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Salvation as Wholeness: Theological Background for an Ecumenical Programme

The theme of this paper was assigned to me, and the history of the assignment will clarify the terms used in my title. The context was provided by ecumenical discussions between representatives of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches. The majority decision of the committee of which I am a member was that the best hope of ecumenical progress lies in working together for the world and its needs rather than in tackling directly questions of doctrine and worship. It was hoped that the gospel character of the programme would be preserved by setting as our goal the salvation of men, while the need of a modern transposition of the biblical term was indicated by conceiving of salvation as wholeness. My task was to provide a theological background against which concrete proposals for ecumenical co-operation might be set and intelligently discussed. This assignment, it seems to me, involves various aspects of theology: historically, it is a matter of an oscillation between the 'thisworldly' and the 'otherworldly' in the centuries of the church; analytically, it is a matter of the natural-supernatural relationship and unity; comprehensively, it is a matter of the divinization of man by God's gracious plan for salvation. These aspects I will now try to set forth.

I start with the biblical meaning of salvation, relying on the article by F. J. Taylor in Richardson's *Theological Word Book of the Bible*.¹ In the Old Testament the idea was first closely linked with victory in battle or 'deliverance from danger and tyranny or rescue from imminent peril.' Then the notion takes a more religious turn, becoming associated 'with the earlier prophetic idea of divine righteousness. The mighty work of God . . . is in saving the humble . . . the poor and the dispirited. The last of the Servant Songs . . . suggests that this saving work can be carried out only through suffering.' And always it is God who is *the* Saviour.

As we approach Christian times, we find that 'men came to despair of salvation in the present order . . . to look for the coming of that day when God would interpose his mighty arm . . . and out of judgment bring full salvation to those . . . acquitted . . .' Taylor finds that in about one fifth of the New Testament occurrences the relevant noun or verb refers to salvation on the last day. But man's future destiny is determined by his present standing before God; the Synoptics see Christ as saving in the present, and John definitely thinks of a present possession of eternal life. There are references to deliverance from various specific evils, but Matthew's account (1:21) makes Jesus Saviour from *sin*, and this expresses the meaning of the New Testament as a whole. In summary: 'Salvation is from darkness to light . . .

1. Cf. F. J. Taylor, 'Save, salvation,' in Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1950), pp. 219f.

from alienation to a share in divine citizenship . . . from guilt to pardon . . . from slavery to freedom . . . from fear of hostile powers to liberty and assurance . . . and all these definitions carry a strong moral content.'

Already, therefore, in New Testament times there had come to the surface the ambiguity that later polarized into two sharply contrasting positions and today grounds the question we must face in any Christian programme of 'salvation': Is salvation thisworldly or otherworldly, or both? If both, how are the two aspects related? The New Testament speaks with equal clarity of saving from disease and saving from judgment. Is one a mere symbol and promise of the other? Or has it a value in itself – in some measure independently of the other? In that case, what is the relationship of temporal welfare to eternal salvation? Christian thought, in attempting to solve this question, has followed a complex sequence which it will be hard to summarize. But I do not think we can form well-founded opinions without at least a rapid survey of history on the point at issue, and to that I must turn, amateur historian though I be.

It is almost a commonplace now that the Old Testament mentality is this-worldly, while the New Testament mentality is otherworldly. This view surely has a basis in fact. We think at once of promises of a land flowing with milk and honey, and of seeing one's children and one's children's children to the third and fourth generations. In contrast, the New Testament attitude seems oriented to the return of the Lord when this world will come to an end; our earliest account of conversion to Christianity tells the Thessalonians how they 'turned from idols, to be servants of the living and true God, and to wait expectantly for the appearance from heaven of his Son Jesus, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus our deliverer from the terrors of judgement to come' (1 Thess. 1:9f, NEB).

But surely also so simple a contrast is one-sided. The Old Testament is not just thisworldly. It knows the supratemporal character of God and looks towards a day of the Lord that is hardly to be fitted to the measure of this world. The redemption through suffering and death that we meet in the Servant of Isaiah, and the development of apocalyptic in Judaism prior to Christian times, also contribute to a more complex picture. But neither is the New Testament just otherworldly. The feet of the Christian are planted solidly on the ground, as many a prosaic precept shows: '. . . the man who will not work shall not eat' (2 Thess. 3:10). Indeed, Matthew's criterion of judgment on the last day could hardly be amended by the most radical secularist: 'For when I was hungry, you gave me food . . . when in prison you visited me' (25:35f.).

If these are discrepancies, how can we reconcile them? If ambiguities, how can we resolve them? I do not think that a clear solution is possible unless we see the people of God as a 'student' body, slowly and with many detours arriving at a better and better grasp of the divine plan for our salvation. I see that plan as having a built-in tension between what we now know as the thisworldly and the otherworldly, but could describe it more theologically

as the natural and the supernatural, or man and his divinization. This tension results historically in various states of imbalance, which are due to a deficient grasp of the whole plan. The imbalance is overcome in a learning process that runs through the period of revelation, from Old Testament to New Testament and in the New Testament itself, and that continues in an unending process through history. The Old Testament and the New would from this viewpoint be opposed, not as fixed 'positions', but rather as related steps in the learning process, and the process continues through time in a cumulative sequence, the steps and stages of which I think can be indicated rather clearly.

There was first of all the great outburst of one-sided otherworldly fervor. Prepared for by deepening Old Testament attitudes, it exploded in the tremendous experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In him so obviously 'the fulfilment of the ages has come' (1 Cor. 10:11); he is so clearly the one 'who comes from above' (John 3:31) in whom the other world has broken in upon us; in the outpouring of his Spirit we have so vivid a sign of what 'will happen in the last days' (Acts 2:17). The first Christians could not but be gripped by enthusiasm for that 'other' world of Messianic blessings which he would establish on his return. Thus they lived remote from this world at Jerusalem: 'The whole body of believers was united in heart and soul. Not a man of them claimed any of his possessions as his own . . .' (Acts 4:32). So otherworldly are their expectations that they do not even initiate missionary activity till persecution destroys their idyllic existence. Even then, Paul brings to his young churches the same strongly otherworldly message: 'The time we live in will not last long. While it lasts, married men should be as if they had no wives. . . . For the whole frame of this world is passing away' (1 Cor. 7:29-31). However much Christian charity excluded immorality and promoted concern for neighbour, it is clear that there is at this stage little or no conception of a set of values proper to this world.

But even in New Testament times a reaction sets in and the imbalance begins to be 'corrected' by a swing towards the other pole. A particularly clear illustration (and a sharp contrast with Paul's early attitude) is found in the pastoral letters with their concern for the institutions of the church, and their justification, against rising heresies, of using the good things of this world: 'They forbid marriage and inculcate abstinence from certain foods, though God created them to be enjoyed with thanksgiving by believers who have inward knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 4:3). Less vivid but equally significant is the contrast between Luke's gospel and those of Mark and Matthew. Whereas our first two evangelists write for the Christian community, Luke writes for the world at large; he is the first 'apologist' whose work we have in writing; from his mentality derive, directly or indirectly, the great apologists of the second century, Justin and his comrades.

The apologetic phase yields insensibly to the imperial in a long and remarkable history which reaches its climax in the ecclesiastical domination of the middle ages. Politically, the trend is shown by that extraordinary sequence in which the apologies of the second century lead to the decree of

toleration by Constantine, and that in turn to the imposition of the Catholic faith by Theodosius, and this again in a series of steps to the veto power which the medieval popes exercised over the nomination of emperors. Culturally, the sequence is just as striking and more significant for our present purpose. Clement of Alexandria, in opposition to the 'integrist' of his time, had espoused the cause of a wide assimilation of Greek culture. In the middle ages, this assimilation had become a total domination of culture. There was indeed a cultivation of what we now regard as secular values: crafts, poetry, drama, architecture, philosophy, etc. But they were not cultivated *as* secular values; rather, they were mere servants of the church and the faith; philosophy, for example, was the *ancilla theologiae*. There was indeed a unitary world and integration of a sort; but the unity contained a latent power of disruption because the integration was not bilateral. In short, the secular values had little or no autonomy; the whole of Europe was run, in Congar's phrase, like a vast monastery under its abbot pope.

The next phase was that of the self-assertion of the secular. Art, science, philosophy, government – all the branches of human activity – made their declaration of independence; they refused to exist any longer as servants. Guilds would be replaced in due course by labour unions; hagiography yielded to stories of chivalrous love; science became empirical; philosophy turned to its own bases in rational reflection; the universities developed in freedom of thought; governments rejected papal influence. All along the line there was a repudiation of the servant role, in many cases linked with a bitter counter-offensive from whose divisive consequences we still suffer.

This stage has a peculiar complexity, owing to the Catholic-Protestant division in the west and the ambiguities latent in the attitude of both churches. The Catholic trend is popularly characterized as a retreat into the ghetto; with governments and universities, arts, crafts, and sciences, removed from its control, Rome simply washed its hands of the whole secular enterprise. This view has its solid grain of truth, but hardly gives the whole story; I think, for example, of my Jesuit predecessors, their cultivation of the classics and the sciences in the schools, their esteem for native customs and 'secular' religious practices on the missions. On the other hand, the Reformation is popularly seen as contributing to the emergence of the secular. This also has its truth; though I should think the first influence was rather from the side of emerging humanism, there can hardly be any doubt that the road of progress and advancing culture lay with the northern Protestant nations and not with the Catholic south. But Luther's own position contained an ambivalence, represented in his promotion of the secular state and his violent opposition to Erasmus.

A sign of the complexity in Roman Catholic and Protestant attitudes is found in the Protestant social gospel and the Catholic social encyclicals. The social gospel was, by and large, an effort to penetrate the social order with the gospel message, so that sin and grace would be discoverable not only in the individual but also in society as such. The kingdom was still God's kingdom.

The social encyclicals, so important a phenomenon under Leo XIII, Pius XI, and subsequent popes, were rather an acknowledgement of a natural order of justice and right, to be authentically taught by the church, even though the message was not that of revelation.

There is another aspect, not at all marginal, to complicate further this long and already complex history. It is that of the religious movement, understood in the broadest sense to include both Roman Catholic and Protestant trends. The early hermits retreated into the desert to commune with God and banish the devil, just when Constantine's attitude was assuring the safe entry of the church into the world. Whether their move was reactionary or not is somewhat obscure. In any case the movement was to have an enormously significant role which cannot be overlooked even in this short survey. From hermit to Benedictine, through Franciscan and Dominican to Jesuit, and then on to the astounding though still hidden upsurge of 'secular institutes' in our day, there has been a persistent history, not only of search for union with God in the cloister, but also of commitment in various forms to a programme of leaving the world the better to serve the world. Luther had the idea of making vocation and the state of perfection more egalitarian; that is, he brought them out of the monastery to be shared by the whole people. But his followers too felt the call of the Spirit to something 'more'; there were the pietists in direct line of descent, with their long history of opposition to theology and their otherworldly hymns; there were movements like the Society of Friends, with their repudiation of the cultural life of the times; there is today the emergence again of old-style religious orders, in the Reformed tradition at Taizé and in the Lutheran stronghold of Germany itself.

Does anything at all emerge from this sketchy history of so long a period, which embraced so many complicated factors? Even with all my historical inaccuracies and imperfect generalizations, does any message come through? It seems to me that two things at least are clear: that there is an unresolved tension between the thisworldly and the otherworldly, and that it is common to Catholic and Protestant churches alike. Since Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church has been emerging, not without struggle and pain, from its four-century retreat to the ghetto. The conciliar documents, especially those on 'The Church in the Modern World,' on 'Ecumenism,' on 'The Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,' and on 'Religious Freedom,' have given it a new orientation. Yet the tension I speak of seems only to have been accentuated. Nor can Protestants, who were far ahead of Roman Catholics in some aspects of the new orientation, claim to have solved a tension that seems inherent in the Christian way. The death-of-God movement may have run its course, but it left us with a new sense of the gap between our faith and our culture. The new secularity, which we all recognize as giving a needed emphasis to the values of this world, has extreme difficulty in retaining the fullness of the gospel message, the transcendence of God, and the absolute character of the response to be given to his invitation.

It is clear to me that there is an urgent need for a theoretical basis for

tackling the practical problem, and here I think Roman Catholic theology is ahead of the Protestant. In two long, slow steps (represented by Philip the Chancellor and Maurice Blondel), with a third on the way, a theorem of the distinction, relationship, and unity of the natural and supernatural elements in God's salvific plan has been worked out. The point of departure in scripture is an undifferentiated unity; outside a few precious hints in approval of a created natural order, the vision is wholly concentrated on our immediate relation to God and to the new order of being introduced by his Son. The necessary work of analysis and of the affirmation of a distinction *within* creation of 'natural' elements, fitted to the measure of men, and 'supernatural' elements beyond his measure, was the slow work of twelve centuries. It was not mere speculation; it was the answer to myriad questions posed from Pelagius to the Scholastics – for example: What can man do on his own without grace? Why is not everything grace, since it is all the gift of God? The distinction reached its first clear articulation in Philip, the Chancellor of the University of Paris, around 1230, with a pairing off of nature and grace, knowledge and faith, natural love and supernatural charity, and so on.

The subsequent period of history was precisely that of the emerging autonomy of the 'natural'; I do not know whether this sequence has been thoroughly investigated, but it seems antecedently probable to me that the distinction itself was operative in setting the natural free. At any rate, the theoretical distinction was followed by the pragmatic rebellion. Further, the distinction had rough sledding in the academic world itself; Protestant theologians were little inclined to accept the theorems of the medieval Catholic, and on the Catholic side there were the persistent efforts of Baius and his successors to eliminate the distinction. Further still, the ineffectual efforts of the orthodox Roman Catholics to bolster it up did not do justice to the real merit of the distinction. They relied too much on a hypothetical and rather useless *natura pura* as a basis for their thinking, with the supernatural viewed as something 'added' in a special act of divine gratuity; this approval made the whole supernatural destiny of man seem like God's afterthought, tacked on extrinsically to an idea already integral in itself.

The impasse was broken around the turn of the present century – largely through the work of Maurice Blondel, with his concern to relate the natural and supernatural intrinsically and to insist on their harmonious unity, while not denying the fundamental distinction itself. Since his time a new approach has been taken by Roman Catholic theologians. I do not myself think that Blondel solved the problem; what he gave was a direction and an impetus. His role was to recall us to the unity of the divine plan, to round out the process represented by the pair in Maritain's phrase, *distinguer pour unir*.

But the task of conceiving the unity in an acceptable way still remained. That third step may be possible now, the key notion being the role of meaning in human life. The notion came to clear formulation only during the last century, perhaps too late for Blondel to exploit it fully. But recently Lonergan has taken it up and elaborated it in the context of Roman Catholic thought.

Meaning, as he explains it, is constitutive of the human; it is not therefore a merely objective intelligibility to be grasped by man, as happens when we study astronomy; rather, it is an intelligibility that enters into the very being and constitution of the object. A country *is* in large measure what the country *means* to its people. Laws, customs, institutions – all these, in human affairs, are what they mean. I think that this idea may be applied effectively to the present problem. The sacraments are what the sacraments mean, and they mean what God instituted them to mean. Human life in all its aspects is what human life means, and the meaning is constituted by God according to his secret plan hidden from eternity, which is to restore all things in Christ, to make us sharers in his divine being. The transformation of the human by the divine is a real transformation; thus the medieval distinction of natural and supernatural remains valid. But the unity of the human world made divine is not accomplished by some process like adding block to block, or gluing together two material components; it is rather a penetrating transformation of the whole by the power of meaning.

My purpose has been to establish a theological background for discussion, but it is time now to relate what I have said to our ecumenical objective: salvation as the wholeness of man. The wholeness of man, then, is that state of being which corresponds to God's plan of making men sharers in his own divine nature. There is a human measure of things, from which the measure of the secular derives; otherwise, there is nothing to be made divine. The human, moreover, has its autonomy, as has the secular, in its objectives, its fields of inquiry, its methods, its laws, its principles; we do not expect a supernatural elaboration of the multiplication table, and neither should we look to revelation for solutions in a whole range of psychological, sociological, political, and other problems. Nevertheless, the human and secular are in themselves deficient, un-whole, with a measure of un-being; a clear religious manifestation of this deficiency is our human impotence to keep a law even when we can humanly know it (Romans 7). Wholeness, therefore, is the result of 'adding' the supernatural, but the addition should not be conceived mathematically; it is the intimate and complete transformation of all the human, so as to give it, not a new *material* reality, but a new meaning. Christian marriage, in almost every outward manifestation, may differ little from non-Christian marriage; but it *is* different, because its meaning is different; it has the meaning of the union of Christ and his church (Ephes. 5).

The unity of man's wholeness thus conceived is not the perfect unity of God, but is a tending toward that unity. It is a unity-in-tension or a tension-in-unity. There is inherent in man, simply because he is finite, a fear and unwillingness to commit his human values to the great ocean of the infinite. That means that the cross and resurrection are an essential part of the pattern for achieving complete wholeness; there must be, sooner or later, a total renunciation of the human in order that it may be received back wholly integrated with the divine. Because men are many, each with his own history, each with his own relationship to God, there is a variety of ways in which they

are called to and achieve their destiny. Some, like Paul (1 Cor. 9), are called to an earlier anticipation of the death and resurrection and a more immediate concern with the transformation of things human; others, as he implies, are called to a fuller participation in and cultivation of the human values to be transformed.

The thesis is complex, but so is the reality, both of the divinized human world we encounter in our life of faith and of the vicissitudes of theological attitudes through history. I think then that only a complex thesis can provide a sufficiently comprehensive background for discussion of the salvation of man in the modern world. It now appears that salvation, if we consider the *terminus a quo* or deliverance *from*, looks to the state of un-wholeness, un-being, the *regio dissimilitudinis*,² which is mostly conceived in human terms as the destruction of what it means to be humanly happy. But salvation, if we consider the *terminus ad quem*, admits two aspects: There is the restoration of the human, the fully human, not only with material needs supplied, but with sin erased, moral helplessness overcome, and psychological disturbances remedied; this is the area of the old *gratia sanans*. Then there is the divinization of man, not necessarily a second step, but a second aspect, in which, according to the ultimate purpose of God, we are to be like him, to live like him, to know as we are known; this is the area of the old *gratia elevans*. The human and the divine remain distinct measures; it is false to say that to be fully human is to be divine; but it is true to say that *I* am not fully and wholly *myself* unless I become divine.

From this viewpoint the manifold possibilities of service to the world of men are an obvious field for the common exercise of the apostolate of concern for our neighbour's salvation. The order to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, always has its application; the poor in one form or another, the economically, socially, psychologically poor, these we have always with us. The work of the young men and women in CUSO and the Peace Corps cannot be foreign to the churches. Concern over Vietnam, over racial discrimination, over violence in law enforcement as well as in crime — all this is as Christian as concern for prayer and fasting, and a more pressing demand on conscience.

Nor can one validly object that this concern is a betrayal of the Christian message unless it is accompanied by the express proclamation of the gospel. We are indeed to give to the thirsty *in the Lord's name*, but this is a definition of our intention rather than a formula to be imposed on the recipient whether he like it or not. If Christ died for all, and all are in some sense his brothers and sisters, it cannot be a merely human act, and an evasion of the gospel demands, for a Christian to help them in their human need. I think that the reactionaries are mistaken on this point. Since 31 October 1967, the Reformed church in the Netherlands has been agitated by an open letter of twenty-four pastors challenging the social orientation of the church since the war, by asking whether it is biblically justifiable and fulfils the evangelical task of preaching.

2. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 10:16.

The movement has become a tempest and my source hopes it will not harm ecumenism.³ I would hope, first of all, that it will not harm commitment to the gospel itself.

What is to be said of the opposing thesis that co-operation in common social programmes is the best form of ecumenical endeavour? This position has considerable support today. Stephen C. Rose says that a future page of history will read: 'For the first time since the Reformation, Christians were brought together not merely on the basis of creeds and doctrine, but because they heard the voice of one God calling them to work together in the streets and alleys, factories and offices, hospitals and legislative offices of a world in need of sacrificial service and dedicated commitment.'⁴ Similarly, Robert McAfee Brown writes: '. . . for the foreseeable future, cooperation in the "secular arena" may be the most fruitful line of ecumenical advance.'⁵

No one who believes in God our Father can object to this programme in itself. No one who follows the gospel or the prophets will insist on creed and ritual while he overlooks 'the weightier demands of the Law, justice, mercy, and good faith' (Matt. 23:23). This, however, does not quite respond to the present question. Matthew adds immediately: 'It is these you should have practised, without neglecting the others.' Our question concerns one of those 'others' – specifically, the ecumenical demand to work for unity. Our question is: How are we to join this concern for justice and mercy to a genuine concern for the Lord's ecumenical precept, and not allow it to be just an evasion of that further duty?

Obviously, our work for the world must be done in the name of the Lord; it must be a co-operation; it must lead to greater understanding and love for one another. Is that all? I would say that we must go farther. The object of our apostolate, if it is salvation as wholeness, is not merely to convert sub-human conditions of existence into human; it is also, as God's agents and co-workers, to be his instruments in converting the human into the divine. This necessarily involves the word of God or the gospel, with its power of transforming the meaning of human life. It necessarily involves a reference to the death and resurrection of Christ, and therefore a reference to the sacrament by which we are baptized into his death (Rom. 6:3) and to the Eucharist in which we show forth the death of the Lord until he returns (1 Cor. 11:26).

In other words, if our work together is to be a truly ecumenical effort with a truly ecumenical purpose, I do not think we can avoid the question of common doctrine and common worship. We cannot even avoid the reflection on ourselves that will lead to confession of our sins of disunity and a plea for forgiveness of one another. Co-operating as Christians, working for Christ in his poor and hungry and oppressed, is a truly Christian activity; it is the primary Christian obligation; it falls on all of us together. But to undertake this and call

3. Cf. *Irénikon*, 41 (1968), 267–70.

4. Stephen C. Rose (ed.), *Who's Killing the Church? A Renewal Reader* (Chicago: Renewal Magazine, 1966), p. 5.

5. R. M. Brown, 'The Pope's Credo,' *Christianity and Crisis*, 22 July 1968, p. 163.

it ecumenical would be, I am very much afraid, an evasion of a further obligation, a rejection of the impulse which the Spirit has been giving us for so many years in Faith and Order, Life and Work, etc. The ecumenical purpose is to eliminate the scandal of disunity; it cannot be accomplished without reference to our *terminus a quo*, the sins of the past; it cannot avoid setting its own *terminus ad quem*, that unity of belief and worship which God means us to have. I hope that we will not still the ecumenical voice of conscience with the reflection that we are, after all, attending to the main Christian duty.