

## NOTES

### INDIVIDUAL, SOCIETAL, AND COSMIC DIMENSIONS OF SALVATION

A central problem for Christianity today is this: What are the relations between the individual, the societal, and the cosmic dimensions of salvation? What is the relation between personal salvation and the salvation of the community, of society as a whole, of all mankind? And what is the relation between the salvation of man and the salvation of the cosmos? Further, what is the importance of the societal and the cosmic aspects of personal salvation? Is the universe, the cosmos, properly speaking an object of salvation? If it somehow is, what does this mean for me, for the individual Christian? Admitting the societal or communal nature of salvation, what does this communal aspect of salvation mean in terms of my Christian life? The whole question is complex. It involves the effort to understand, in terms of salvation, the relations between person and society, and between man and cosmos. Moreover, it involves the effort to determine what these relations mean in everyday Christian life, in prayer, in action, in evangelism, in all forms of Christian worship, witness, and service. How do we answer these questions?

One may distinguish two general answers, two overlapping positions held by contemporary Christians.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, there is a view that sees Christ working in all of history, bringing forth the final transformation's first fruits in man's personal life but—inseparably—in man's life in society and in the world. Christ renews us not only in ourselves but in our relation to other men and in our relation to the world. This view stresses the intrinsic inseparability of the personal, social, and cosmic aspects of Christ's work.

On the other hand, there is a view that sees Christ's work as taking place primarily through His Word to persons. There will be certainly a final transformation of all things in Christ; but, until the end, Christ's work is primarily the work of the renewing Word of God addressed in forgiveness to the sinner. The work of the Church, therefore, is the work of addressing the transforming power of the Word, the work of bringing the Word to persons. There should be, of course, a real spill-over into the social, secular order; but that spill-over, while good and

<sup>1</sup> I am following the problematic described by Colin W. Williams in "The Evangelical Imperative to Evangelize," an unpublished paper delivered at the National Faith and Order Colloquium, June 1966. The present article was given as a paper at the National Faith and Order Colloquium, June 1968.

the work of God, is not the chief concern of the Church. The main task of the Church is conversion.

We have, then, in contemporary Christianity two basic viewpoints. The first is that the redemptive work of Christ, carried on in time by the Church, is the renewal of persons and of society and of the world, a renewal aimed at, and to be consummated in, the final transformation at the end of time. The second is that Christ's work of salvation and the salvific work, therefore, of the Church is to address the saving Word of God to the hearts of men; the Church's work is conversion to Christ. These two viewpoints seem to be at bottom irreconcilable and in many ways opposed. It is clear that they result in differing approaches to Christian living, to different kinds of Church activity and of missionary action. They are not viewpoints that are strictly confessional; they are both found in almost all Christian denominations.

There are many ways of approaching the problem. It could be considered in terms of the distinction and relation between the sacred order and the secular order. It could be discussed in terms of faith and action. My intention is to treat this whole matter in terms of the Christian person and his relation to the person of Christ. The question is: What is the societal dimension of this interpersonal relationship between Christ and the Christian, and what is the cosmic dimension of this relationship?

My method is to form a tentative theological hypothesis that takes into account the relevant scriptural data as well as contemporary man's understanding of what it means to be a person. I am aiming at a theological hypothesis that makes as much sense as possible and that is productive of reflection, discussion, and, ultimately, better understanding of Christianity so that it may be better practiced.

## I

What is a person? A person is, by his very nature, relational, open to relation with other persons and, ultimately, with a personal God. Because a person is essentially relational, the idea of person cannot be understood apart from the idea of person-in-relation-to-other-person, apart from the idea of society. A more productive question than "What is a person?" is "What is the relation between person and society?"

In the domain of life, whenever we find a true union we find that the union differentiates the elements that are united. Whether we speak of cells united to form a living body of the members of a society, or of the elements that make up any synthesis, true union never confuses the elements united, it differentiates them.<sup>2</sup> On a baseball team, for ex-

<sup>2</sup> See the writings of P. Teilhard de Chardin, especially *The Future of Man* (New York, 1964) pp. 52-57.

ample, the players are differentiated according to function, according to the positions they occupy on the team. Union differentiates. At a deeper level, in the union of persons that we call friendship, there is again a differentiating union. Persons who are friends become, through the friendship, more themselves, more person. Union differentiates, and union of persons personalizes the persons united. This is above all true of marriage. To the extent that the marriage is a happy and successful union, the husband and wife grow as persons. They do not merge into one amorphous mass; on the contrary, each achieves his or her own personhood precisely through the union with the other person. When a union is truly human, a union of persons that is a union from the interior, from the heart, that union further personalizes the persons united.

Society is a union of persons. And to the degree that societal union is really a human union, it is a union that personalizes. We grow as persons to the degree to which we enter into society, to the degree to which we go out of ourselves to be united with other persons. It is simply in accord with the essentially social structure of human nature that persons grow and develop as persons to the extent that they go out of themselves and unite with other persons.

For the Christian, there is one personal center for all mankind. This is the meaning of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ; God has sent His only Son for man's salvation, and He has raised up that Son so that, risen, He may be the personal center for the unity of all men. Personal union with Christ is, obviously, the most personalizing union possible; it is more than personalizing, since it is a saving union, a union of grace and justification. Since Christ is the saving personal center of mankind, of human society, when the Christian is most united to Christ he is most involved in society. Conversely, to be united with Christ, he must be united with his fellow men. "If any man says he loves God and does not love his neighbor, that man is a liar." We grow as persons, then, to the degree that we go out of ourselves in Christian love to other persons, and, above all, to the extent that we go out of ourselves to Christ, the saving personal center for all men.

A first conclusion is this: person and society are not opposed. On the contrary, person and society are correlative. To the degree that I help to build up society by helping others, I myself grow as a person. We do have a more or less engrained prejudice that inclines us to think that the notion of the individual person and the notion of the collectivity are opposed notions. Often we tend to consider person and society as opposed, as though personal freedom and growth varied inversely to the degree of the development and organization of society. This prejudice probably has as part of its root the unpleasant sense of constraint

and of loss of freedom that the individual sometimes experiences when he finds himself involved in a group. It is simply the prejudice of human selfishness and egotism. Our human selfishness inclines us to adopt an isolationist attitude with respect to other persons in the illusion that personal fulfilment lies in getting what is ours, in building bigger barns and filling them with grain. But this is an illusion; personal fulfilment and personal involvement in society are not opposed, they are correlative.

A second conclusion is this: personal involvement with Christ and personal involvement in the needs of other persons are inseparable; for Christ is not only Saviour of the individual person, He is the unifier who has come that all may be one in Him. Christ unites us to one another by drawing us to Himself. Love of Christ and love of neighbor are two sides of one coin. In Christ's words, "Whatever you have done to the least of these, my brothers, you have done to me."

The relation between the personal and the societal aspects of salvation is that they are inseparable and correlative. Personal salvation is essentially societal salvation. Personal fulfilment does not lie in trying selfishly to become fulfilled but in going out of ourselves in Christian love to Christ and to others for His sake. This means dying to our own selfishness: "Unless the grain of wheat fall to the ground and die, it cannot bear fruit." And, "if any man try to save his life in this world, he will lose it; but if he loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, he will find it."

## II

What is there to say about the cosmic dimension of salvation? What is the relation between the personal aspect of salvation and the cosmic aspect? Is the cosmos relevant to an understanding of salvation, or is salvation a matter of personal conversion, of existential decision? How we answer these questions depends on how we understand the place and function of Christ's saving power in the cosmos. Christ is Saviour of the person and Lord of the cosmos; but what does Christ's lordship over the universe have to do with His saving the individual person? Is it simply that He who is my Saviour is also Lord, and His lordship of the cosmos has nothing directly to do with my personal salvation? Or is my salvation bound up intrinsically not only with the salvation of other persons but with the salvation of the cosmos? In an effort to investigate the New Testament teaching on the cosmic dimension of salvation, I would like to outline briefly some of the main elements to consider in such an investigation, as these elements are found in John's Gospel and in Paul's epistles. Exegetes differ in their understanding

of the relevant Johannine and Pauline texts, and my own outline here will necessarily contain several personal theological options and interpretations.

The first part of the Prologue of John's Gospel identifies Christ with the Old Testament wisdom through whom God creates and with God's creative word. The idea is also present of a creative word, a *logos*, who is the ordering principle of the universe, the principle of the organization and harmony of the cosmos. The Prologue pivots on the central verses which concern personal salvation: "But to all who did receive Him, to those who have given Him their allegiance, He gave the right to become children of God. . . ." In the second half of the Prologue the creative Word of God is identified with Jesus and as the Son of the eternal Father.

Christ is, then, God's creative Word, the principle of the existence and the order of the cosmos. "Through Him all things came to be; not one thing had its being but through Him." Christ is, moreover, God's Word of revelation and self-communication to man. "The Word was with God and the Word was God. . . . The Word was made flesh, He lived among us, and we saw His glory, the glory that is His as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth." Finally, Christ is God's Word of promise and salvation. To all accept Him, who believe in Him, "He gave power to become children of God."

The fundamental idea of the Prologue is that Christ brings the word because He is the Word. This is worked out in the body of John's Gospel in terms of the light, life, and truth that Christ brings because He is the light, the life, and the truth. The import and purpose of the Gospel is that we believe in the word that Christ preaches and, particularly, that we believe in the Word that He is, that we adhere to His person, that we enter into loving interpersonal relationship with Him.

For John's Gospel, creation, the work begun "in the beginning," is fulfilled through the response of men to God that is faith in Christ, adherence to Christ, being joined to Christ. Creation and salvation are intimately connected. God's work of creation is completed and brought back to Him through the faith response of men to God-present-as-Saviour in Christ. It is through Christ working in history through His Church that men are brought to salvation; but not only men are brought to salvation. What is brought to completion and fulfilment in Christ is the work begun "in the beginning." It is the entire cosmos that, through men in Christ, is brought back to the Father.

John and Paul have the same basic doctrine regarding the cosmic aspect of salvation, but they have two different theological approaches.

John's theology of creation and salvation is expressed in terms of inter-personal encounter. John's central basic metaphor is human discourse: Christ is the creative Word spoken by God who returns to God in the response of men. Paul expresses the relation between creation and salvation in more organic terms; it could be said that his central basic concept is that of the body.

For Paul, as for John, all that exists comes from God, but all things come to be through Christ and remain in existence through Christ (1 Cor 8:6). The doctrine of the first three chapters of Ephesians is that God's whole creation-salvation plan has from the beginning been centered on Christ. That plan is "to bring everything together under Christ as head" (Eph 1:10), for Christ is the ruler of everything and He "fills the whole creation" (1:23). God's plan of creation and salvation is in process now, and the Church has a central place in that plan. Christ is the ruler of everything and He is the head of the Church. It is in the Church that Christ is present in His fulness (1:23), and it is through the Church that God's plan in Christ is made manifest (3:10-11). Creation has not been finished; it still goes on in the working out of God's over-all plan; and the central axis of the working out of God's plan in Christ is the Church.

Much the same teaching, though fuller and in some ways more polished, is found in the first two chapters of Colossians, especially in the hymn in the first chapter (Col 1:15-20). All things have been created in Christ, and through Him and for Him, and "He holds all things in unity" (1:17). Christ is the head of the Church, His body (1:18); and He is, moreover, the head of the cosmos, which is also called by Paul Christ's body (2:10).<sup>3</sup> That is, Christ is the head of the cosmos and the head of the Church. The cosmos is His body, and also the Church is His body. The Church, then, has a certain cosmic character, and it has a central place in the cosmos. It is clear that, although Christ is the head of the cosmos, it is not yet that all things are reconciled in Christ. All things are reconciled *in principle* by Christ's redemptive death on the cross. But the working out of that reconciliation takes place in time. In the light of this, creation and redemption can be seen to be two aspects of one great mystery: the reconciliation of all things in Christ. For God's plan is that "all plenitude be found in Him and that all things be reconciled through Him and for Him" (1:19). In the plenitude of His cosmic supremacy, Christ embraces all things: God who saves, men who are saved, the universe, all visible and invisible powers. All things are created in

<sup>3</sup> This is the exegesis of H. Schlier, "The Pauline Body-Concept," in *The Church: Readings in Theology*, ed. at Canisianum-Innsbruck (New York, 1963), pp. 44-58.

Him, are reconciled in Him, find their fulfilment and salvation in Him. In Paul's vision, everything is somehow suspended from the risen Christ, and finds its meaning and value and even its existence in Christ risen. "In Him all things hold together," and "In Him all things and He in all" (1:17; 2:10; 3:11). The Christ of Paul is the Christ in whom all creation is recapitulated.

If all things are in some way to be reconciled in Christ, then the cosmos itself must be somehow an object of salvation. The cosmic text of Rom 8:18-25 has been much discussed, and some points seem clear. It is the totality of creation that shares in God's plan. The hope of mankind is also the hope of all creation. Creation and salvation are inseparably connected. Whatever has been created has been created to be saved, is object of salvation, and this includes the whole cosmos. The salvation of the cosmos is situated by Paul in the context of man's salvation. More precisely, Paul situates the salvation of the cosmos in the context of the Resurrection, in the context of the salvation of man's body. The salvation of the cosmos is a consequence of man's salvation, especially of the salvation of man's body through resurrection. The cosmos is not just an instrument of man's salvation; it is itself object of salvation.<sup>4</sup>

At this point I would like to draw some conclusions about the cosmic aspect of salvation. To begin with, for both John and Paul there is a necessary intrinsic connection between creation and salvation. Creation and salvation are not so much two Christian mysteries as they are two facets of the one great mystery of God's total plan to bring all things to fulfilment in Christ. Creation is not thinkable apart from salvation. A cosmos that is not ordered to salvation would be, in the vision of John or Paul, inconceivable. This does not mean that salvation is not grace. The salvation of the whole cosmos, as well as the salvation of any person, is grace. But we know that salvation is grace not because we can conceive that God could create something that would not be ordered to salvation. We know that salvation is grace because it is offered freely by God; and we know that God offers it freely because it is accompanied by the sure sign of freedom: it is offered out of love.

Creation and salvation are indissociable, and so too are the cosmos and Christ. For John and Paul, the cosmos exists in, through, and for Christ. For Christian theology, the question "What would the world be like without the Incarnation?" makes little or no sense. The world is inconceivable without the Incarnation; for Christian theology, the cosmos is unthinkable apart from Christ. A first conclusion, then, is

<sup>4</sup> I am following S. Lyonnet, "The Redemption of the Universe," in *The Church* (n. 3 above) pp. 136-56.

that salvation and creation, Christ and cosmos, are intrinsically related and necessarily connected.

A second conclusion is this: for the Christian, the cosmos is personal because it is grounded in the person of Christ. Christ is the personal center of the cosmos. "Besides those attributes that are strictly divine and human (those attributes to which theologians have paid the most attention up to now), Christ possesses—in virtue of the working out of the implications of His incarnation—attributes that are universal, cosmic, attributes which show Him to be the world's personal center."<sup>5</sup> The common center of things, "Christ can be loved as a person, and He presents Himself as a world."<sup>6</sup> "To the eyes of the Christian . . . Christ invests Himself with the whole reality of the universe; and at the same time the universe is illumined with all the warmth and immortality of Christ."<sup>7</sup>

### III

The risen Christ is, then, the personal center of society and the personal center of the cosmos. I would like to include "society" and "cosmos" in one concept, that of "world." I do not intend to use the term "world" in the sense of that part of the world that Christ advises us to have no part of, that part of the world that moves away from God. Nor do I want to use the word "world" in a neutral sense. By "world" I mean here the world that God so loves that He sent His only Son to save it. The question now is the question of the meaning of the world—human society and the entire universe of which society is a part—for the salvation of the individual person. From the point of view of salvation, what should be the relation of the Christian to the world?

For the Christian, the world is not hostile, nor is it indifferent. The Christian can have a positive, personal relation to the world, a certain interpersonal mutuality with the world. For the Christian, the world has a friendly and even loving face because it is rooted in the person of the risen Christ. The Christian, more than others, can and should have faith in the world, faith in man, faith in human progress and in man's efforts to build up the world. And the Christian, more than other men, can and should have hope in the future of man, hope in the world's future. "For the Christian, the eventual success of man on earth is not merely a probability but a certainty, since Christ is al-

<sup>5</sup> P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ* (New York, 1969) p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in Time of War* (New York, 1968) p. 213.

<sup>7</sup> P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (New York, 1964) p. 224.



ready risen—and in Him, by anticipation, the world is already risen.”<sup>8</sup> The world moving into the future can be believed in, hoped in, loved, because it is grounded in Christ risen, the guarantor of its ultimately successful outcome. What is more, because true union of persons is personalizing, union with Christ through involvement in the world is personalizing, makes for personal and Christian growth and development.

In the light of all this, there is surely a specifically Christian responsibility for the world. In a world that is moving toward an ultimate synthesis of all things in Christ, in a world that is in the process of a painful and gradual unification in the direction of its final transformation, the Christian, precisely as Christian, has a heavy responsibility to contribute whatever he can to the forward progress of society and of the world as a whole. The Christian, as Christian, should take with the greatest seriousness his political obligations, his social obligations, his obligations to contribute as much as he can to the work and the research that are in the direction of the world’s forward progress toward Christ. The Christian should advance God’s kingdom in every domain; his faith imposes on him the right and the obligation to throw himself into the things of the earth.

Christian morality has too long been a naturalistic and static morality of equilibrium, a morality that exists to protect the individual and to protect society. In the past, morality has been understood as a fixed system of rights and duties aimed at maintaining a static equilibrium among individuals. But this is not really Christian morality, because it is not aimed at the reconciliation of all things in Christ. A truly Christian ethic is an ethic that is aimed at the highest development of the person, of society, of the world. The primary purpose of a Christian ethic should not be to protect but to develop, to unify, to move forward.

The task of the Church, then, is much broader than conversion, much more than simply bringing persons to a change of heart and a personal, existential decision for Christ. The work of the Church is transformation: transformation of persons, of society, of the world. This is not to say that we should look for a new Christendom, for an updated version of thirteenth-century Europe. It is to say that the world, as world and in keeping its own very worldliness, is to be transformed and brought closer to Christ. This is, in my opinion, the Christian task: to build up the world in every way in the direction of the final fulfillment when God will intervene, the world will be transformed, Christ

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

will definitively weld the world to Himself and hand over the kingdom to the Father, and God will be all in all. And it is only in participating fully in the social and cosmic aspects of salvation that the Christian can respond to the gift of salvation that is offered to him in Christ. This is central to Christianity and therefore central to Christian life and to Christian evangelization.

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