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Salvation as Corporate Experience in the Church [Le Salut en tant qu'experience collective dans l'Eglise]

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- **Salvation as Corporate Experience in the Church**
- *Erlösung als korporative Erfahrung in der Kirche*
- *Le Salut en tant qu'expérience collective dans l'Église*

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans ce dernier demi-siècle, la théologie protestante ne s'est pas assez préoccupée du salut en tant qu'expérience collective. Plusieurs facteurs font qu'il est difficile de voir que l'Église a une contribution à apporter face aux problèmes du monde, en particulier celui de la souffrance. De plus il y a des malentendus concernant la nature du salut, en rapport avec la composition de l'église et l'expérience personnelle.

Malgré l'importance qu'occupe 'le salut' dans le mouvement évangélique, il y a peu d'intérêt pour sa formulation théologique. On se contente de répéter des idées toutes faites. L'aliénation humaine est aussi collective.

Le salut est d'abord intérieur, dans l'expérience personnelle que nous en faisons maintenant, mais cette dimension ne pourra être vérifiée que dans l'au-delà; il est ensuite manifesté dans le comportement, ce qui implique une nouvelle intégration à la communauté; en troisième lieu il est ecclésial: L'Église est plus qu'une collection d'individus,

c'est une communauté unie dans l'adoration; il est enfin social.

Il règne souvent un certain flou au sujet de ce que nous devons considérer comme faisant partie du salut, en particulier pour ce qui concerne la guérison. L'Église doit déterminer dans quelle mesure la guérison nous est accordée déjà maintenant et dans quelle mesure elle est encore à venir. C'est là un exemple de la tension entre les deux pôles: déjà et pas encore. C'est vrai dans notre vie personnelle et dans la vie sociale.

Enfin le salut de l'Église devrait être un bienfait pour la société en général. L'Église est "la communauté où l'on a le privilège de connaître le monde tel qu'il est" (Barth). Et de pouvoir lui apporter un message de salut. En annonçant le salut, l'Église ne doit pas insister sur les guérisons individuelles, comme si le salut délivrait les croyants de toute souffrance. Elle doit apporter une solution eschatologique à un monde qui souffre de ne pas trouver de sens à l'existence.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Protestantische Theologie der letzten fünfzig Jahre hat die Erlösung als korporative Erfahrung zu wenig bedacht. Verschiedene Faktoren tragen zu der Schwierigkeit bei, die Kirche als relevant in Bezug auf die Probleme der Welt zu sehen, dies gilt insbesondere für das

Problem des Leidens. Darüberhinaus gibt es Mißverständnisse über das Wesen der Erlösung, sowohl in Bezug auf die Zusammensetzung der Kirche als auch in Bezug auf die individuelle Erfahrung.

Ungeachtet des hohen Stellenwerts von 'Erlösung' in evangelikalen Kreisen wird der Theologie derselben wenig Interesse

entgegengebracht, stattdessen wird oft an bereits fixierten Vorstellungen festgehalten. Menschliche Entfremdung geschieht auch korporativ.

Erlösung ist a) innerlich, als persönliche Erfahrung in der Gegenwart, obwohl dies nur eschatologisch verifiziert werden kann; b) verhaltensbezogen, sie impliziert eine neue Integration in die Gemeinschaft; c) gemeindebezogen: die Kirche ist mehr als eine Versammlung, sie ist Gemeinschaft in der Anbetung; d) gesellschaftlich.

Oft herrscht Unklarheit darüber, was als Bestandteil der Erlösung beansprucht werden kann, insbesondere wenn es um Heilung geht. Die Kirche muß erkennen, welches Maß an Heilung jetzt beansprucht werden kann und was

der Zukunft überlassen werden muß. Somit illustriert Heilung ein allgemeines Prinzip der Erlösung: zwar schon 'jetzt' — aber 'noch nicht' in vollkommener Weise. Das gilt sowohl im persönlichen als auch im gesellschaftlichen Bereich.

Schließlich sollte die Erlösung der Gemeinde der Gesellschaft als ganzes Nutzen bringen. Die Kirche ist 'die Gemeinschaft, in der es einem gegeben ist, die Welt zu kennen, so wie sie ist' (Barth), und den einen oder anderen soteriologischen Hinweis zu geben. Bei allen Hinweisen auf Erlösung darf die Kirche sich nicht auf individuelle Heilungen konzentrieren, als ob die Erlösung alles Leid der Gläubigen beseitigte. Stattdessen sollte ihre Antwort auf die Erfahrung der Sinnlosigkeit in der Welt eschatologisch sein.

The recognition that in the last half-century Protestant north-atlantic theologians have tended to think too much in terms of individual salvation, and too little about salvation as corporate experience is now a commonplace. As a consequence of a particular ecclesiology Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians by contrast have been very much aware of the corporate aspect of salvation at least insofar as it relates to a particular view of Church.

However, this observation of itself identifies one of a series of questions that must be resolved. The fact is that the title of the paper is multiply ambiguous; the respective significances of the terms *church*, *salvation* and *corporate experience*, must be examined.

1. The Church

As Stephen Neill has concisely expressed it:

The Church is not an appendage to the Gospel;
it is itself part of the Gospel.¹

The term *church*, however, has both

denotative and cognitive resonances for the contemporary Christian which are arguably absent from the term *ekklesia* in the New Testament text and the pre-supposition pools of the first authors and readers of the New Testament. Although the scholar is well aware intellectually that the term *ekklesia* does *not* have as its referent a distinctive kind of building or, indeed, any building at all, the fact is that its English language counterpart 'church' *does* frequently denote a building and moreover for many people the term carries largely negative connotations.

There is a second potential problem in that the Greek term *ekklesia* is the regular target of theologians who without malice are nonetheless occasionally guilty of the etymological fallacy. Escaping the denotative error they define *ekklesia* in terms of a *called-out* people, and then, swiftly, a *congregation*, called out, separated from, the rest of society. In fact the *ekklesia* remains so whether in congregation or dispersed in its non-ecclesial society.

A third problem, allied to both of the preceding problems, lies in the emergence of the historic state-related churches.

With a pedigree which we might take back to Constantine, and with a variety of special relationships to their respective governments, they represent an aspect of the *church* which does not appear to be anywhere reflected in the New Testament's admittedly hesitant characterisation of the *ekklesia*.²

A fourth problem is the problem of popular perception: the *church* is popularly perceived as an irrelevance, precisely at a time when there is an increased awareness that the existential experience of life demands a soteriology. Society in the western world still accords the church some measure of relevance in the rites of passage, although the religious aspects of these rites is steadily being devalued in birth and marriage, if still retaining importance at death. Secular society also recognises the relevance of the church at times of suffering, especially at times of mass suffering, but then largely to decry the Christian religious gloss.

It is by no means clear that the range of human suffering today is any greater than it has been in other periods of human history. Plutarch's account of the human sacrifices of Carthage fills the human heart with despair of the same quality as that engendered by the current massacres in Serbia or Rwanda:

The Carthaginians were wont to slaughter their own children at the foot of altars. Those who had no children would buy some little ones from poor folk, and slaughter these as one does with lambs or birds. The mother would be present at the sacrifice, never shedding a tear nor uttering a groan. Nevertheless at the base of the statue, the whole arena was filled with flute players and drummers, so that the cries and screams of the victims should not be heard.³

But faced with the problem of human suffering and the inadequate explanations offered by most Christians, lay or ordained, our society no longer turns to the church for an explanation. Christianity is no longer perceived to be holistic, as very properly having meaningful

and even powerful comment to offer on the human experience. To quote Edward Norman's Reith Lectures of 1978:

The Christian religion has lost the power, and also the confidence, to define the areas of public debate, even in moral questions. Instead, it follows the definitions made by others. Almost no one now looks to the Church for social teaching, though in the Third World religion still has a social role. Even the fears of impending global chaos or annihilation do not elicit religious responses, as once the intimations of cataclysm would have done. The contemporary debate about world resources, over-population, or nuclear catastrophe, is according to the analyses of secular thinkers—although the Churches tag along, offering a religious gloss to precisely the same ideas. No one listens . . .⁴

One urgent task for the church is to construct a meaningful theodicy which can be both intelligible to and accepted by the people who do genuinely seek to rescue God from unrighteousness on the one hand and absurdity on the other, between the Scylla of willing the suffering and the Charybdis of being unwilling to prevent it. The simplistic characterisation of God as being omnipresent (Psalm 139), omniscient (yet cannot know what I know, the knowledge that my sin has separated me from him), and omnipotent must give way before the all-but universal wail of suffering that goes up from the earth, now not merely going up to heaven but transmitted throughout the earth and heard in almost every home, a wail that asks for an answer at the same time as it formulates its accusatory question: 'How can a God of love allow it?'

This formulation of the problem is of itself naïve: the problem is that of an omnipotent God who is intrinsically good allowing evil, evil for which there is no sufficient consequent good which might justify the substantive evil.⁵

The term *church* has a further problem attached to it in that there is no general agreement on who is on the inside and who, if anyone at all, on the outside. On

the one hand there are those who build a credal wall around the community, at least implying that all who affirm the creed are inside. On the other hand there are those who perceive Christianity as not a bounded set but as a relational set, a community determined by its relationship to Christ. The problem here is not merely one of the identity of the community, but of the nature of salvation. If the community is in any sense at all a saved community, or, put another way, if membership of the community is in some sense salvific, then the bounded community may well be expected to offer some greater measure of ethical homogeneity than the centred set. And this in turn appears to assume that a homogeneity of ethics is somehow of the essence of salvation. The problem for those who hold to the concept of a bounded community is that no boundary so far identified encloses a high, consistently observed and homogeneous ethical system.

And finally we have the problem of what might be seen as biblical hyperbole, the persistent use in scripture of the prophetic present. Sweeping generalisations are expressed which, taken literally, are clearly untrue: '... you were washed, you were sanctified (1 Corinthians 6:11), ... if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin (Romans 6:6), ... thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness' (Romans 6:17). If such were true of all members of the Christian community, the identity of that community would be wonderfully clarified. But it is not so.

2. Salvation

It is certainly remarkable that although contemporary evangelical Christianity

places soteriology in the forefront of its praxis there is very little interest shown in the theology itself and certainly no agreement on how the crucifixion of Christ effects salvation. This is, perhaps, not surprising since the historic creeds of the Church offer no authoritative explanation beyond indicating that Christ came 'for us men and our salvation', and leaving the reader to make a connection between that and the affirmation of his crucifixion.⁶

The term *salvation* carries various implications in the plethora of religions available for study. For Islam, of course, the term is almost an irrelevancy:

It does not normally use the word 'salvation', still less 'regeneration', though its saints and mystics know full well the mysteries of inward evil, and its day-to-day devotions echo the plea for refuge ... It bids men fear the judgement, walk humbly, rely upon mercy, conform to the duties of *din* and be cast, without any anguished inquiry, upon the compassion of God.⁷

In the Traditional Religions salvation has usually meant deliverance from some current experience of dissonance rather than from some anticipated future judgement. Indeed, as John Mbiti has indicated with regard to African Traditional Religion there is rarely any concept of a *post-mortem* judgement or, indeed, of any eschatological framework at all.⁸

Christianity, by contrast, places its understanding of the consequences of its soteriology somewhere in the forefront of its theology, and consciously relates its ecclesiology and pneumatology to it. Inevitably, however, soteriology has developed along lines in great measure determined by the presuppositions brought to the supposedly authoritative texts by their exegetes. To use the terminology of the hermeneutics of reading we develop a reading *strategy* which enables us to find in a text what we expect or wish to find, but which effectively prevents us from finding anything else.⁹ The consequence is that in general those who started from individualistic premises came to individu-

alistic understandings of salvation, and those who looked for an ecclesiastical locus for salvation found it.

Some few were more successful. John Macquarrie began the substantive part of his *Principles of Christian Theology*¹⁰ by considering 'Human Existence' (chapter three) and was able to develop a satisfying and comprehensive analysis of the human predicament in terms of the polarities of human existence, the concept of a true humanity, and the alienations¹¹ which result from the failure to resolve the tensions in the one or, consequently, to realise the other. The process of alienation (for it is a process and not a static condition) may objectively (and not merely out of a theoretical hamartiology) be identified personally, with an inward orientation, and horizontally, in a societal orientation. Again to quote Macquarrie:

Every society acknowledges its injustices and imperfections, and every individual, when pressed, acknowledges his own disorder and his share in the wider disorder.¹²

The personal fracture is essentially ontological, identified by Hegel¹³ in terms of an individual's dissociated condition. From the standpoint of Christian theology it is encapsulated in Paul's formulation in Romans 7:15—24.¹⁴ Martin Heidegger would see this ontological alienation as irremediable, a permanent feature of individual human existence.

Durkheim used the same concept of alienation to refer to the loss of community, to describe an unnatural social condition characterised by rampant individualism, *anomie*. This is unredeemed humanity, a plurality consisting of nothing more than a plurality of unrelated monads. It is the purpose of Christian salvation to repair the ontological fracture and to remove the *anomie* through a more fundamental, but essentially subjective process of reconciliation¹⁵ to God, a resolution of a third aspect of alienation, alienation Godward.

We now turn to a more detailed consideration of the Christian understanding

of salvation, interpreted in terms of an authentic restoration of community effected in and through the church, a restoration which serves to heal in some measure both the personal, internal ontological alienation that is the outcome of sin, and the *anomie* or societal alienation which follows from it, giving an existential experience of restoration to those within the community, and evidence that alienation could be healed to those outside.

3. Corporate Experience

Salvation has its beginnings in the salvation of the individual, but in its fullest sense is more than the mere aggregate of the salvation experiences of the individuals. We might wish to identify four aspects to salvation, the first being fundamental and *interial*, the others being derivative.

1. The one objective soteriological reality is personal. This is the irreducible minimum, the indispensable source of all else, the salvific work of the Spirit effected, somehow, on the foundation of the Passion.

The use of the adjective 'objective' here is admittedly open to objection. There is no way in which this 'objective' event can be verified other than through the *subjective* confirmation of the individual concerned, or again through the *subjective* observation of the individual's subsequent behaviour, perhaps compared and contrasted with the behaviour observed before the 'objective' event. In principle, of course, the reality of the event will be verifiable eschatologically, and this confirms our suspicion that the validity of Christianity is inescapably and irretrievably located in its eschatology.

2. And so we move very quickly to the second aspect of salvation, *behavioural*.

The salvific work of the Spirit in an individual is characterised by the metaphor of new birth, and this suggests that the work initiates a growth phenomenon, the objective fact of a new creation being

subjectively experienced by the new Christian. This is well characterised by the Orthodox Church understanding of salvation as *theosis*. The experience itself is individual, variable and equivocal: conversion experiences are common within the general phenomenon of religion,¹⁶ and the particular expressions of conversion are not unique to any one religion.

However, the biblical understanding of salvation does suppose that the former *anomie* will be replaced by reconciliation with oneself, with the community, and with God, leading to a truly human existence. A co-operative integration into the community in which the concerns of others are given precedence over personal concerns is expected as a result of the first aspect. This new behaviour itself has two elements to it, the first is a spontaneous expression of the new creation, and the second is the expression through a series of choices of what is cognitively understood of the work of the Spirit. It is here that we encounter the supportive or the suppressive influence of the Christian community which may radically modify these two elements of Christian behaviour, on the one hand limiting the work of the divine Spirit and on the other hand limiting the cognitively directed will of the human spirit. The result is a homogeneous but diluted ethical code acceptable to the community, but, at least initially, confusing and disappointing for the new Christian.

3. We have already entered the third aspect of salvation, *ecclesial*.

The church should be more than a congregation: it should be a community, and it is a community whether it is gathered together for worship or dispersed into the wider community for witness. The problem, then, is to ensure that in its witness the church should proclaim neither less than nor more than the Good News.

The Christian community is provided with teachers and it is important that the teachers identify on behalf of the congregation what may be claimed as part of salvation. On the one hand we may claim

too little, when Christianity may become either trivial or irrelevant or both. On the other hand we may claim too much, when the church becomes confused because what is claimed is not in fact given. The consequence then is deception or disillusion. In the contemporary church *healing* is a focal issue, and it is an *ecclesial* rather than a *personal* aspect of salvation since it appears to involve others beside the patient.¹⁷

It is clearly important that the Christian community should identify what measure of healing may be experienced now, and what is left in the eschatological future. There is, for example, the search for the ideal church experiencing all that the age of the Spirit might be expected to yield, while there is also the placid acceptance of a church which does not aspire to being ideal. On the one hand there is the expectation that for the Christian all will be well, and on the other hand what amounts to a denial of the miraculous. On the one hand there is prosperity theology¹⁸ and on the other hand radical humanism. The fact is that in response to prayer offered for healing some are healed but most are not.

It is everywhere acknowledged that men and women of faith, prayed for by men and women of faith, are nonetheless not healed. John Wimber himself records his own request for healing prayer in 1985 but confesses:

I wish I could write that at this time I am completely healed, that I no longer have physical problems. But if I did, I would be a liar.¹⁹

The expectation of healing is founded on the healing ministry of Jesus and his immediate followers, and there is little doubt that through history inexplicable healings have occurred²⁰. In *World and Church* Schillebeeckx details the cure of the leg of Pieter de Rudder in which a part of the patient's shinbone was regenerated in seconds. Of course, as Schillebeeckx makes clear no doctor or biologist can do more than examine such a case and agree that the cure is inexplicable, but cannot pass judgement *as doctor*

or biologist on whether or not God has miraculously intervened.²¹

Since miraculous healing *does* occur there are those who demand that our soteriological formulations should allow for some *regularity* in healing. A problem here is that we have tended to look for what mathematicians describe as the necessary and sufficient condition for intercessory prayer to receive a positive response. Such concepts as faith and piety are often posited as creating the necessary and sufficient condition. However, Paul Helm comments:

to have any prospect of being answered, a petitionary prayer must be warranted by God, at least by being permitted. Prayer to God, at any time, under any condition, about anything, is not a natural human right. What exactly the circumstances are in which prayer to God is warranted by him would be a matter for consideration in a more detailed and thorough treatment of prayer than we are able to carry out in the present study.²²

Helm goes on to comment perceptively on

the temptation to separate the action of praying from the matrix of other actions and events in which it is set, and to speculate about 'the power of prayer' in isolation.²³

This is well said. Put even more bluntly, John Wimber, having spent much time in attempting to produce a taxonomy of healing prayer, lets fall a very simple formulation:

A secret to healing prayer is that it comes from God having already touched our spirits; it is agreement with God about his will.²⁴

Thus, so far as physical healing is concerned the good news must be kept within limits prescribed by scripture and validated by praxis.

The example of physical healing is taken only as illustrative of a more general principle relating to personal salvation within the context of the church, a well-established principle that salvation

is both now and not yet. The Kingdom *does* break through in healing, but the totality of the healing of the nations, and even of the healing of the church, is not yet.²⁵ And the same is true of the healing of our personality deficiencies: Christians are *not* uniformly perfected at conversion. The salvific work of Christ is described in Ephesians 2 in terms of societal healing: specifically the admitted 'dividing wall of hostility' is broken down and a new community is created. The term *mesotoichon* is a *hapax* but the meaning is quite clear: whatever barriers were there between Jew and Gentile are, for the Christian, at least potentially removed. And this necessarily has consequences for any actual Christian community. As Markus Barth expresses it:

At this point Paul does not discuss the possibility, desirability, or necessity of the saints operating to wreck and remove the barrier. He wants to proclaim no more and no less than an event created, a fact accomplished by Jesus Christ once and for all. All later imperatives demanding reconciliation stand upon the basis of this fact.²⁶

The confident assertions of Christian unity made in chapter four are, it seems, founded on Paul's perception of what Christ has objectively and historically done. If the fundamental barriers between Jew and Gentile are gone and gone not by an act of the human will but by divine action then important consequences follow:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1–6).

In what may be itself symbolic²⁷ Paul uses the word 'one' seven times, but most significantly in his references to one Lord, one faith and one baptism (incidentally without explanatory copula or verbal form, simply declamatory). Barth comments:

The three Greek nouns combined in this exclamation are masculine, feminine, and neuter respectively. With each the form of the Greek numeral 'one' is appropriately changed. The flamboyant ring of the corresponding sequence (*heis, mia, hen*) cannot be reproduced in English.²⁸

What Barth terms 'the flamboyant ring' is to be understood in terms of literary rhetoric: the repetition, striking even in translation, is there to draw attention to an expression of Christian fundamentals, a fact which is confirmed by the later credal statements of the church which (interestingly in reverse order) were eventually produced.

The sequence culminates in the reference to *one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all*, the rhetorical underlining²⁹ making it clear that we have here a crucial stage in the on-going paraclesis.³⁰ Here in God is the awesome ground of our expected unity: awesome on the one hand because of the majesty of God, but on the other hand awesome because of the responsibility devolving on the church properly to reflect through its individual humility and its corporate unity what God in Christ and through the Spirit has made possible. Schnackenburg expresses it neatly:

Only with the look up to the one God and Father of all does the enumeration of unity-motifs reach its peak.³¹

The lesson for today's fragmented church needs no formal explication. In this matter, at least, we are not saved.³²

But Ephesians 4:12 takes our critique of the church still further: is the gifting of the church so that firstly the 'saints' might be equipped, and secondly so that the work of the ministry (by a sub-set of the first) might go forward? This interpretation

has an aristocratic, that is, a clerical and ecclesiastical flavour; it distinguishes the (mass of the) 'saints' from the (superior class of the) officers of the church. A clergy is now distinct from the laity.³³

The problem here is that the church has evolved into a hierarchically structured institution and is consequently and in classical terms, no longer a goal oriented *sodality* but an existence oriented *modality*.³⁴

Barth himself gives four reasons for preserving the essential unity of the saints in the interpretation of this crucial passage³⁵ and somewhat defiantly entitles his 'Comment VI' as 'The Church Without Laymen and Priests'.³⁶ Arguably it is in large measure the existence of this dichotomy in the church that is responsible for turning the church into a modality: the clergy has a vested interest in preserving the church as a viable institution, and is hesitant to risk a prophetic ministry which might result in alienation from the sources of power.³⁷ As Robin Gamble puts it:

The church, especially the Church of England, is expert at producing 'good-taste' prophecy, and remaining 'cool under the collar'. We write letters to the quality press or our MPs, we have rational debates in our Diocesan Synods, and everything is done in the best of English using articulate and erudite arguments. Our attacks are cushioned with cautious qualifications, diplomatic decency and an apologetic air.

The prophets of Israel were obedient to God, concerned for the exploited, and apologetic to no one.³⁸

4. The fourth aspect of salvation is *societal*.

Salvation is to be found by society within the Christian community, but at the same time the Christian community is to bring salvation to those who are on the outside. Of course those who are on the outside would not use soteriological categories to describe their sense of confusion, but at the present time and in Europe it is clear that the general aban-

donment of a faith commitment has left people without a secure base for ethics and with a heightened experience of alienation. The problem is made the more intractable and poignant by the discovery that there seems to be no vantage point from which a view of the world can be obtained which will in some sense allow the viewer to *interpret* the world.

Karl Barth has succinctly expressed the relationship between the church and the world in a way that provides a basis for the salvation of society:

The true community of Jesus Christ is . . . the fellowship in which it is given to one to know the world as it is.³⁹

From within the Christian community, then, it should, according to Barth, be possible to survey the world, identify its problems with some measure of objectivity, and at least to offer some soteriological comment.

It is interesting that the search for a New World Order entered into by John Foster Dulles, American Secretary of State in the 1950s (incidentally the only religious leader of any significance ever to become Secretary of State⁴⁰), was begun in the political context of the old League of Nations but encountered ultimate disillusion. However when Dulles encountered Christians engaged in the same search he transferred his activities there in the expectation that he would be able to influence secular politicians through the powerful consensus and detailed projections of the church.⁴¹ Dulles had discovered that a fundamental reform of the world political scene could not be brought about without an objective and selfless ethical foundation. He wanted to see an end to war, an end to the divisions in Europe, a new United States of Europe, with a central government, in many ways anticipating current proposals for a European Community. By contrast the current proposals have as their foundation not ethical but economic criteria, and these criteria do nothing to resolve popular and essentially selfish perceptions of national identity, the proposals inevitably fail to gain genuine popular or leadership support.

And yet it is clear that Christianity calls for the subordination of personal and national 'rights' to a concern for the needs of others: *Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*, (Philippians 2:4).⁴² It seems that if this principle of relationships between Christians could be inculcated across the Christian community then it might also be extended beyond that community. It must surely be a matter for concern that the church is not persuasively demonstrating this concern for others within its own community, and appears to have no agenda that relates obviously to that of the European Community, or offers a commentary on the policies of the present political parties towards the Community.

Here it is interesting to consider the Social Creed proposed by the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America more than sixty years ago, in 1932. The Creed spoke of subordinating speculation and the profit motive to the creative and co-operative spirit, control of the credit and monetary systems and the economic processes for the common good. There was reference to a minimum living wage and a just and fair share for the worker in the products of industry and agriculture. Social insurance was there too, collective bargaining, protection of the family by a single standard of purity, and protection of the individual and society as a whole from traffic in intoxicants and habitforming drugs. Problems of the future were anticipated: there was a call for justice for all, and co-operation among racial, economic and religious groups. The creed was pacifist in intent, and looked for the right to free speech, free assembly and a free press.⁴³

Most of that creed could be affirmed by Christians today and yet there appears to be no move to place such a creed before, say, the World Council of Churches. The question to be asked is whether we can recognise such a creed as inductively adduced from Scripture in much the same way as were traditional creeds, and whether such a creed ought to be recognised as one aspect of a contemporary soteriology.

Disease, illness, death form part of a broader issue, the issue of the general meaningless of life⁴⁴, the absence of any obvious correlation between the ethical quality of a life lived and the experiences of *anomie*, of alienation, of *dukkha*⁴⁵ in that life. How is this to be explained to the Christian, and even more to those who are outside the church, in that society which our salvation experience ought to affect?

One common response to perceived meaninglessness is to point to Jesus as having shared it with us at the cross.⁴⁶ This does not, in fact resolve the problem, it merely deepens it. Nor is the problem of *dukkha* resolved by rare healings. For the problem is rooted in its universality. It is not enough for an individual Christian or even group of Christians to have their *dukkha* resolved if this leaves the sufferings of the rest of the world unexplained. Indeed this is precisely the direction taken by those who are critical of claims made of divine intervention on the micro scale when macro-suffering remains unrelieved. To put it very bluntly, what is the significance of one case of the healing of a bone cancer over against the massacre of innocents in Rwanda?

The Christian community must not claim a salvation that here and now includes the resolution of all pains for believers. It seems that the Christian sense of salvation in terms of the resolution of meaninglessness must focus again on the eschatological: looking for the redemption of the world and the revelation of the justice of God the community lives in peace with itself, patient in its shared pains and comforted by the Holy Spirit. Again to quote Schillebeeckx:

In human dialogue, in which our humanity is always at stake, what is ultimately at issue, then, is this basic question—has this humanity, together with man's ability to give, in freedom, a meaning to life, itself the last word, or is this human word, even though it may be an absolute 'no', in the long run only a penultimate word, so that only God has the last word,

a word that we know is not a *verbum irae*, a word of anger, for all men who are sincere, but a *verbum misericordiae*, a word of infinite mercy.⁴⁷

- 1 *Crisis of Belief*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1984, p.258
- 2 See especially Jürgen Moltmann's discussion of the problem in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, SCM, 1977, pp.317ff, 'The State Church and the Sects'.
- 3 Quoted by R. de Vaux in *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1964, pp. 75—84.
- 4 Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order*, OUP, 1979, p.4.
- 5 See David Hume's analysis in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and especially Barry L. Whitney, *What are they Saying about God and Evil?*, Paulist Press, 1989, chapter 1.
- 6 John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, T. and T. Clark, 1992. McIntyre offers an outline of thirteen major competing models, each ostensibly explaining the mechanism of salvation (chapter 2).
- 7 'Abd al-Tafahum, 'Doctrine' in A. J. Arberry (ed), *Religion in the Middle East*, vol. 2, CUP, 1969, p.401.
- 8 John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, 1969, p.161.
- 9 See A. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Harper Collins, 1992, ch.13, 'The Hermeneutics of Reading in the Context of Literary Theory' and David Gunn and Danna Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, OUP, 1993, especially ch. 1: 'Strategies for Reading' and ch. 9, 'Readers and Responsibility'.
- 10 SCM, 1966.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.62.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.61.
- 13 Hegel's concept was taken up by Marx, de-idealised, and related to societal alienation, and especially to the alienation of humanity in relation to its work. See, for example, K. Thompson, J. Tunstall (eds), *Sociological Perspectives*, Penguin, 1971, ch. 4(d), Karl Marx, 'Alienated Labour'.
- 14 A passage which gave rise to diametrically opposed interpretations at the Keswick Convention in successive years, Dr Ernest Kevan insisting that the experience was that of the unbeliever, Dr Graham Scroggie that it was the experience of the believer, where a moment's, reflection will show that it is the common experience of all.

- 15 The *locus classicus* of the doctrine is, of course, 2 Corinthians 5:18—21.
- 16 'Conversion is a universal phenomenon which may be documented in non-religious as well as religious experience': S. S. Smalley, article 'Conversion', in S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology*, IVP, 1988. See also Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, OUP, 1994.
- 17 Note the particular case of James 5:14, part of a pericope which requires very careful exegesis.
- 18 See Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, Copeland Publications, 1974 and my *Prosperity Theology*, Religious and Theological Student's Fellowship, 1993.
- 19 John Wimber, *Power Healing*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1986, p. 162. Written in 1985 the situation was unchanged in 1994, when it was known that Wimber was also suffering from cancer. Clearly this comment is not intended as any criticism of John Wimber, but it is a warning to those who would go beyond Wimber's own teaching and invoke a generalised principle of healing in terms of human faith.
- 20 Although as with other paranormal phenomena there has been misrepresentation and exaggeration. For example, although examples of glossolalia are common, and arise in virtually all religions, the phenomenon of xenolalia has not been confirmed: Max Turner, 'Spiritual Gifts Then and Now', *Vox Evangelica*, XV (1985), p. 44.
- 21 E. Schillebeeckx, *World and Church*, Sheed and Ward, 1971, p. 255.
- 22 *The Providence of God*, IVP, 1993, p.154.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Power Healing*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1986, p.214.
- 25 See the invaluable compendium edited by John Goldingay, *Signs, Wonders and Healing*, IVP, 1989, a book given particular poignancy by the death from cancer, shortly after its publication, of a major contributor Dr Roger Cowley, an outstanding Ethiopic Scholar.
- 26 The Anchor Bible, *Ephesians 1—3*, Doubleday, 1974, p.263, and see, especially, his excursus on the possible connotations of the 'wall' terminology for Jewish readers, pp.283ff.
- 27 Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4—6*, p. 463.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 429.
- 29 R. E. Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse*, Plenum Press, 1983, pp. 26—27.
- 30 Schnackenburg, in commenting on the passage, for good reason rejects the currently popular designation 'paraenesis': *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, T. and T. Clark, 1991, p. 161.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 32 Our condemnation is not merely because of our diversity: as Schnackenburg goes on to show, our unity is to be reflected in a diversity of the gifting of the church (Ephesians 4:7—16). Our condemnation is in the absence of *tapeinophrosynês*, *prautêtos*, *makrothymia* and *agapê* (Eph. 4:2) from our relationships.
- 33 Barth *op. cit.*, p. 749.
- 34 Cotterell, *The Eleventh Commandment*, IVP, 1981, pp. 156—7 and Orlando Costas, *The Church and its Mission*, Tyndale, 1974, p. 168.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 480.
- 36 See also Alan Kreider's contribution 'Abolishing the Laity' in Paul Beasley-Murray (ed), *Anyone for Ordination?* Marc, 1993.
- 37 See Robin Gamble, *The Irrelevant Church*, Monarch, 1991, ch. 7, 'The Prophetic Church'.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 141f.
- 39 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, p. 769.
- 40 R. Ferrell (ed), *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy*, Vol XVII, 'John Foster Dulles', Cooper, 1967, p. xi.
- 41 *John Foster Dulles. The Road to Power*, Free Press, 1982, p.187.
- 42 The reading strategy common to evangelicals who fear a 'social gospel' as something antithetical to a 'spiritual gospel' enables them to pass over some remarkable social provisions evident in scripture. Widows' pensions funded by the church (1 Timothy 5:9—10) are a very relevant example!
- 43 *The Federal Council Bulletin*, 16, 1 (January 1933), p. 9.
- 44 See my *Mission and Meaninglessness*, SPCK, 1990.
- 45 One of three terms used in Buddhism to characterise the human existence. *Dukkha* is the general unsatisfactoriness of life.
- 46 See, for examples, Gillian Crow, of the Russian Orthodox Church, 'Only the Guilty Condemn God' in the *Independent*, Saturday 11 June, p. 6.
- 47 *World and Church*, p. 185.