative position Jesus as the concrete foundation of salvation. But the dissimilar dynamics of the narratives yield very different understandings of how this is the case, from a mythic transtemporal transaction, to a metaphysical change in human historicity, to a concrete release of praxis and hope. In truth, there are no pure types, and soteriologies form a spectrum rather than black and white contraries. But if it be granted that Christian soteriology has at root a narrative structure, then the issue of *what* kind of narrative is most appropriate defines the basic theological *status questionis*.

III. THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Christian theology's continuing effort to interpret the narrative of Jesus and salvation in the contemporary world is raising new issues which form the frontier of soteriology in our day. In particular, contingent historical narrative is placing newly retrieved ancient understandings at the center of soteriology, along with fresh insights. Work is well advanced on some of these issues, less so on others. I chart these questions here in schematic fashion with the idea that they provide an agenda for ongoing theological work.

God. In all honesty, the very framing of the subject at hand as "Jesus and salvation" is too narrow. Salvation comes from God through Jesus by the power of the Spirit. It is the gift of the whole triune God acting *ad extra*.²⁰ To concentrate on Jesus alone in a kind of Christomonism has led historically to many dead ends for understanding as well as to imperialist action toward those who do not believe in Christ.

In particular, the Spirit has received short shrift in our understanding of salvation. But as history goes on after the historical Jesus, salvation is primarily a pneumatological phenomenon. It is Spirit-Sophia-Shekinah who provides the connection between the historical Jesus and the present community, and who empowers the present experience of salvation. The whole triune mystery of God, with Jesus as the concrete sacrament, needs to be rewoven into the narrative of salvation.

¹⁹For the cognitive status of narrative discourse, see David Power, *Eucharistic Mystery*, 304-27; Nicholas Lash, "Ideology, Metaphor, and Analogy," *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology*, Brian Hebblethwaite and S. Sutherland, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 68-94.

²⁰See Catherine LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); and Roger Haight, "The Point of Trinitarian Theology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 4 (1988) 191-204.

Christ. Similarly, the whole life of Jesus is important for soteriology. There is no one mathematical point in that life where salvation is given; even while the climax is Jesus' faithful love to the point of death and resurrection, the repair of the world is signalled in his entire life as salvific.

Hence the new importance given to the ministry of Jesus, read through historical methods. Jesus' life is no *tabula rasa* on which we project our desires, but his message, actions, and whole person already stand for something historically. He preached the reign of God drawing near; healed suffering bodies and exorcised troubled spirits; invited sinners to sit at a table of thanksgiving and joy; reinterpreted his own religious tradition in the name of God who is compassion; and did all of this with an inclusiveness that was highly offensive to the official guardians of that tradition. Through his ministry, Jesus—subversive sage, liberating prophet, compassionate healer, and founder of a revitalization movement within Judaism²¹—actually enabled fragments of salvation to gain a foothold within history. In his concrete actions what actually occurred was the drawing near of the reign of the compassionate, liberating mystery of God, in a particularity which norms and challenges Christian praxis.

The resurrection, too, is being reknit into the story of salvation. While the nature of the event remains hidden, it signals that diminishment and death are not the last word. Rather, God relates to evil in such a way as to overcome it. In the power of the Spirit, Jesus the Christ becomes newly present to the circle of the community of disciples who follow his Way in the world.

In relation to this retrieval of the whole of Jesus' life as salvific, the question of his concrete Jewishness needs further attention. Too many theologians speak as if Jesus' teaching, behavior, destiny, and significance would remain the same even if fate had located him in the Egypt of Moses or the Greece of Pericles.²² But in truth, he made his appearance in history in the living tradition of Judaism, as God's AMEN to all previous promises (2 Cor 1:20). The powerful, religious wisdom of this tradition is irreplaceable for an adequate interpretation of his meaning.²³

Attentiveness to Judaism must go deeper than this. More than any other event in the West, the sheer, unmitigated negativity of the Jewish holocaust puts a question mark against a totalizing, triumphalist soteriology. It raises for theology the fundamental question: Does the affirmation of salvation coming from God

²¹Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987).

²²Comment of Juan Luis Segundo, *An Evolutionary Approach to Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988) 28.

²³Raymond Brown, for example, notes that woven into the passion narratives are elements from the Isaac and Passover stories, the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, the death of the martyrs in Maccabees, the death of the just in Wisdom, texts from Jeremiah and Lamentations, Psalm 22, and at least twenty citations from other psalms: *Death of the Messiah*, appendix VII, 1445-67; see John Lyden, "Atonement in Judaism and Christianity: Toward a Rapprochement," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29 (1992) 47-54.

in Jesus require the belief that Judaism has been displaced by Christianity, the old covenant by the new? Christian theologians in dialogue with Judaism urge upon us the realization that no interpretation of Jesus and salvation is adequate that does not recognize the Jewish character of the Christ event while simultaneously affirming the status of the Jews as God's chosen and covenanted people, even now.²⁴

Anthropology. As the ministry and resurrection of Jesus regain their rightful place in the soteriological narrative, they propel greater inclusiveness regarding the dimensions of human life wherein salvation occurs. If Jesus fed, healed, soothed, and otherwise cared about persons precisely as embodied, and if his resurrection affirms the body's participation in the shalom of the reign of God, then salvation concerns not just the soul but also the body; not just the individual but also society; not just humanity but also the whole of nature. Indeed, salvation refers not only to the eschatological reality of heaven but also to *this* world.

Some speak of this task as reconnecting the doctrine of creation with redemption, and its ramifications are immense. Redeemed bodiliness, along with new appraisal of the sexual and erotic long denigrated in Christianity, still needs to be integrated into soteriology.²⁵ We have come a bit further in understanding that salvation pertains also to political, social, economic, and cultural structures that codify relationships into significant social patterns. Both Latin American liberation theology and an equivalent North American political theology have pioneered the insight that oppressive social structures are contrary to God's historical project and thus forms of sin, while the grace of salvation redeems communities as well as hearts.²⁶ Applying gender analysis to these same structures,

²⁴David Tracy, "Religious Values After the Holocaust: A Catholic View," *Jews and Christians After the Holocaust*, Abraham Peck, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 87-107; John Pawlikowski, *Christ in the Light of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1982); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy, eds., *Holocaust as Interruption* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984).

²⁵Karl Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation," *Theological Investigations*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1981) 71-89; Paula Cooney, "The Redemption of the Body: Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Inherited Christian Doctrine," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, Paula Cooney et al., eds. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993) 106-30.

²⁶Latin America: Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, trans. S. Caridad Ina and John Eagleson (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1973); Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*, trans. John Drury, (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1982); Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1984); Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1987).

North America: Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Critical Social Theory and Christology: Toward an Understanding of Atonement and Redemption as Emancipatory Solidarity," *CTSA Proceedings* 30 (1975) 63-110; Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Gregory Baum,

feminist theology names the oppression of sexism pervasive in church and society, offering the insight that salvation involves the profound healing of the broken mutuality between women and men, and transformation of structures that codify that brokenness.²⁷ This insight is especially crucial in view of how the story of Jesus continues to be used in nonredemptive ways against women, his male sex, for example, and supposedly exclusive choice of twelve male apostles being exploited to denigrate women's baptism and exclude women from full participation in ministry in the Church. When the appraisal of sexism is combined with analysis of racism and classism as done by African American, Hispanic, and Asian American women theologians and women in third world countries, the scope of salvation becomes startlingly clear. It involves the restoration of harmony, justice, and equality to all *human* relationships everywhere, and the lifting up of poor women of color in violent situations most of all.²⁸

The ecological crisis today is pushing the bodily and social dimensions of salvation even further, beyond the human race to include the whole earth and the cosmos itself (an ancient theme). This is the ultimate inclusion, bringing all creation into the circle of divine liberating and healing power.²⁹

All of these inclusions entail a major corollary: the importance of human action in cooperation with salvific grace. What is first of all God's gift is ultimately a human task. Even in matters of salvation, God's grace and human initiative do not compete but grow in direct proportion. Therefore, human acts which allow fragments of well-being to gain a foothold amid historical meaninglessness

"Sociology and Salvation: Do We Need a Catholic Sociology?" *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 718-43; and Michael Himes & Kenneth Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1993).

²⁷Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Wanda Berry, "Images of Sin and Salvation in Feminist Theology," *Anglican Theological Review* 60 (1978) 25-54; see essays in Catherine LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

²⁸Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993); Emilie Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993); Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: An Hispanic Women's Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993); Virginia Fabella & Mercy Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988); Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience," *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, Robert Schreiter, ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1991) 70-81.

²⁹Charles Birch, et al., eds., *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1990); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecology and Human Liberation," in her *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 57-70.

and suffering make persons copartners with God in the coming of salvation.³⁰ By contrast, when human beings do not assume their full measure of responsibility, the historical enactment of salvation does not occur.

Cross. Recent insights into God, Christ, and anthropology have coalesced to create a debate over how to interpret the cross. A historical reading of Jesus' ministry indicates that his execution was not something he sought or intended in a masochistic desire for victim status, but rather a consequence of the kind of ministry he freely practiced. In other words, he did not "come to die." Yes, Jesus risked retaliation; anyone challenging the suffering caused by strongly authoritarian structures always does. However, historically he did so not as a preordained act of vicarious satisfaction but as part of his free, larger commitment to the flourishing of life in solidarity with others.

This raises the further critical question of how God relates to the suffering and death of Jesus. Did this tragedy happen according to the providential will of God, or did it happen "despite" this will?³¹ In the background here is the current ferment over the nature of divine providence amid the contingency of history, the meaning of divine act in a causally connected universe, and the model of divine power (dominating or empowering?) appropriate to the God of Jesus Christ.³²

Some modern-day Anselms continue to construe the cross as in some sense a necessary requirement for salvation to be achieved. In Moltmann's well-known interpretation, for example, the Father hands Jesus over to be crucified as a penalty for sin, abandoning him to death even while grieving the loss of his Son.³³ Similarly, von Balthasar depicts the theodrama of how God expels his Son into the powers of destruction, so that Jesus bears the judgment of divine wrath on the world's sin.³⁴ Criticism of this construal, however, is severe. Think for a mo-

³⁰For careful analysis of this point, see Frances Stefano, *The Absolute Value of Human Action in the Theology of Juan Luis Segundo* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1992). For detailed working out of the presence of God amid fragmentary moments of grace in history, see Peter Hodgson, *God in History: Shapes of Freedom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989); see also the insightful commentary on Schillebeeckx's work in this area in Robert Schreiter and Mary Catherine Hilkert, eds., *The Praxis of Christian Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

³¹The term used by Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 728-30 that has triggered much debate; see John Galvin, "The Death of Jesus in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 50 (1983-1984) 168-80.

³²Owen Thomas, ed., *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem* (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983); Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for A Scientific Age*, Gifford Lectures (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Anna Case-Winters, *God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

³³Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974) esp. 200-90.

³⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik III: Die Handlung* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1980) esp. 309-27; see also his *Mysterium Paschale [The Mystery of Easter]*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) 119-25.

ment about the human analogy being used, and the justification of violence that it implies. Dorothy Soelle's criticism of Moltmann's position lays it out bluntly: God the Father is here being portrayed as a brute and a sadist, in fact, as Jesus' ultimate murderer. Are we expected, she asks, to worship the executioner?³⁵

Latin American liberation theologians argue that far from the crucifixion being the Father's will, it is an unjust political act carried out by state authority that disrupts the divine design for the well-being of the poor.³⁶ Feminist theologians call attention to the patriarchal family setup that this construal presumes, with the father in a dominant position over the lives of family members. In Rita Nakashima Brock's analysis, atonement theories that interpret the crucifixion as the Father's will "reflect by analogy images of the neglect of children, or even worse, of child abuse, making it acceptable as divine behavior—cosmic child abuse, as it were. The Father allows or even inflicts the death of his only perfect son."³⁷ Yes, the doctrine emphasizes the Father's grace and forgiveness; but it makes this depend upon the suffering of an innocent child, thus equating God's purpose with violence and punishment. Since the symbol of God powerfully functions, feminist theologians conclude, this has the social effect of justifying the worst kind of patriarchal, authoritarian behavior.

By contrast, a contingent historical narrative of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection discloses the hope that God intends to put an end to all the crosses of history. If so, soteriology shifts from the model of God as perpetrator of the disaster of the cross to the model of God as participant in the pain of the world. In Jesus the Holy One enters into solidarity with suffering people in order to release hope and bring new life. This construal brings us far from the satisfaction theory and correlative doctrines of the atonement. The cross remains, but its symbolic nexus changes. It stands in history as a life-affirming protest against all torture and injustice, and as a pledge that the transforming power of God is with those who suffer to bring about life for others. But debate continues.

World Religions. New encounter with the riches of the world's religious traditions raises a further fundamental question as to whether traditional ways of understanding Jesus' role as the universal mediator of salvation are still viable. This question gains a critical edge in view of the history of violence against other religious traditions to which exclusive Christocentrism has at times given rise. To date, three well-known positions regarding Jesus and salvation have been

³⁵Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 26-28.

³⁶Examples: Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1978) 179-235; and Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1987).

³⁷Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 56. See also Mary Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Pub., 1990) 137-58; Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989) 1-30.

staked out; namely, the exclusive, the inclusive, and the pluralist, with the frontier of strongest debate in Catholic theology between the latter two.³⁸ The inclusivist position, articulated most influentially by Rahner, combines the constitutive sense of Jesus Christ for salvation with the value of other religious traditions which include elements of Christic grace and truth for their historically diverse members. The pluralist option, as seen in the work of Paul Knitter, affirms a unique and universally relevant manifestation of salvation in Jesus while eschewing its absolute normativity, thus arriving at a nonnormative theocentric Christology.

Newly arrived to the discussion, Asian Catholic theologians, when asked to choose among the standard three positions, are opening an innovative front by answering "none of the above."³⁹ The very way the question is framed, they argue, reflects a modern Western mentality, in particular an epistemology of differentiation in which identity depends on and is achieved by comparison and contrast (what makes one unique is what others do not have). But in an Indic, Asian framework an epistemology of nondifferentiation requires that the starting point be oneness with the other, out of which self-identity emerges. Most fundamentally, being and nonbeing are not two poles, but nonbeing is that which envelops being as its outer limit.

In this context, the question of uniqueness does not arise, nor are theologians interested in comparing religions as objective systems. More coherent with their cultural situation is the attempt to witness to Jesus' holiness and his path (*marga*), to interpret him as *guru* through his *marga* which will also disclose his being and his truth, and to enter into respectful dialogue in order to encounter the grace and truth that others too have received. This tolerance is not necessarily relativism as it would be understood in the Western liberal tradition expressed in the pluralist option. Axioms such as "all rivers lead to the sea" or "all paths lead to the summit" in an Asian religious situation are statements about the

³⁸See Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985). For contemporary development of Rahner's argument see Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). The debate can be traced in John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988), and Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1990).

³⁹See, e.g., Michael Amaladoss, "The Pluralism of Religions and the Significance of Christ," *Asian Faces of Jesus*, R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993) 85-103; Felix Wilfred, "Images of Jesus in the Asian Pastoral Context," *Any Room for Christ in Asia?*, Leonardo Boff and Virgilio Elizondo, eds. (London: SCM Press, 1993) 51-62; and Felix Wilfred, "Some Tentative Reflections on the Language of Christian Uniqueness: An Indian Perspective," unpublished paper for conference sponsored by Pontifical Council for Dialogue with World Religions on "Jesus Christ and World Religions," Pune, India, 1993.

nature of the goal, divine mystery, rather than about the relationship between paths. They express the inexhaustibility of divine mystery which no one way can fully comprehend.

In this dialogue between Western and Asian Christians, contingent historical narrative, I think, offers a helpful perspective. Since Jesus existed in finite form, geographically, temporally, and culturally, he not only reveals but also conceals God, whose richness remains unfathomable. This incarnational dialectic of revealing/concealing is deepened in the light of the resurrection. In the words of Jacques Dupuis:

It is true to say that while Jesus is the Christ, the Christ is more than Jesus. To deny this would amount to denying the real transformation, emphatically affirmed by the entire New Testament, of Jesus' humanity as he is raised by the Father. The metahistorical Christ or cosmic Christ is universally present and active in human history. . . .⁴⁰

and the historical Jesus is not. This same perspective emerges when one thinks of cosmic Wisdom or Creator Spirit at work in the world. Jesus Christ, then, is the privileged and central incarnate disclosure of the God who nonetheless remains hidden.

If this be the case, it seems to me that it becomes possible to affirm that all mediations of the Spirit in the world do not necessarily lead to belief in Jesus the Christ. For the concrete Jesus of history is uncreated Wisdom in kenotic form, enfleshed within the contingency of history. The radical *kenosis* of the Incarnation means that even when the Chalcedonian confession is affirmed in all its fullness, the contingent, historical character of the Jesus event allows for the possibility that the divine offer of salvation finds different concrete form in other contingent contexts. Confessing Jesus the Christ as the universal Savior, Christian belief remains attuned to hear from others in dialogue how God's saving ways have also been active among them. At this point we do not yet know how all these pieces will fit together; that will be discovered only in ongoing dialogue in history. It may be, as some Asian theologians have suggested, that we will come to realize that the pluralism of religions is a necessary and permanent feature of the world, so great is the mystery of God seeking expression in contingent historical forms. For myself, I have come to think that a postmodern narrative soteriology provides the most fruitful framework of thought for entering into this dialogue.

⁴⁰This citation is taken from Jacques Dupuis's unpublished manuscript "Theology of Religions, Christian or Universal." See similar ideas in his *Who Do You Say That I Am? Introduction to Christology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994) and *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1991); see also Edward Schillebeeckx, *On Christian Faith*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 2-10 for another discussion of the hiddenness of God in the revelation in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

We have been seeking understanding of Jesus as the concrete foundation of salvation. I have proposed that while post-Vatican II Catholic theology began its *aggiornamento* at the end of the modern era and was marked by the optimism of that era, leading edges of theology soon shifted into a postmodern paradigm due to encounter with the enormity of evil and with religious pluralism. Rather than mythological or metaphysical explanations alone, the appropriate discourse becomes contingent, historical narrative which provides a practical framework for recognizing how Jesus is the concrete foundation of salvation.

What Christians have in the end, I have been suggesting, is a story and the Spirit. The narrative memory of the life, death, resurrection, and outpouring of the Spirit in Jesus the Christ traces the way of divine compassion in the midst of historical sin, death, and defeat. This living *anamnesis* of Jesus shows that instead of being absent, the gracious mystery of God is in the midst of historical suffering enabling resistance, bringing about healing, promising ultimate liberation. Instead of final failure, a future is promised to the defeated of history, who in the end are all of us. Those who believe are thereby galvanized to be a community of praise and thanksgiving, critically free *from* the world for loving engagement *with* the world, in the power of the Spirit. It is in this sense, I suggest, that we can best understand Jesus as the concrete foundation of salvation.

Now, as always, the Great Work Begins.⁴¹

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