

CLEAR DISTINCTIONS BUT UNCERTAIN PATHS A Response to Elizabeth Johnson's "Jesus and Salvation"

Perhaps many, even most, of you would want to join me in giving Professor Johnson's paper a Woody Allen subtitle: "What I've always wanted to say about salvation but was afraid to say it." In her now familiar, carefully nuanced, yet bold manner, she has laid out both the sores and the salve in the present-day efforts of theologians to speak about the "salvation" that Christians have experienced through Jesus the Christ. Her final, overall picture is perhaps as sobering as it is clarifying; it shows how drastic have been some of the shifts in the soteriological terrain among Christian, especially Roman Catholic, theologians.

In the first part of my remarks, let me follow a device my wife uses with me before starting a "serious discussion." She first tells me what "she heard me saying"; then she brings on her own remarks. So let me first highlight—in more simplified, less nuanced, and perhaps starker formulation—what I think Johnson was telling us. Doing so, I expect her to tell me if I have heard her correctly; and if I did, *then I think we need to ask* whether what she has presented us with represents a consensus, perhaps a silent consensus, among Roman Catholic theologians of Europe and North America.

1. *Not satisfaction but sacrament.* Johnson announces what most of us know: the long-playing Anselmian model is not drawing anymore. It's not touching people, not eliciting a response from them; indeed, it stirs confusion, even repulsion, in many Christians. (I'm speaking of Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations.) So instead of the satisfaction model, with its emphasis on paying off debts through suffering, theologians are formulating, Johnson tells us, different versions of a sacramental model—which can also be termed a representational or narrative model. The Christ event "saves" not so much as an operation that changes the ontology between God and world and so affects us from the outside, but rather, as a moving, Spirit-filled narrative that reveals and so transforms us, and the world, from within.

2. *The death of Jesus saves not as a transaction with God but as a revelation of God and of ourselves.* What Johnson states so clearly would probably rattle many a Sunday morning congregation: It was not God's will that Jesus died his horrible death; the crucifixion, in itself, was not something that God required of Jesus. Rather, his death was contrary to the divine will. If Jesus "had" to die, it was not a necessity *ex jure divino* but, rather, an unavoidability *ex malo humano*. Therefore Jesus' death saves not as a transaction with God but as an empowering revelation that anyone who follows him in struggling for the Kingdom will have to face such deaths. So to die does not satisfy divine justice,

but creates life-giving human-divine justice in this world. Which brings me to the third main assertion in Johnson's paper.

3. *Salvation has to affect this world; otherwise it's not Christian salvation.* Here Johnson recaps a consensus growing amid the theological community if not so clearly in our parishes. God's will and Kingdom are to come and be done *on earth*, as in heaven. If this is not happening, in some way, then we are not talking about a salvation that is consistent with the original message of Jesus or relevant to our present-day awareness. As Edward Schillebeeckx would put it: *Extra mundum, nulla salus*.¹ What this means is not a *reduction* of otherworldly salvation to this world. Rather, it calls for a nondualism, or essential relatedness, between God's Kingdom in this world and in the next. If we are not actively or passively striving to realize this Kingdom of love and justice in this world, we will have little, if anything, to realize in the next.

4. *In understanding salvation in Jesus, Christians must be open to other ways of salvation and wary of "totalizing" these others ways into their own.* In this fourth declaration, Johnson may not represent as clear a consensus as she does with the first three. But as I hear her, she clearly wants to eschew the simplicities of the so-called pluralist model for understanding other religious ways of salvation; yet at the same time she, like many Roman Catholic theologians and layfolk, is clearly dissatisfied with the inclusivist or totalizing model. Without elaborating, she proposes an understanding of Jesus the Savior that will allow for the *possibility* of other saviors and the *necessity* of engaging them in dialogue and cooperation. She is seeking a middle way between pluralism and inclusivism.

5. Finally, I'd like to draw out what I think is the hermeneutical principle that grounds Johnson's entire paper. It's as simple as it is unsettling and demanding—and it comes not primarily from her broad knowledge of the Christian tradition but from her pastoral soul. To all theologians and ministers pondering and preaching the mystery of salvation, she announces: "If it doesn't save, don't call it salvation!" This hermeneutical flashlight has guided Johnson in her observations about the Anselmian model, about anthropology, about views of salvation that totalize or violate the integrity of Judaism and other traditions: so much of our talk about Jesus as Savior is not "saving" people, not moving them with the power of the Christ-Spirit. And if this is how our *language* is landing in the communities, we have to change it. Though such a hermeneutical principle for soteriology sounds drastic, it is solidly grounded in traditional views on the *sensus fidelium*, on the relation between "reception" and orthodoxy, and on the bond between the *lex credendi* and the *lex orandi*.

Having reviewed "what I heard her saying," I now attempt to have my own say (as if I weren't doing that already!). Given my general and enthusiastic

¹Church: *The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 5-9.

agreement with her presentation, I will, in the following four points, outline where she, and we, have to say more in order to move forward in the directions which she has mapped.

1. First, I have the discomfoting suspicion that if Christian salvation is really going to help "save" humanity and the planet from the present ecological crisis, we Christians must come to a deeper, clearer understanding of our proclaimed nondualism between God's kingdom in this world and in the next. What do we mean by announcing a *this-worldly* salvation? Johnson speaks of the earth as the "ultimate inclusion" in Christian salvation and of the necessity of "bringing all creation into the circle of divine liberating and healing power." But I'm afraid that given the dominance of traditional eschatological models of the world as secondary and temporary, and given persistent fears of any form of pantheism that would threaten the transcendence and freedom of God, it is difficult *really* to include the material earth in Christian salvation. Environmentalists and especially my Buddhist and Native American dialogue partners tell me that our environmental crisis will not be solved until we can truly look upon the earth as sacred, as divine.

But this will require us to go further than what I hear Johnson doing in her paper (or recent book). To "bring creation into the circle of liberating power" is not enough; rather, we have to discover the liberating power *already there* within the circle of creation. Sophia-Spirit therefore indwells the earth not as a house but as a body; house and Spirit can exist without each other; but body and Spirit cannot! Therefore, we Christians need to speak not just about the history of salvation but also about the geography of salvation. The Spirit embodies herself not just in passing historical events but also in abiding places of the earth. Unless we can view the earth not just as something entrusted to our care but as the very being or body of God, we will not be able to save it. To save the earth, we must recognize its divinity. For Catholics, who practice an incarnational, sacramental spirituality, that should not be too difficult.

2. The middle path that Johnson and other theologians are tracing between the hubris and potential abusiveness of a totalizing or inclusivist view of salvation on the one hand and the fuzziness and nonnormativeness of the pluralist viewpoint on the other, needs a lot more surveying and exploring; at the moment, it's not a very clear path. I must say that the "none of the above" position of Felix Wilfred and other Indian theologians sure sounds a lot like what Western pluralists, in their efforts to revise the notion of Christ's uniqueness, have been proposing: stop making all these claims for uniqueness and really listen to and witness to what the others have to say about salvation. And when Johnson says that while Jesus is the Christ, Christ is more than Jesus, and when she suggests that not all revelations may lead to historical belief in Jesus, and that "the pluralism of religions may be a necessary and permanent feature of the world," she sure sounds like one of those fuzzy pluralists! So much so, that I was somewhat jolted when I read her concluding statement: "Jesus Christ, then, is the

privileged and central incarnate disclosure of the God who nonetheless remains hidden." If she means this just for Christians, I understand. But if she proposes this as a universal claim—as Christians have traditionally done—then I'm not sure how she can rest content with pluralism as a permanent feature of the world. Doesn't a privileged and central disclosure necessarily have an inclusive or totalizing potential and obligation?

Here is where Johnson's calls for a better bond between pneumatology and soteriology can help in charting that middle path between inclusivism and pluralism. Without getting entangled in the thicket of the *Filioque* controversy, I think it is sound trinitarian theology to affirm (and experience!) the Spirit as *essentially related* to the Word (the intent of the *Filioque*) but at the same time as *really different* from the Word (the concern of the Orthodox churches). Therefore, if Johnson sees, as she does, the Spirit as that dynamic presence which not only continues the Christ-event through time but also as the saving Love that is working throughout creation beyond the Christ event, then what we Christians should expect to find *extra muros ecclesiae* and in other religious traditions are beliefs and practices that not only reflect what we know in Jesus but also that go beyond and say more than what we know in Jesus. Such genuine differences or "new revelations" will have to be related to the Gospel, as Spirit is always related to Word; but the relationship is a two-way street—the Spirit sometimes including the Christ-Word and the Word sometimes including the Spirit; or, other religions learning from Christianity and Christians learning from other believers.

3. Finally, an observation that will qualify somewhat what I have just been saying about the dangers of totalizing. If there is any value to what Hans Küng and the World Parliament of Religions are saying in their Declaration for a Global Ethics,² then our world is in dire need of a good bit of totalizing or universally binding ethical convictions. Unless the nations and the religions can get their ethical acts together, the entire planetary and human drama may play itself out. And here is where I see a real danger in some of the postcritical or postmodern or postliberal or narrative models for understanding religion in general and soteriologies in particular: In their extolling of diversity,³ in their abhorrence of universals or any kind of totalizing framework, in their claims of incommensurable narratives, they remove the epistemological or hermeneutical foundations for any possible crosscultural, crossreligious unanimity. Simply stated, they remove the *conditions for the possibility* of what for our world is a *necessity*: crosscultural, interreligious agreements on what the "salvation" or well-being of this planet and its peoples means and ethically demands.

²Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

³See J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

Here is where I would cautiously, somewhat uncomfortably, propose that Christians and Jews have a *unique* contribution to make to the global and inter-religious discussion: they must hold up the vision, the hope, and the necessity of a global community of nations and religions, based on globally affirmed ethical values and principles. I know how much such words fly in the daunting face of postmodernism—and how frightening such words will sound to Indians, Africans, Native Americans—victims of the global vision of Christian Europe and the United States. Yet, while we have abused our vision of a global community (the Kingdom of God), while we have thought that as Christians we had a privileged place in determining the contents of that vision—still, we cannot abandon the vision. If conversion is real, we can learn from our mistakes and from the way we have abused these universal claims. We can proclaim the salvation realized in Jesus as a universal reality that calls us all to an egalitarian, nonhierarchical community that does not destroy or absorb diversity but which builds ever greater community out of ever more vibrant diversity.

Daily, then, we recommence the Great Work. For the help and guidance that Elizabeth Johnson has provided all of us for this task, we are grateful.

PAUL F. KNITTER
Xavier University
Cincinnati, Ohio