

## JESUS AND SALVATION: AN ESSAY IN INTERPRETATION

ROGER HAIGHT, S.J.

*Weston School of Theology*

THE CONCEPT of salvation is central to Christianity. From a historical perspective, the experience of Jesus as savior is the basis from which the Christian movement sprang. This religion arose and continues to exist *because* people experience Jesus as a bringer of God's salvation. Christology in its narrow sense of defining the status of Jesus before God and human beings depends upon soteriology. Yet despite this centrality and importance, the Church has never formulated a conciliar definition of salvation nor provided a universally accepted conception. This is not necessarily something negative, but it still leaves us with a pluralism in the domain of the theology of salvation, the meaning of which remains open and fluid. Salvation is also elusive: like time, every Christian knows its meaning until asked to explain it.

Because of its centrality, the problems that surround the concept of salvation are rendered more grave. Many of the traditional expressions of how Jesus saves are expressed in myths that no longer communicate to educated Christians; some are even offensive. Some of the traditional theological "explanations" of salvation through Christ do no better. Often treatments of salvation are largely devoted to rehearsing traditional theories or presenting models or types which seem to inject some order into the disarray.<sup>1</sup> But one cannot assume that these

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most famous study of the typologies is Gustav Aulen's *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1950); however this work now appears somewhat tendentious and seems to me to misrepresent the authors it interprets. For a far more adequate typology drawn from early sources, see Michael Slusser, "Primitive Christian Soteriological Themes," *TS* 44 (1983) 555-69. H. E. W. Turner's *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine during the First Five Centuries* (London: A. R. Moberly, 1952) also describes various models of salvation in the early Church. Other studies in contemporary soteriology include Gabriel Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1988); F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968); Carol Frances Jegen, *Restoring Our Friendship with God: The Mystery of Redemption from Suffering and Sin* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1989); Sebastian Moore, *The Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger* (New York: Seabury, 1981); Norman Pittenger, *Freed to Love: A Process Interpretation of Redemption* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1987).

are credible today, and too little attention is given to intelligible present-day reinterpretation. Given the pluralism of conceptions, is there a way systematically to establish a center of gravity on the salvation mediated by Jesus that will be clear and definite but open and not exclusive? In the face of the confusion about the nature of salvation, can one formulate the present-day questions and crises to which Jesus provides a salvific answer? Given the incredibility of the mythological language when it is read at face value, can one find a symbolic formulation of this doctrine that is closer to actual human experience today?

These issues serve as a backdrop for the main question that guides this essay at interpretation. Because salvation in its religious sense can come only from God, many of the theories of salvation that emerged after the first century in both the Greek and Latin traditions focused on Jesus as a divine figure, or on the divinity of Jesus. Moreover, their language drifted away from the concrete historical ministry of Jesus. On the one hand, these theories are beginning to sound unrealistic; even when they are interpreted symbolically, they are too far removed from ordinary experience to command respect. On the other hand, this situation is reinforced by present-day historical consciousness and its highlighting of the humanity of Jesus. How does the prominent place that the historical Jesus is assuming in Christology come to bear on salvation theory? More deeply, how is the salvation mediated by Jesus to be understood within the framework of a historicist imagination?

In attempting to respond to these questions, I have divided this article into three parts. The first part lays the groundwork for the rest of the study. It deals with definitions of the point of departure of this investigation, its presuppositions, and its method. The second part deals with the tradition and offers an interpretation of some of the experiences that lie beneath some of the standard theories of salvation from the history of doctrine.<sup>2</sup> The third part is an effort to draw the experience of the past forward by placing it in conjunction with some existential questions of our time that call out for salvation.

Some of the best ground regarding salvation has been gained in the

<sup>2</sup> I use the term "salvation" as distinct from "redemption" and "atonement," because salvation appears somewhat more general and neutral. The notion of redemption is too closely tied to a ransom theory of salvation; that of atonement strongly suggests Anselm's theory of satisfaction or the Reformers' emphasis on the suffering and death of Jesus. Of course salvation too is a historically conditioned metaphor, not without its own inner trajectories. The goal of our study is to interpret its meaning.

area of New Testament history and interpretation.<sup>3</sup> This article picks up where study of the New Testament leaves off and is limited to a consideration of some of the tradition's classic conceptions of how Jesus saves.<sup>4</sup> The New Testament is viewed only obliquely as providing the data which later theology itself interprets. It should also be clear from our title that salvation is being considered in close connection with Jesus. But the fullness of the meaning of salvation will only be found in conjunction with many other areas of doctrine such as grace, pneumatology, the Church, eschatology, spirituality, and so on. Therefore what follows is an essay in Christology in the broader sense of this discipline and should not in any way be expected to exhaust the meaning of salvation.

#### JESUS AS SAVIOR

We begin by setting the framework within which salvation is to be examined. A presupposition at work here is that one's imagination in approaching this material must be at the same time historical and theological. There will be an effort to begin with and to continue to keep in view the historical Jesus of Nazareth even while we interpret this Jesus as the saving Christ. Taking Jesus as the point of departure, the preliminary methodological material which follows has been divided into three points, which treat the genesis of the experience of salvation, its structure, and a method of dealing theologically with the notion of Jesus as savior.

#### *Genesis of the Experience of Jesus as Savior*

One cannot understand the experience of Jesus as savior without analyzing its historical origin and genesis. The experience was and is an event in history, and as such it requires an understanding that grasps the coming to be of the phenomenon for the first time. In some essential respects, the history of the experience of Jesus as savior repeats the original experience.

A first key thesis about the genesis of the Christian experience of salvation is that it has Jesus as its object or at least its focus of attention. Jesus is the medium of the experience of God's salvation. Strictly speaking God alone is savior; only God can save. But Jesus is the object

<sup>3</sup> The work of Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Seabury, 1980), is a major contribution to the New Testament theology of salvation and to a present-day interpretation of salvation.

<sup>4</sup> Our interpretation is based on some classical statements by Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Anselm, Abelard, Luther, and Calvin.

of the experience of salvation in the sense that he is the historical mediation or sacrament or symbol of this experience. Salvation is mediated through him and experienced in him.

When this experience was first had, who had it, or what form it took cannot be determined. Was Jesus experienced as savior even during his lifetime, an experience which was deepened and confirmed by the Easter experience? Was the Easter experience of Jesus alive and with God the first true experience of Jesus as God's savior for us? Or was the Easter experience the point of departure for the gradual development of a sense that God had acted in Jesus for our salvation? These questions cannot be answered firmly, and there may be some truth in all these possibilities. But no matter how they are answered, the human being Jesus is the object of the experience, or better, the symbol or medium that focuses the Christian experience of God's salvation. There can be little doubt that there was a development in the experience of Jesus as savior and continuity in that development. And the basis of continuity was the person of Jesus himself.

These reflections have further significance which will be drawn out as this article progresses. At this point it is sufficient to note that a person cannot be separated from what he or she says and does. A person's actions along the course of his or her life define in many respects who and what that person is. The whole of a person's life goes to fashion his or her being. Therefore the whole of Jesus' life, and what we can know of it, has some bearing on salvation.<sup>5</sup>

The experience of Jesus as savior developed unevenly, so that the New Testament contains a pluralism of interpretations of salvation. This fact emerges from a study of concepts of salvation in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> One would expect such a pluralism because of the spread and development of the appreciation of Jesus as savior in different communities with different traditions. It should be clear from the outset that salvation from God designates a transcendent reality and as such it subsists in absolute mystery. Therefore no expression of what this salvation is, no reflective symbol, and no "explanation" of how it is accomplished is adequate to the reality itself. Thus one should expect a priori that salvation will be conceived in a variety of different

<sup>5</sup> Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has shown the fallacy involved in reducing the saving significance of Jesus to his passion and death, as though Jesus' ministry were a mere prelude to his dying; see his "Critical Social Theory and Christology: Toward an Understanding of Atonement and Redemption as Emancipatory Solidarity," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 30 (1975) 63-110.

<sup>6</sup> Schillebeeckx's *Christ* analyzes each book of the New Testament apart from the Synoptics and then offers a synthetic survey of the major New Testament images for salvation.

ways. The pluralism of the New Testament's images and notions of salvation is itself explained by the historicity of the writings, the variety of the interpretive traditions, and the multiplicity of aspects of Jesus' life. This pluralism within the New Testament legitimates a pluralism of salvation theories.

But at the same time the rich variety of conceptions of salvation reflected in the New Testament writings, which are in some measure irreducible among themselves, can be summed up by a *reductio ad simplicitatem*. Reduced to simplicity, Jesus makes God present in a saving way.<sup>7</sup> This statement is so simple that within the context it is almost self-evident. Yet it is all-encompassing; it includes the multiplicity of notions of salvation. It does not reduce to a least common denominator but to the fullest possible denominator. Various conceptions of salvation are drawn up into it by means of its concrete simplicity. But it does not solve the problem this essay addresses because its open-endedness invites further questions. What kind of God does Jesus make present? How is this God made present in a saving way? In other words, salvation must be specified a good deal further.

### *The Structure of Salvation*

Given this first broad and schematic description of the genesis of the experience of salvation mediated through Jesus, I want to say more about the nature of salvation as an experience. A distinction has often been made between objective and subjective or existential salvation. Objective salvation designates what God has done in Jesus Christ for our salvation independently of us, as it were. The work of Christ, what he did, constitutes this objective salvation, whereas subjective salvation refers to the human appropriation of this grace. There are reasons for preserving this distinction. But in this article I approach objective salvation through the experience of it. In this section, then, I want to say more about the nature of salvation on the basis of an analysis of it as an experience. I will be building on the genesis of the experience of Jesus as savior just described and transforming what is described there into formal principles and categories.

We can begin with the thesis that Jesus is the real historical symbol who mediates God's salvation. All contact with and knowledge of God is historically mediated. And for the Christian imagination that me-

<sup>7</sup> "It is impossible to arrive at a fully consistent synthesis from the preceding detailed analysis [of the notions of grace in the New Testament]. However, a fundamentally identical experience underlies the various interpretations to be found throughout the New Testament: all its writings bear witness to the experience of salvation in Jesus from God" (Schillebeeckx, *Christ* 463).

dium is Jesus. What the thesis adds to these propositions is the notion of symbol.<sup>8</sup>

A symbol is some finite piece of this world, some thing or person or event or idea or proposition through which something else, other than itself, is known or encountered. A symbol, then, mediates something else, makes it present. Often the other thing that is known can only be known through a symbol, as a dream mediates the subconscious, or a religious symbol represents God. A symbol thus introduces human beings into spheres inside themselves and levels of reality outside that would not be known without this mediation. Symbol, then, is not a weak but a strong concept indicating a depth perception of reality; on the religious level a symbol is a sacrament.

Symbols by their very nature are dialectical. Religious symbols retain their finite identify, and yet they mediate or make present what is transcendent. They both point beyond themselves to the transcendent one, God, and at the same time make God present. Symbols may be conceptual, as in words or parables; they make God present to consciousness. Thus doctrines and the terms that represent them, such as "salvation" or "redemption" or "resurrection," are symbols. Symbols can also be real things or persons who make God present by bodying God forth. To call Jesus the symbol of God in this framework of symbolic realism, then, is to encapsulate in a conceptual scheme the dynamic origin of the experience of salvation mediated by Jesus. Jesus is savior because he is the symbol of God for Christians; it is in Jesus that Christians encounter God.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the centrality of Jesus in the Christian imagination, the hermeneutics of New Testament images of salvation and all those subsequent to them require a reference to Jesus of Nazareth. Since the person of Jesus is the medium of God's salvation, conceptions of salvation, insofar as they are specifically Christian, must be referred back

<sup>8</sup> The notion of symbol employed here is drawn from the conceptions of Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich. It is an analogous concept, used in different senses for different kinds of symbols, e.g. in relation to concrete symbols and conscious symbols. For a fuller development of these ideas see Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990) 127-66.

<sup>9</sup> One could say that Jesus is the sacrament of the Christian encounter with God, to paraphrase Edward Schillebeeckx in *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963). The same line of thought was pursued by Karl Rahner in transcendental terms in his "Theology of Symbol," *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 221-52. But while the structure of symbol is similar here, the framework of appreciation is considerably and significantly different. Whereas Schillebeeckx and Rahner in those writings approached the material dogmatically and from conceptions of the nature of God, our approach is from below and from an analysis or phenomenology of symbolic experience.

to Jesus. This methodological injunction raises some nuanced issues that cannot be treated fully here. For example, What can we know of Jesus? How is this data gathered? It is true that very little can be known of Jesus in a straightforwardly objective way. And the notion of a "historical Jesus" really refers to the reconstruction of historians which is not without context, standpoint, interest, and bias. This discussion is well known. The reference to Jesus, then, cannot be naive. But two things should be borne in mind. First, one can make objective statements about Jesus. Because of the unity in experience of subject and object, and because various criteria for sifting the confessional statements about Jesus reveal a consistent object, one cannot reduce statements about Jesus to pure subjectivity. Second, the recognition of an objective reference to Jesus of statements about him bears fruit when one considers the role of the imagination in all knowing. Knowledge has specific content by being tied to concrete perception of the world and history. Since our concepts and notions about Jesus draw their content from him, they continue to have him as their specific referent imaginatively and intentionally.<sup>10</sup> The language of salvation is highly figurative, symbolic, and at times mythological, and like all language it abstracts, objectifies, and tends to take on a life of its own. It not only interprets Jesus but also drifts away from his historical actuality. What I am claiming is that the language of salvation for Christians has an imaginative, intentional, and referential bond to Jesus as the one who mediates that salvation.<sup>11</sup>

From this it follows as a general hermeneutical principle that all interpretations of Jesus as savior have the historical Jesus as their norm. But this principle too is open to exaggeration and misunderstanding, because the norm in this case, the historical Jesus, is not an extensive body of exact knowledge which can function as a clean measure of statements that interpret the data. Moreover the notion of

<sup>10</sup> This is so even if the imagined referent is Jesus who is alive today and with God, that is, the risen Jesus. This is so because we have no way to know anything about the risen Jesus apart from Jesus of Nazareth; because he is the referent, the content of what and who the risen Jesus is is drawn from Jesus of Nazareth. This is the reason for insisting that the risen one *is* Jesus of Nazareth. The risen Jesus is not someone other than Jesus of Nazareth. This fundamental insight can be transcendently deduced from the proposition that all knowledge of transcendent reality must be historically mediated.

<sup>11</sup> One should beware of the fallacy that the essence of Christianity is reducible to what is specifically different from other faiths. The bond of the imagination to Jesus does not exclude absorption by Christian faith of truth from other quarters or holding the same views as other religious faiths. Rather the mediation of Jesus has a centering, interpretive, and transforming effect on what the Christian affirms about things held in common with other religions. For example, the New Testament provides a hermeneutical framework for a specifically Christian interpretation of the Jewish writings.

norm admits of distinctions. But at least the following principles make sense: negatively, one cannot say Jesus saves by doing things he did not do, or by avoiding things he obviously did; positively, although Jesus' significance far transcends the "empirical" data about his life, still his person and praxis should be the imaginative point of departure for interpretations of him. These seemingly obvious statements are not irrelevant. At many points in the course of the history of theology, soteriological views of Jesus Christ have simply left Jesus behind in affirmations about him that are contradicted by historical data and assertions that bear little resemblance to a human being in history. This hermeneutical principle touches home.

### *A Method for Interpreting Jesus as Savior Today*

These descriptions of the genesis and structure of the experience of Christian salvation lead to an attempt to define a method for interpreting the tradition for today. The hermeneutical theory at work here is developed in dialogue with the line of thought beginning with Schleiermacher, stretching through Heidegger and Gadamer, and modified by critical theory.<sup>12</sup> There is no doubt that proposing a method which bears a family resemblance with these authors involves a risk of serious oversimplification. But the language and theory of hermeneutics represented by these thinkers have become influential and well known in recent years and one can presume some familiarity with them. The reduction of this consideration to three points, moreover, has a positive function of displaying clearly the logic and epistemology of the method.

A first methodological principle is the following: A hermeneutical method for interpreting Jesus as savior today begins with a historical analysis of the texts and praxis of the past. This article will focus on postbiblical texts reaching to the Reformers.<sup>13</sup> These texts contain

<sup>12</sup> Some useful basic references: Rudolf Bultmann, "On the Problem of Demythologizing," in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. S. M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 95–130; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975) esp. 235–341; Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976); idem, "Original Sin: A Study in Meaning," in *Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1974) 269–86; idem, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" and "Appropriation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981) 131–44, 182–93; Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) 132–79; Dorothee Soelle, *Political Theology*, trans. John Shelley (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); David Tracy, "Part Two," in Robert Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 153–80.

<sup>13</sup> Our aim is to deal schematically in a short space with some of the classical texts of



many different symbols expressing the meaning of salvation. Moreover, texts as a whole may be regarded as symbols; a whole work is a symbol. Classical texts such as Athanasius's *On the Incarnation* or Anselm's *Why God Became Human* are not bound to the particularities of time, place, author, audience, and circumstance, but transcend them to achieve an ideal meaning with a universal relevance. At the same time this symbol is a particular, concrete, historical phenomenon which yields its universal relevance only through its particularity. Interpretation must begin with the particularity of the concrete symbol. Critical historical analysis establishes the past meaning of the text. This first step of historical reconstruction cannot be bypassed, for it establishes the symbol to be interpreted in its concreteness and particularity. It protects the identity of the text from our eisegesis, and it also preserves the distinctiveness of our experience, by showing the strangeness of the text and our distance from it. There is a close conjunction between the meaning of a text and its reference to the world. Thus the praxis of the Church at any given time is a good interpretive key for the meaning of its texts.

A second step and another level of interpretation involves the following principle: Interpreting a symbol or text of the past includes a phenomenology of the experience implied in the meaning of the text. Hermeneutical analysis also tries to formulate the experience upon which the text, considered as a whole and as a symbol, draws. This does not mean reading the mind of the author. It means inquiring after the potentially universal experience and vision of existence that has come to expression through the author in the textual meaning and reference.

Symbols generally, and especially religious symbols, have deep roots in religious experience. By definition this means experience of a transcendent reality that cannot be known immediately but is perceived through a complex mode of awareness that engages various levels of the whole person.<sup>14</sup> Symbols make public and linguistically available realities that are encountered deep within a community and a person; symbols require a sympathetic phenomenology to elicit in more explicit form what they mediate. This is possible on the basis of various axes of continuity. A person within the same tradition as that of the

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the tradition in a manner analogous to Schillebeeckx's lengthy and detailed treatment of New Testament data. Another study would be required to compare the results of this analysis, which envisages the earthly figure of Jesus as the medium of salvation, with other present-day theologies of salvation.

<sup>14</sup> The point here is not to analyze critically religious experience and knowledge or the epistemology of faith, but simply to underscore the depth within the personality that is engaged and the complexity of factors that are at work.

text should be able to appreciate, perhaps too easily, the classic texts of the community's past. But the universality of the relevance of the text, and thus the possibility of appreciating it, really rest on the unity of the human species. The phenomenology of the experience represented by a past text is both historical and transcendental, that is, appealing to common human experience.<sup>15</sup>

Third, the experiential vision contained in past symbols can be retrieved today by a hermeneutical method of critical correlation in response to the religious questions of today. A critical method of correlation is conceived in terms of a dialogue of question and answer between past and present. It involves both criticism of present-day experience by the tradition and criticism of traditional symbols by present-day knowledge. The final affirmation of truth, however, is a present responsibility and can only occur within a present-day historical framework or horizon. This requires that the interpreter be aware of his or her biases and questions.

One could say that the whole process of interpretation really begins with the interpreter in his or her world. If the interpreter is not interested, there will be no interpretation at all. An interpreter brings a whole world of background knowledge and conviction, bias and question, to the appreciation of the past. This cannot but result in interpretations that are new and different; if they are not different, they will be neither faithful to the past assertions nor comprehensible within the really different situations of the present. And yet the interpretation is forged in the openness of dialogue; and appropriation of the past means being changed by the past to generate a new assertion which is, paradoxically and analogically, in continuity with the past and shares a measure of "sameness" with it. In brief, the method we are proposing contains three moments: historical criticism of past texts, a generalized phenomenology of the experience and vision implied in the text, and a drawing forward of this vision into a present-day context. Interpretation and appropriation is actualized in the interactive correlation or dialogue between past and present.

To sum up this first section, the genesis and structure of the soteriological symbols of Christianity and the method of interpreting them are all of a piece. They mutually imply each other. The tradition that was committed to writing and became the New Testament was a history of interpreting Jesus as savior. It was also the genesis and devel-

<sup>15</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "Original Sin: A Study in Meaning." The tension between transcendental meaning and concrete social-historical meaning is well illustrated by the point and counterpoint of the views of R. Bultmann and D. Soelle, as represented, e.g., in the works cited above in n. 12.

opment of soteriology. This development continued after the New Testament writings. Therefore just as the New Testament is an interpretation of Jesus as savior, so too is the development thereafter an interpretation of Jesus that is made possible by the preservation of his memory in the New Testament. Hermeneutical theory applies not only to interpreting texts but also to interpreting any symbol, since implicitly it is an epistemology or an historically conscious ontology of understanding itself. It is applied here not only in order to understand classical texts of the tradition but also in order to understand Jesus to whom these texts necessarily refer, even when they do so obliquely, indirectly, and inadequately. The history of theology, which forms the basis of this study, is continual hermeneutical appropriation of the tradition reaching back imaginatively and in some measure historically through the New Testament to Jesus himself.

#### INTERPRETING THE HISTORY OF SOTERIOLOGY

In a brief article some corners must be cut relative to historical analysis. I have insisted that Jesus is a norm for soteriology, but cannot here engage in Jesus research. The first step in interpreting texts is historical criticism, but this is not possible here either. Various levels of analysis, such as comparing the conceptions of classical authors about how Jesus saves with Scripture and the Jesus material, must be short-circuited. In this section, therefore, I shall simply enumerate the authors who provide the bases for the interpretations of the experience which follows. I must presuppose a certain familiarity with these classical texts and hope that one will be able to see the connections that are made by the references to them.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Classical Authors*

We take as representative of the theological tradition on the saving work of Jesus four theologians from the Greek-speaking Eastern tradition, Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nyssa; three Latins reaching into the twelfth century, Augustine, Anselm, and Abelard; and two representatives of the Reformation, Luther and Calvin.

There are noticeable differences between the Greeks and the Latins.

<sup>16</sup> Beyond the standard histories of doctrine, there are many histories of the doctrine of atonement or redemption, such as F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (see n. 1 above); Jacques Rivière, *The Doctrine of the Atonement: A Historical Essay*, 2 vols., trans. Luigi Cappadelta (St. Louis: Herder, 1909); H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (see n. 1. above).

Irenaeus is very dependent on Paul's image of Jesus as the second Adam (Romans 5:12–22), which he develops in terms of the concept of "recapitulation." Jesus repeats the role of Adam; the incarnate Word takes up and reenacts the entire pattern of human existence but this time "gets it right." He thus sets things back in their original created order.<sup>17</sup> Origen's cosmic framework of thought is best seen in his *On First Principles* which, even though it does not extensively develop the idea of salvation, opens up a worldview which is very different from that of today.<sup>18</sup> Jesus is a true incarnation of a divine but subordinate Word joined to a preexistent soul, who in his perfection leads human beings back to God. Freedom is an important concept in Origen's system, and it controls his view of how Jesus saves. Jesus is savior by revealing God and being an exemplar of human existence.

Athanasius is probably best known for his frequently quoted saying: "He was humanized that we might be deified."<sup>19</sup> But in Athanasius Jesus also saves by revealing and by undergoing a sacrificial death.<sup>20</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, by contrast, was Origenist enough to take up his master's view of universal salvation. Through a series of purifications in this life and hereafter all human beings will be saved. For Gregory too there would be no salvation if God "did not come into contact with [our physical human nature]"<sup>21</sup> Gregory also developed a mythic subtext to Jesus' passion and death: Jesus was innocent bait for Satan's lust for dominion, and, by destroying Jesus unjustly, Satan lost any justification for his hold on humankind.<sup>22</sup>

Although many of the same themes are found in the Latin tradition, it is less cosmic, incarnational, and metaphysical, and more transactional in its "explanation" of the work of Jesus for salvation. Some-

<sup>17</sup> Irenaeus deals with salvation in *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. and ed. Joseph P. Smith, *Ancient Christian Writers (ACW)*, vol. 16 (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1952) nos. 31–52, pp. 67–81. His notion of "recapitulation" is not systematically developed but spread throughout his *Against Heresies*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)*, vol. 1, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1953). See also Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959).

<sup>18</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973).

<sup>19</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers (CLF)*, ed. E. R. Hardy with C. C. Richardson (Library of Christian Classics 3; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) no. 54, p. 107. Sometimes it appears as though this divinization was effective in human nature as such, as a whole, by the contact of the divine Word that assumed it in one individual.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* nos. 20–22; *CLF* 73–86. See George Dion Dragas, "St. Athanasius on Christ's Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991) 73–100, esp. 92–95.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *An Address on Religious Instruction* no. 27; *CLF* 305.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* nos. 20–24; *CLF* 296–301.

thing is done to and for someone else. Augustine is a good example in his two concentrated accounts of Jesus' saving work.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, in a development analogous to that of Gregory, Jesus' death is a redemption, a buying of human beings back out of the control of Satan by the payment of a ransom, that is, the innocent death of Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus' death is a sacrifice in which Jesus is both the one who offers the sacrifice and its victim; it is offered to God for us, in our place, and as a "propitiation" for our sin.<sup>24</sup> Anselm's theory of satisfaction which dominates Western theology from the Middle Ages onward can be seen as a development of Augustine's theory of sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> Jesus as an incarnation of the divine Word is the solution to a dilemma: human beings had to make satisfaction for the disruption of the very order of reality effected by sin, but only God could offer to God the "more" that was owed, that which constituted satisfaction. Anselm's view is a substitution theory; Jesus took our place, he died in our stead. The reformers Luther and Calvin, at least insofar as the work of Christ is concerned, seem to follow in the tradition of Anselm but lay much greater stress on the suffering of Jesus as salvific.<sup>26</sup>

In this Western tradition Abelard's view of how Jesus saves stands out for its simplicity. Jesus saves by being a revelation and effective demonstration of God's love for humankind. Jesus teaches us and gives us an example of how to love God and our neighbor in response to God. Jesus thus binds human beings to God in love by being God's love towards us and enkindling our love of God and neighbor in return.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Fathers of the Church; Washington: Catholic University of America, 1963) 4.7(11)–19(26), pp. 144–64; 13.10(13)–16(21), pp. 388–401; Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948) nos. 23–55, pp. 655–730.

<sup>24</sup> See Gerald Bonner, "The Doctrine of Sacrifice: Augustine and the Latin Patristic Tradition," in *Sacrifice and Redemption* 101–17; Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (London: Burns and Oates, 1970) 165–76; John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938) 168–72.

<sup>25</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Why God Became Man*, in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 100–83. An incisive brief commentary on the work in the context of the period and Anselm's whole life is found in R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990) 197–227.

<sup>26</sup> See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* 26: *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, ed. J. Pelikan and W. A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963) 276–96, 359–74; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) bk. 2, chaps. 15–17, pp. 494–534.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Abailard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans (An Excerpt from the Second Book)," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* 276–87. Gustaf Aulen calls Abelard's a subjective and moral theory of salvation. The change that is effected in salvation is not a changed attitude on the part of God, but a change that takes place in human beings, that is, a conversion (*Christus Victor* 18, 112–13). Abelard's view is

This brief overview of classical salvation theories is presented here to stimulate recall. There is no question of doing historical justice to these authors; their work is merely alluded to as the sources from which the following phenomenology of experience is drawn.

*The Experience Represented in the Texts: Symbolic Interpretation*

What is the experience of salvation that is codified in these symbolic texts? What aspects of the experience of salvation from God mediated by Jesus are evoked by this symbolic language? Of course, these salvation theories are dependent upon a variety of New Testament images which in turn rest upon a memory and experience of Jesus as God's salvation bringer. These dependencies must be kept in mind, for they are the historical predecessors of the texts in question: ultimately these salvation theories and the New Testament accounts of salvation are interpretations of Jesus. Our goal is to interpret the experience that underlies and sustains these theories of salvation. Many of them appear bizarre, extravagant, and at times grotesque. Did God really require the life of Jesus in a Roman crucifixion in order to set things right with human beings?

The interpretation that is given here is provided in broad generalized statements, which attempt to universalize this experience. The point is to characterize the particular experience in such a way that it can be appreciated generally. The experience is thus idealized beyond the objectification of language itself; it is further released or placed at another remove from the particular psyches of the authors. This interpretation will serve as a bridge to the next section in which we address Jesus as savior today.

*Jesus the teacher is experienced as revealing God.* All of the texts either state or imply the experience of Jesus as a revelation of God. In his teaching, in his way of acting, Jesus communicates the things that are of God. In his parables Jesus presents God's wisdom. In his ethical teaching he represents God's values. No matter what particular salvation theory predominates in a given author it is never exclusive; Jesus is always also recognized as the revelation of God.<sup>28</sup> In a pagan

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extended further as a moral theory in 19th-century liberal thought according to which salvation becomes human movement toward God (ibid. 139–59). Aulen's interpretation of Abelard appears inaccurate to me on two counts: first, God's approach to human existence is ontological because Jesus is God's love incarnate; and second, the love that is aroused in the human person to respond to God is also ontologically caused by God, since Abelard is Augustinian in his theology of grace; grace is God as Spirit at work within human beings.

<sup>28</sup> For Origen, e.g., as a replica might reveal an immense reality, thus as a globe might

world of polytheism and multiple and diverse religions, this "knowledge" is considered salvific.

*God is encountered in Jesus.* Beyond the experience of revelation, one can discern an experience of encountering God in Jesus. There are various ways in which Scripture and later writers express the idea that Jesus makes God present or that God is present in Jesus. God is present to Jesus as Wisdom and as Spirit. In one instance in the New Testament, in the hymn introducing John's Gospel, Jesus is presented metaphorically as the Word of God. In early patristic writers Jesus is a second God, an angel of God, the anointed of God. This "making God present" reflects Jesus' acting in power in his healing and exorcisms; the Gospels depict Jesus as empowered by God as Spirit. In the Greek Fathers, God's being present to Jesus physically transforms flesh, or humanity, divinizing it. In Jesus, God assumes every aspect of human existence, so that it is healed, cleansed, cured, and saved.<sup>29</sup> The experience is one of meeting with God's power in this man. Incarnation is a typical symbol for this; it means that God has saved by assuming a human being and thus the human race as such as God's own.<sup>30</sup> All who are united with Jesus by faith and baptism and receive the Spirit of God participate in God's presence.<sup>31</sup> Behind all of these formulas one can generalize by pointing to the experience that Jesus makes God present because God is encountered as acting in or through him.

*God is experienced as a loving creator.* Salvation is most often presented as a narrative, and in a story one thing happens after another. Thus the ordinary way of thinking of salvation is as something that occurred after creation, usually because sin required a new initiative of God. But the texts are also clear that the God who works through

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reveal the planet earth, so too has the Son, replica of the Father, become our size in order to reveal the incomprehensible God (*On First Principles* 1.2.8; Butterworth 21–22). In Athanasius and others this revelation restores knowledge of God and thus the image of God that was lost by sin. This was accomplished through Jesus' teaching, and this illumination is salvation; see *On the Incarnation of the Word* nos. 13–19; *CLF* 67–73. Also see Jaroslav Pelikan, "Salvation as Illumination [in Athanasius]," in *The Light of the World: A Basic Image in Early Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962) 73–92.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *An Address on Religious Instruction* no. 27; *CLF* 304.

<sup>30</sup> Athanasius explains this divinization with the metaphor of a king who, by residing in a city, raises up its honor and prestige and thus protects it from its enemies and makes it a place of special attention and care (*On the Incarnation of the Word* no. 9; *CLF* 63).

<sup>31</sup> In the case of Luther, salvation happens now by a mystical union with Christ: "We must look at this image and take hold of it with a firm faith. He who does this has the innocence and the victory of Christ, no matter how great a sinner he is. . . . Therefore we are justified by faith alone, because faith alone grasps this victory of Christ" (*Luther's Works* 26.284).

Jesus is the one creating and saving God. Two things are happening here. On the one hand, Jesus mediates an experience of a God who is benevolent, loving, accepting, forgiving, as well as judging all dehumanizing conduct. The experience is that God is "for us." On the other hand, Jesus in mediating this God is clearly associated with God. Frequently authors state that only the creator can save, that the creating and the saving are done by the same God.<sup>32</sup> This experience is important because in it lies the principle that generates the close association of Jesus with God and finally the idea that Jesus is divine.

The God whom Jesus reveals and makes present, then, is both creator and savior; as savior God is also creator, and the creator God is also savior. As God's mediation, Jesus begins to be interpreted symbolically as associated with both creation and salvation. But it is crucial to see that the experiences of God as creator and as savior are not separable, even if one can distinguish the two ideas. God is experienced simply as God who is simultaneously loving and saving creator. Salvation is restoration of union with God, but God is experienced as a God who "must" bring to completion what God intended with creation. "It is certainly incongruous for God to let any rational nature perish altogether."<sup>33</sup> It will be important again in our own day to see salvation as inseparable from creation.

*The devil represents an experience of a priori evil to which human existence is in bondage.* Behind the mythological redemption stories involving Satan and ransom lies an extensive belief in a world of demons.<sup>34</sup> But the point of these stories is not to provide objective information about the world.<sup>35</sup> When these beliefs are interpreted ex-

<sup>32</sup> For Athanasius "the renewal of creation has been the work of the selfsame Word that made it at the beginning. For it will appear not inconsonant for the Father to have wrought its salvation in him by whose means he made it" (*On the Incarnation of the Word* no. 1; *CLF* 56).

<sup>33</sup> Anselm, *Why God Became Man* 2.4; Fairweather 148. This echoes similar sentiments all through the tradition, both Greek and Latin.

<sup>34</sup> Origen cites abundant testimony to a whole world of external spirits and demons. "The opposing powers and the devil himself are engaged in a struggle with the human race, provoking and inciting men to sin" (*On First Principles* 3.2.1; Butterworth 211).

<sup>35</sup> "The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially" (Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. H. W. Bartsch [New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961] 10). For a balanced summary appraisal of Bultmann on hermeneutics, see Werner G. Jeanrond, "After Hermeneutics: The Relationship between Theology and Biblical Studies," in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies*, ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM, 1993) 90-92.



istentially, they can be seen to represent the experience of being victims of or in bondage to historical and natural forces of which people have little knowledge and over which they have no control. Many of these forces are experienced as sinful and operative within the self prior to freedom.<sup>36</sup> But these experiences are not merely individual any more than there is such a thing as an isolated, autonomous person. The bonds which hold human freedom in captivity are largely historical and social: the constraints of poverty, social marginalization, war, slavery, disease, sickness, and early death. Thus the demons are everywhere and control everything. When Jesus is experienced as a mediator of freedom, so prominent in a theologian like Origen, for example, he is a savior from the bondage of fate.

*Divine fidelity is experienced in Jesus' human fidelity.* One has to ask why the death of Jesus became so central in the Christian imagination. Is it possible that Jesus' death as a criminal was such an embarrassment to the first disciples that apologetic discussion was focused there and the idea took on a life of its own? However that question is answered, in the sacrificial theories of salvation it is not physical slaughter that is important. Jesus' physical death per se is not salvific; but it represents God's love and Jesus' obedience which are salvific. In Augustine, for example, one has a high Christology. Thus Jesus is God's gift of God's self to human beings, and his death on a cross is a most radical dramatization of the extent of God's condescension and love.<sup>37</sup> On another level, external sacrifice for Augustine is the external sign of the inner reality of self-giving to God.<sup>38</sup> Jesus' obedience unto death was considered his ultimate fidelity to God.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Jesus' voluntary passion and death are symbolic of the strength of his attachment to God. What is expressed in these seemingly extravagant views

<sup>36</sup> Both Luther and Calvin place great emphasis on the experience of sin within the person. Accordingly, their salvation theories are in Anselm's line: Jesus substitutes for us and undergoes punishment, with an emphasis on suffering, to make satisfaction for our sin. The heightened consciousness of sin generates in inverse proportion a heightened experience of liberation from sin: in the wonderful exchange between Christ and the sinner in Luther, we appropriate all of Jesus' divine qualities; in Calvin, we are released in the Spirit for a holy and constructive life in society.

<sup>37</sup> On Augustine, see Burnaby, *Amor Dei* 172. Also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.2; ANF 1.446.

<sup>38</sup> Bonner, "The Doctrine of Sacrifice" 106.

<sup>39</sup> In Irenaeus, e.g., Jesus' death was the external sign of a fidelity that reversed Adam's disobedience: "So by the obedience, whereby He obeyed unto death, hanging on the tree, He undid the old disobedience wrought in the tree" (*Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* no. 34; ACW 16.69). Irenaeus frequently uses the language of Jesus redeeming us by his blood. Its logic is that Jesus' fidelity, the free commitment of his obedience even through a bloody death, is salvific.

of ransom and sacrifice is that this Jesus, who came from God bearing God's presence and power, signifies the radical extent of God's self-gift to human beings and, from the human side, the equally radical kind of commitment this communication should draw forth as a response.

*Jesus is experienced as the archetypal human being, the second Adam.* And so Jesus himself appears as the saved person, the first of many.<sup>40</sup> He saves by showing the way. One of the Pauline images for salvation which is most important for the tradition is that of the Second Adam. We have seen that the figure of the Second Adam influences Irenaeus's notion of recapitulation. The image expresses the experience of Jesus as the new creation, the new archetypal human being who responds to our desire for guidance, and who embodies what it means to be human.<sup>41</sup> In Origen the figure of the Second Adam reflects God acting for our salvation in a way that respects human freedom; Jesus is the pioneer of our salvation whom we are to follow.<sup>42</sup> This exemplarism is usually slighted in favor of the more extravagant symbols of salvation, but it is very basic and virtually present in every text.<sup>43</sup> This foundational experience of how Jesus saves underlies the equally fundamental dynamics of Christian spirituality as the imitation of Christ.

*Jesus' resurrection is the promise that meets the hope of human existence.* Intrinsic to the human condition is the desire to exist and to exist permanently. The resurrection of Jesus is experienced as salvific: it meets the basic human trust in life, the desire to be, with the promise of eternal life. The experience of salvation that is implicit in the affirmation that God has raised Jesus is absolutely fundamental, so fundamental that many theologians regard the Easter experience as the basis and starting point for soteriology and Christology. God's raising of Jesus nourishes human hope. Resurrection is salvation from death, triumph over all the forces that lead so inevitably toward ex-

<sup>40</sup> Here and throughout, when I refer to Jesus as a human person, I intend a common-sense meaning of present-day usage. I am not working within the framework of the patristic theological and Christological controversies which carry their own ambiguities.

<sup>41</sup> In Origen this exemplarism has a universal cosmic structure. As Christ exists in accordance with God and is God's image, so human beings should exist in accordance with Christ. Jesus is the paradigmatic human being. See James A. Lyons, *The Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard de Chardin* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1982) 127.

<sup>42</sup> *On First Principles* 3.5.6; Butterworth 242.

<sup>43</sup> "He also offered Himself to be tempted by him, the devil, so that by also overcoming his temptations, He might be our mediator not only by His help but also by His example" (Augustine, *The Trinity* 4.13.17; McKenna 151).

inction and nothingness.<sup>44</sup> This basic sentiment or attitude of hope nourished by Jesus' resurrection lies beneath the whole variety of scenarios of victory.<sup>45</sup>

To sum up, the seven themes represent an attempt to generalize the experiences of the Christian community that are reflected in the classical symbolic texts describing God's salvation mediated through Jesus Christ. The community's experiences have been restated in a way that takes into account that Jesus of Nazareth is the focal point of these theories, and that God's saving action now through Jesus is unknowable without reference to the Jesus of history. These experiences have been expressed in terms of common human experience; they can be appreciated by other human beings and thus have universal significance.

Given this first interpretation of experience as it comes from the past, we must now inquire about the form it will take within the context of present-day culture.

#### INTERPRETING JESUS AS SAVIOR TODAY

I propose to interpret the meaning of Jesus as savior today in two stages. In the first I try to formulate some of the religious questions that are pressing today. One cannot, of course, be comprehensive; we cannot exhaust the forms in which the religious question is posed. But one can try to delineate the large thematic areas which require specific attention. Salvation takes many forms today as it has in the past. A notion of salvation that reaches towards being integral, comprehensive, and relatively adequate will have to respond to the questions of our day. In the second part, then, I try to interpret the salvation mediated by Jesus in such a way that it responds to these questions.

#### *The Question of Salvation Today*

The question of salvation is the religious question. One who is interested in and understands what is going on in religion has in some measure already appreciated the meaning and the question of salvation. In other words, without the question of salvation, there would be no religion at all, because salvation simply gives specific content to the

<sup>44</sup> Resurrection plays a prominent role in the salvation theory of Gregory of Nyssa. It is a complex theory of the reunification of body and soul by the incarnate Word to form an indissoluble immortality (*An Address on Religious Instruction* nos. 8 and 16; *CLF* 282-86, 292-94).

<sup>45</sup> The victory is over flesh, sin, mortality, death, Satan, the law, and so on. The point is that Christ's victory is also ours. "Inasmuch as Christ did rise in our flesh, it follows that we shall be also raised in the same" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.7; *ANF* 1.532).

religious question.<sup>46</sup> In what follows I will try to define more precisely, but still very generally, various aspects of the religious question today. On the one hand, these subquestions are merely aspects of a common human reaching out for transcendence. On this basis they are connected with religious experience generally and serve as a link with the tradition of the experience of salvation. On the other hand, insofar as these questions represent the particularities of present-day cultures, they call out for responses that are applicable to our situation. These questions, then, are the link which binds theological interpretation to the past and at the same time generates distinctively relevant applications to the present.

*Ignorance, Sin, Guilt, and Death.* Any or every salvation theory must account for the foundational experiences of bewilderment at the ultimate meaning of existence, of the evil that characterizes human existence, of moral failure in one's own personal existence, and of finitude that is never secure, but only grows weaker with time and culminates in the apparent annihilation that is death. There is constant tension between these harsh realities and the elemental human desire to be and to trust in our existence. All salvation theories, including any integral theory for today, must address these issues, for these are the realities from which salvation saves us. In stressing distinctive aspects of the question of salvation for us, the classical loci cannot be bypassed. But how do those perennial contradictions confront us today? In the following paragraphs we describe four distinctive characteristics of a contemporary notion of salvation.

*The Actuality of Salvation.* Salvation cannot be understood today as merely a promise for the future or as an exclusively future reality. Salvation must be something that can also be experienced now. Salvation has to be formulated as a symbol pointing to a reality that is in some measure existentially actualized in a person's life. Such a concrete, historical, and existential view of salvation is demanded by a culture that is empirical-minded and aware of pluralism and false promises. Secular societies generate a combination of critical skepticism and naive trust. The skepticism is a function of the thousand promises of salvation which inevitably fail; the tendency towards trust is created by the imperious demand that some meaning-giving salvation must be available somewhere. Any deep and lasting notion of

<sup>46</sup> These propositions, which may seem contentious, are not polemical at all. They simply indicate a very broad notion of salvation. Thus broadly defined as the goal of the impulse that reaches towards God, salvation is able to be further qualified in a variety of different ways.

salvation must be drawn from an experience of an objective mediation that is solid and enduring.

*The Integralness of Salvation.* The question of salvation extends to one's freedom and activity in the world. Salvation must be integral; it cannot touch a so-called spiritual dimension of a person's life and not include his or her activity in this world. Salvation today cannot be interpreted as salvation from the world, unless the term "world" is itself construed in a way alien to present-day experience. Contrary to escapist views, human beings are spirit in the world in such a way that the world shapes and defines the human spirit. The world is by extension the full measure of the human body which helps to give human beings their identity. Salvation must incorporate the world insofar as the world, although in one respect over against the self, is also part of the self. We make ourselves by our action. Our activity and work, the integral fabric of the many commitments that make up a human life, have to be touched by salvation.

*The Comprehensiveness of Salvation.* Salvation must be interpreted not only individually but also socially. The idea of individual salvation apart from the salvation of the species is incoherent. The issue of one's individual destiny necessarily involves the destiny of other people, of society, region, nation, and the whole race. Thus the question of salvation has to be approached with an explicit concern for meaningfulness within the ignorance, sin, guilt, and mortality of human existence as a collective phenomenon at its various levels. Each person is a social individual who is nurtured by the innumerable social relationships that constitute his or her particular existence. One must be able to see oneself as a part of society, and ask the question of the health, wholeness, and salvation of the various groups of which one is a part and for which one is responsible. There is no salvation apart from being in relation with other human beings.<sup>47</sup>

*The Eschatology of Salvation.* The distinctive question of salvation today involves a conception of history that gives history and my freedom in history ultimate meaning. Since the Enlightenment, human freedom is perceived as more than the ability to choose or even to enter into a lasting commitment; it has taken on the character of creativity. Human existence is intentional action that in extending into the future is always creating novelty. Does the innate drive to achieve and to create have any ultimate meaning? And is human history as a whole,

<sup>47</sup> I can only state this here, in effect recalling this dimension to those who recognize it. But in fact the sociality of human existence is not evident in individualistic cultures and societies, and religion in such situations strongly reflects their individualism.

that is, the creativity of science, technology, and politics, also meaningful? Salvation in today's world must address the connection between human action and the ultimate state of things, the eschaton.

These are some dimensions of the question of salvation that arise out of our present global situation. These are the questions theology addresses today which have a bearing on the meaning of salvation. Let us consider now how they shape an appropriation of the experience of salvation from the tradition.

### *The Meaning of Jesus' Salvation*

We come now to our central point. What are some of the ways in which the traditional experiences of the salvation mediated by Jesus can be credibly reinterpreted for our age in response to these questions? How are we to formulate in general terms the way in which Jesus is savior on the basis of the data provided by the classical salvation theories? The response that is proposed here can be summarized in this way: Jesus is salvation by being revealer, a symbol for an encounter with God and thus an incarnation of God, and an exemplar of human existence. In what follows I will develop more explicitly, but still very generally, this summary statement of the ways in which Jesus might be interpreted as the bearer of God's salvation. The focus of the imagination in these interpretations is the human person Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus is now risen, but, beyond the fact of his being with God, we know nothing specific about the risen Jesus that is not extrapolated from his historical appearance.

*Jesus reveals a God whose salvation is an integral dimension of God's creating.* Jesus in his teaching and praxis reveals God. All revelation and knowledge of God is historically mediated.<sup>48</sup> This means that the content of every idea of God is shaped by a historical medium that focuses the imagination. For Christians that medium is Jesus. Jesus is the mediator who reveals God and this revelation is salvific. Juan Luis Segundo expresses this well. Because human existence is historical, and because the nature of God can only be known by a historically mediated revelation, Segundo answers the question "What is God like?" by asserting that God is like Jesus.<sup>49</sup> The Christian conception of God is ultimately mediated by the concrete historical life of Jesus.

Jesus saves by revealing the character of God. That is, the content of Jesus' revelation is salvific. Jesus reveals that God is love, that God's very nature is love. Relative to creation, love is the primary affection

<sup>48</sup> See John E. Smith, "The Disclosure of God and Positive Religion," in *Experience and God* (New York: Oxford University, 1968) 68-98.

<sup>49</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The Christ of the Ignatian Exercises*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 11-40, esp. 22-26.

that God bears God's creation; although one may distinguish between God's creating activity and God's love for creation, one cannot separate these two as though they were discrete, separable, and unrelated actions of God.<sup>50</sup> In revealing God Jesus reveals that the creator is benevolent, loving savior prior to and in the very act of creating.<sup>51</sup> But creation is not a past event; it is the always-present activity of God. Being in existence, then, is being within the all-embracing love of God. God's creating and saving can be mentally distinguished, and there is some point to distinguishing them, but they cannot be separated. Salvation is the love that is prior to and an integral part of God's creating; it is God's unconditional, unbounded, and effective loving of what God creates. Anselm conceived of God's salvation from within the context, and thus the limits, of God as the ground of the order and harmony of the cosmos. Reversing the scheme of Anselm in favor of Abelard, it is more appropriate today to say that Jesus reveals a God whose justice unfolds within the larger context of gratuitous and forgiving love.

*Jesus reveals a God immanent to human existence itself.* The love God bears human existence is not a mere affection that is self-contained within God. It is more than an attitude of God. It is effective. God's love is an outpouring of God's self and a personal loving presence to God's creation generally, but in a special self-communicating way to a human existence that can recognize and respond to such a self-gift. The symbol of God as Spirit points to God being present to creation, especially human existence, as an empowering and dynamic personal presence. God is close to human existence, immanent within it, not distant and aloof.<sup>52</sup> Jesus reveals God as the one who is experienced within. In Jesus is revealed a God who assumes human existence as God's own by being present to it and potentially active in it as he was in the person of Jesus.

God active as Spirit does not compete with human freedom but fills what is lacking in it. This God does not stand over against human existence in a competitive way, although God is judgment against sin. God is rather the sustainer and empowerment of loving human free-

<sup>50</sup> Many of the classical authors make it clear that it would not be fitting for God to abandon what God creates; see above nn. 32–33. Today it is less easy to separate God's creating and saving and thereby to limit God's salvation to an elect.

<sup>51</sup> See Karl Rahner, "The Order of Redemption within the Order of Creation," in *The Christian Commitment*, trans. Cecily Hastings (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 38–74.

<sup>52</sup> Other metaphors for God which were appropriated by Christians to express how God was operative in and through Jesus communicate other aspects of the same reality. Such metaphors are *dabar/effective word*, *sophia/wisdom*, *logos/intelligence*. See Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God* (New York: Paulist, 1993).

dom. It is very important that the dialectical character of what is being said here be appreciated. On the one hand, human existence can be understood as essentially a rational freedom. We have spoken of our contemporary appreciation of freedom as a potentially creative force within the world of nature. On the other hand, our experience of autonomy is not complete, for human beings are finite, ignorant, sinful, guilty, and mortal. This ontological limitation and bondage we experience—this limitation in our transcendent vocation to freedom—calls out for salvation. And we know that that salvation must come from the God who created freedom's semi-autonomy and potential for creativity. God saves by restoring the genuine autonomy and vocation to human freedom in the world.

*Jesus is a concrete real symbol or sacrament for an interpersonal encounter with God.* This statement formalizes the experience described in the last point that God is encountered as present and immanent in Jesus. A symbol makes present something distant and other than itself. Thus Jesus mediates and makes God present for our response. As indicated earlier, this language appears similar to that of Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx early in their careers. But although it is structurally analogous, the perspective is entirely transformed by a historical approach "from below." At the same time, within a historicist framework, one can make statements analogous to those which are dogmatically grounded. Because Jesus makes God present symbolically, one can say that God is like Jesus. One can use the language of Incarnation, which in turn can be "explained" or further described by retrieving a variety of scriptural symbols such as God as Spirit, or Wisdom, or Word present and operative in Jesus.<sup>53</sup> In this way the discussion of salvation naturally leads beyond itself to formal Christology.

*Jesus reveals God's intention and thus the direction set for human freedom in history.* When the historical person Jesus of Nazareth is perceived as the historical medium who focuses the Christian imagination and determines the encounter with God and the notion of God, it becomes impossible to reduce Jesus' saving activity to his death or the manner in which he died. It is the whole person of Jesus who reveals God and makes God present. And one cannot separate out Jesus from the cause for which he lived, namely, the kingdom of God.

Jesus' preaching and praxis of the kingdom of God reveal the general will of God. It is true that the exact meaning of the kingdom of God as it appears in the Synoptic Gospels cannot be neatly pinned down, let alone the exact meaning that Jesus himself might have given to the

<sup>53</sup> See Roger Haight, "The Case for Spirit Christology," *TS* 53 (1992) 257–87.



symbol.<sup>54</sup> But this is not a serious problem for our appreciation of the symbol today. Even if we were able to determine exactly what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God, its meaning would still have to be distanced from Jesus' own historical situation and reinterpreted in order to be applicable to other historical situations. Generally speaking, the kingdom of God refers to God's values and intentions for creation and history as revealed by Jesus' own preaching and ministry. For Christians the kingdom of God cannot be adequately defined linguistically. Jesus' preaching and ministry, the cause for which he lived, define the kingdom of God.<sup>55</sup>

Once one transcends individualism and recognizes the social character of human existence, the ideas that Jesus incarnated God's solidarity with us in a social emancipatory way and set the direction for human freedom in history can be seen as latent in patristic texts. These two ideas can be correlated with the notion of a divinization that is also a humanization, which is not unrelated to the kingdom of God. Jesus mediates by embodying in his action a God who is for us. This cosmic idea was lived out quite concretely in Jesus' behavior, in his teaching and practice of reaching out to anyone who suffered within a diminished humanity. The cause of Jesus was God's cause, which was at the same time the cause of human existence. On the one hand, it took the power of God within Jesus to enable him to recapitulate human existence. On the other hand, the living out of God's values of the kingdom of God was an exercise of humanization. These ideas are not

<sup>54</sup> See Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) for study of the parables based on the premise that the kingdom of God is a religious symbol. The recognition of the symbolic character of the image releases theology from asking inappropriate questions about the kingdom, such as, When is it going to occur?

<sup>55</sup> Francis Schüssler Fiorenza makes this point in the following way: First, one begins a constructive interpretation of Jesus' redemptive significance with a consideration of "Jesus' communicative life-praxis with double openness toward solidarity or identity with God (the 'Father') and with his fellow-persons" ("Critical Social Theory and Christology" 101-2). Second, the key phrase for understanding Jesus as savior is "emancipatory solidarity." "Atonement and redemption can be understood as emancipatory solidarity" (ibid. 108). Solidarity means God's being with us and for us through and in Jesus' solidarity with God and his fellow human beings. And emancipatory means that his solidarity has a liberating and freeing dimension to it. This phrase should be substituted today for atonement, redemption, and salvation. "The basis of our redemption is God's presence in Jesus expressing his solidarity with us in and through Jesus. It underscores that Jesus' solidarity with the Father and with us even until death is the basis of our faith in him. But his solidarity was interwoven with an emancipatory praxis. He healed the sick, cast out demons, forgave sinners, and fed the hungry. In his actions, the kingdom that he proclaimed was already anticipated for his actions were signs of the future kingdom" (ibid. 110).

antithetical but complementary; Jesus is divine in the measure that he is the ideal human person able to recapitulate human existence by living entirely and to the end for God's kingdom.

*God gives meaning to human freedom and to history by God's own self-limitation and through resurrection.* One of the issues of salvation that has arisen with historical consciousness concerns the ultimate meaningfulness of human creativity. This question finds no direct response in biblical sources because it could not have been imagined then in today's terms. Rather, a response to the question must be projected on the basis of a conjunction between the data of the past and the experience of faith in the present.<sup>56</sup> The reasoning here is quite simple: if human freedom does not contribute to the reality of the end-time, then by definition what we do in this world is without ultimate meaning. The creativity that characterizes human freedom is ultimately a hoax in the sense that it has no lasting value.

The concept of God's self-limitation responds to this issue. The idea of a self-limitation of God is analogous to the conviction that finite creation is really real over against the God who is its source and ground and on whom it depends absolutely. Finite reality is real but is not God. Thus God's self-limitation is paradoxical, as is the autonomy and reality of creation vis à vis an infinite God. It is true, too, that the notion of God's self-limitation is speculative. But it attempts to thematize an actual human experience. And some such notion is required if personal and corporate freedom in history is to be saved from meaninglessness. When the notion of the self-limitation of God is combined with the experience that Jesus is alive with God, that he is risen as the first born of many, and that we too may hope for resurrection, one may also think of that resurrection as not supplanting but as completing what was begun in human freedom by cooperative grace. Resurrection in this view is a symbol for the final transformation by God of what human beings have wrought in love, so that human beings are cocreators of ultimate reality.<sup>57</sup>

*Human beings participate in the salvation mediated through Jesus by their praxis, that is, in the measure in which they participate in God's project set for human freedom.* We conclude with this thesis from liberation theology. It responds to several issues which define our situation today, specifically, the sense of being historical agents, the need to experience salvation in the present and concretely, and the sense of being part of a community and of having a social responsibility. God's

<sup>56</sup> See Karl Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," in *Theological Investigations 4*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 323-46.

<sup>57</sup> See Juan Luis Segundo, *The Humanist Christology of Paul*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 123-25, 157.

saving presence, which is actualized and revealed in Jesus, is an appeal to human freedom. God's initiative asks for a commitment of faith that is actualized or realized in action. This response, this participation in the cause of Jesus, transforms a conceptual or notional idea of salvation into an actualized experience. Human beings experience participation in God's salvation in this world in the measure in which they respond. On the one hand, the proposition that people experience God's salvation in Jesus in the measure in which they respond positively to it is tautological. But, on the other hand, it serves to underline the fact that the experience of salvation involves an active human response. The God made present in Jesus bestows meaning on history only in the measure in which people participate in the action that itself makes history meaningful. Jesus reveals a God who calls upon an active moral response through one's life in the world.<sup>58</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me summarize the logic and major theses of this retrieval of classical salvation theory. First of all, the tradition of classical salvation theory must be continually reinterpreted. The genesis and structure of the experience of salvation in Jesus as that is given us in the New Testament show that the method of reinterpretation must have Jesus of Nazareth as the consistent imaginative referent. It is through Jesus that the saving action of God is initiated: Jesus is the medium of Christian salvation. A hermeneutical method for reappropriating Jesus as savior through the classical texts of the tradition involves, first, a historical method that attends to the texts in their past context; second, phenomenological analysis of the transcendental or potentially universal human experience that is implicit in the texts; third, a reappropriation of that meaning on the basis of a correlation of it with present-day context and religious questions.

An intelligible interpretation of Jesus' saving activity today would present him as revealer of God through his public ministry: his teaching, his actions, the cause to which he dedicated his life to the very end. As the symbol of God, this Jesus made and continues to make God present to human beings, so that in him one can encounter God who is both creator and savior. This Jesus bestows meaning on the whole of human existence when he is received as God's own paradigm for what it means to be human. These rather foundational propositions open up many salvific consequences that cannot be further developed at this point. In themselves, however, they help to "explain" how the human being Jesus of Nazareth mediates God's salvation to the world.

<sup>58</sup> This notion is developed further in Roger Haight, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 134-37.