

Salvation in Twentieth Century Theology

Introduction

The 20th century has witnessed an incredible variety of religious movements, and it would be futile to attempt to describe even the major ones with any genuine depth in such a short lesson. This lesson, much like the last, is designed to highlight the soteriology of several major movements or thinkers in order to demonstrate that both popular and scholarly theology in this century has generally abandoned most or all of the four "pillars" spoken of in the lesson on the cross: the love of God, the holiness of God, the sinfulness of humanity, and the incarnation of Christ. As a result, a right understanding of the cross, and with it the gospel, has been lost.

The survey which follows is roughly chronological, but the movements have been so widespread that none of them can be said to have completely "died out."

Classic Liberalism

Evangelicals often speak of anything that disagrees with them as "Liberal" theology, but the term applies most properly to the idealistic, critical theology which reached its zenith in Germany in the late nineteenth century. Leading liberal thinkers in that country were Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, and Wilhelm Herrmann, all of whom were dependent upon the earlier works of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Harnack (1851-1930) will provide a window into liberal theology through the quotations below. Harnack's father was a serious and conservative Lutheran theologian who raised five children as a single parent. Harnack was a church historian whose views caused enough opposition to prevent him from teaching theology, but his rigorous application of a rational historical method to the New Testament and the early church, combined with his prolific writing, made him one of the most influential thinkers of the period. Harnack eventually became an important figure in the government of Kaiser Wilhelm II, repeatedly defending the German war effort. Here are some statements that provide insight into his soteriology:

IV. It is utterly improbable that St. Paul arrived at the central conception of a Son of God, who died and rose again, through the myths of Western Asia; the premises of his reasoning and the historical premises which lay in the death on the cross and the belief in the resurrection of Jesus must of themselves have led him up to it. But it is quite possible that the idea underlying those myths had won some influence over him, without his being aware of it, not only upon the cosmological development of the idea, but also upon the determination and power with which the apostle advanced it. Wherever St. Paul came, from Syria to Corinth, the myth of a God dying and rising from the dead must have confronted him in various forms.

This myth, which originally was symbolical of the most general and most important natural occurrences, had had a history extending over a long period, in which it had become the expression of hopes of immortality and moral purification without losing completely its original meaning.

But however this may be if the apostle Paul was at all—and if so how much—indebted to this myth, of one thing at any rate there can be no doubt, and that is that the preaching of a crucified and risen God must have touched in a wonderful and liberating manner the hearts of thousands, who had hitherto received this belief from uncertain and obscure sources, and who now obtained it from a history, which had as it were, taken place only yesterday, and the witnesses of which they now saw before them.

The message of the death and resurrection of the God Jesus Christ, who had become man, became the gospel of the Church at large, and has taken its place side by side with Christ's teaching of the kingdom of heaven, its benefits and its ethical demands.¹

Every assertion about Jesus Christ which has not as its framework that he was man, is not to be accepted, since it is at variance with the historical portraiture of the life of Christ. But the "second gospel" is in no way refuted through his admission. Even if it is certain that no God appeared, and that no God died and rose again, it is equally certain that we know absolutely nothing of God through our senses and knowledge of nature, and that therefore the personal higher life and ethics are the only realm in which we can come into touch with God

God is holiness and God is love. If this be so, God is then only manifest in the personal life, that is, in men. He works by means of men, saves through men, and completes his work through men.

It is by no means necessary that every one be fully conscious that Jesus Christ is the way by which he has come to the truth. Christ is thereby also Christ that one brother becomes a Christ to another.²

Christ died for our sins? Christ has reconciled us to God? What? Did God demand a reconciliation? Is God not love? Does God, who forgives sins, demand indemnity? Does the father in the parable of the prodigal son require satisfaction before he forgives his son? Does it not say of the tax-collector who prayed: "God, be merciful to me a sinner" that he "returned home justified?" Of course, it is true. God is love. He has always been love and forever remains love. In what else does the comfort of the gospel consist but in that it reveals God to us as eternal love? Away with the thought that God turned from hate to love or that any sort of sacrifice or payment had to be made to him so that humanity might be forgiven and loved!³

The life, word and death of Jesus need to be put into this context. *For thus it achieved its aims and thus it still achieves it.* He creates the assurance that forgiving love is a fact, the highest revelation of all higher life, and that this love is greater than punishing judgment, that, therefore, this judgment no longer is to be seen as the final word of the higher life. They who believe this are reconciled, reconciled to God; for it is not God who is in need of reconciliation, it is humans who need to be led back to God. The reconciler, however, is Christ, for he redeems humans from the law of sin into which they had fallen, the law either to deny God or to think of him as a terrible judge. How does Christ save? Only in that his word, life and death, that is, he himself, becomes an experience of

¹Adolf von Harnack, "The Two-Fold Gospel in the New Testament," in *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height*, edited by Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 152.

²*Ibid.*, 154.

³Harnack, "Christ as Savior," in Rumscheidt, 310.

the soul which through this experience, is freed from the power of the law of sin, freed from this unnatural law of nature.

That is the basic form of Christian faith concerning reconciliation and the reconciler. I do not wish to assert that every Christian must be conscious that this is what she/he believes, still less do I wish to maintain that this is all to be said about God's ways. What is very clear and what must have become so to every Christian in its significance is that Christ did not call the just to himself but sinners and those who yearned for justice but still feared it. This, too, history teaches: the most profound and mature Christians conceived of Jesus not as a prophet but as the savior and reconciler. Indeed, even more: they were not content with seeing reconciliation merely in his words and his life's work; they considered his suffering and death, too, to be substitutionary. How could they do otherwise? When they, the sinners, knew themselves set free from the judgment of justice and saw him, the Holy One, suffer and die, how should they not acknowledge that he suffered what they should have? Confronted with the cross no other feeling and judgment is possible. In this feeling and judgment the decisive has come to full expression. In relation to this matter, every calculating speculation must stray into uncertainty and groundlessness, for we can not venture beyond the bounds of the righteous. Awe, too, disappears when all-powerful love is probed concerning its right and method. It is manifest to us always as a fact only and lies on the boundary of that which reason comprehends. The cross of Christ, like every cross which stands in the service of brothers and sisters, like merciful love itself, is a holy secret, hidden from the wise and knowledgeable, but is the power and the wisdom of God.⁴

Neo-orthodoxy

Neo-orthodoxy began in the 1920's as a response to classic liberalism. The movement is most commonly associated with Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Swiss theologian who was appalled at his mentors' support of the German war effort. Barth rejected the immanentism of liberalism that had so confused the work of God and the will of man, reaffirming the transcendence of God and making theology theocentric once again. Barth brought a "new" orthodoxy that affirmed doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation while accepting most contemporary criticism of biblical authority (he saw the Bible as a means by which God could speak if He so chose).

On the American continent, "neo-orthodox" theologians also reacted to liberalism, but on somewhat different issues. This reaction was typified by Reinhold Niebuhr and his brother H. Richard, who rejected liberalism's optimistic view of human nature and society. These men did not reaffirm orthodox trinitarianism, but they did restore the concept of sin (at least in its interpersonal and societal expressions). This new "realism" was especially popular in the wake of the first world war and the depression.

Returning to Barth, one may see in the quotations below several distinctive features of his soteriology and his perception of the role of the church.

We have to regard all *human beings*, even the oddest, most infamous or wretched, from the point of view that, on the basis of the eternal decision of God, Jesus Christ is also their brother, God himself is also their Father. On that assumption we have to associate with them. If that is already known to them, we have to strengthen them in it. If they do not yet know it or know it no longer, it is our job to impart this knowledge to them: When the humanity of God is perceived, no other attitude is possible to any human

⁴Ibid., 311-12.

companion. It is identical with the practical recognition of their human rights and their human dignity. If we refused it to them, we should, on our side, be renouncing Jesus Christ as our brother and God as our Father.⁵

The subject-matter, origin and content of the message received and proclaimed by the Christian community is at its heart the free act of the faithfulness of God in which he takes the lost cause of humanity, who have denied him as Creator and in so doing ruined themselves as creatures, and makes it his own in Jesus Christ, carrying it through to its goal and in that way maintaining and manifesting his own glory in the world.⁶

Existential Theology

One of the influences on neo-orthodoxy had been existentialism, but this movement did not come to full flower until after the second world war with the rise to prominence of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich (1886-1965), each of whom was indebted to the thought of Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher whose most significant work was done in the 1920's. Tillich, who spent most of his teaching career in the United States, occupied very influential positions at Union Seminary, Harvard, and the University of Chicago. The following excerpts from Tillich's writings will provide a glimpse into his very complex thought.

As only God himself can be at issue in the prayer of Christians for the coming of the kingdom, so only human beings can be at issue in their other thinking and speech and action. Human beings are those whom God loved, for whom Jesus died and rose again, and for whom he will come again as Judge and Redeemer. To them as such Christians owe righteousness, our whole attention and concern, and mercy. We do not believe at all that "clothes make the man." We cannot be impressed, or deceived, then, by the Sunday clothes or working clothes or fool's clothes in which we will often enough meet them. We will not fear them because of the armor and cut-and-thrust weapons with which they try to impress us and behind which they simply hide their anxiety, and we certainly will not fear them because their coats have too many holes to conceal effectively the emptiness of their vanity and their real needs. We will not see them categorized as political or economic or ecclesiastical beings – the less so the more they claim to be high priests. We will not see people as members of this or that country or sociological stratum, nor as types of this or that psychological category, nor as those who believe in this or that doctrine of salvation or perdition. We will not see a person as a good citizen or a convict, as the representative of a conviction or party that we find agreeable or painful, as a Christian or a non-Christian, as a good or bad, a practicing or non-practicing Christian. Naturally, we will on occasion see people also as the bearers of one or many of these garbs or masks. It will be no accident that they bear them and that they bear this or that particular one of the many that are available. To see them it may be helpful to see them also in these disguises, as worker or at play, or as "business man," or as "organization man," or so-called "modern man." All this is good and right and relevant, but Christians cannot stop here, looking only at people in these disguises. These are not the people themselves. They themselves may act as though they wanted to be addressed in terms of their garbs and masks, but they cannot really be addressed thus. They cannot be nailed to these and judged and treated accordingly. In, with, and under all the apparatus by which they are surrounded and with which they surround themselves and usually hide

⁵Karl Barth, "The Humanity of God," in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, edited by Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 57.

⁶Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, in Green, 205.

themselves, they themselves are the beings who, whether they know that God is on their side or not, are to achieve their right, live in dignity, and enjoy freedom, peace, and joy, but who behave with terrible ineptitude and even wickedness in this area, choose crooked and dubious paths – why take the simple course when a complicated one is also available? – act either with total lack of humor or total lack of seriousness, are either as timorous as a gazelle or as relentless as a buffalo, and in any case do not achieve their purpose being unable to find again what they intend and seek in what they think they sometimes find. People themselves *suffer*, and they fight tooth and nail against admitting this even to themselves, let alone to others. They act – this is the point of their disguises – as if they do not suffer. Those who suffer are real human beings whom God loves. The task of little righteousness which Christians are given praying for the coming of God's kingdom is to see and understand human beings in this plight from which they cannot rescue themselves, but only God can rescue them, to turn to them openly and willingly, to meet them with mercy. What do people need on this side of the deliverance that can be only the work of God? Being hopeless, they need hope. They thus need – this is the mercy that is to be shown to them – the promise that what they intend and seek is really there and is there for them. Christians know and have this promise. We know the God who has already created, and in glory will still create, right, worth, freedom, peace, and joy for humanity. We may hope, and we live by our hope. To bid people hope, and thus to mediate to them the promise that they need, is our task. Concern for this is our conflict. In it we practice the little righteousness which is our affair and portion, in contrast and yet also in correspondence with the great righteousness that God has practiced, practices, and will still practice.

We have to be witnesses, shining lights of hope, to all people. We have to make the promise known to them in its direct wording and sense as a call to faith. There arises here the missionary task of the Christian community in the narrower sense, a task in which each individual Christian will naturally have to have a part. But Christians cannot be content with this. This call needs a practical commentary in the acts of those who issue it to the people – just as Jesus Christ himself proclaimed the kingdom of God not only with words but also with signifying acts. People are right in wanting to see the good works of Christians in order to praise our heavenly Father (Mt.5.16). We also have to be witnesses to them by resolutely being there – and not as the last on the scene – when on this side of the deliverance that God has begun and will complete, in relative antithesis to human disorder and the lordship of demons, there is wrestling and fighting and suffering for a provisional bit of human right. Not with good words alone, not even the best, can we be companions and friends of people who suffer because they seek and cannot find, but who in fact, whether they know it or not, may always and everywhere hope, and therefore cry out for the promise. In order that the promise may not merely be uttered but ring out loudly, Christians must draw alongside people. Nor must we do this as weary sceptics. As we may live by the great hope, we must stand by them even in little things, in hope venturing and taking with them little steps to relative improvements wherever they attempt them, even at the risk of often going astray and being disappointed with them. We should not be afraid, then, to say Yes here and No there in solidarity with them – a relative but still a definite Yes or No. Sometimes in so doing – and there will be plenty of occasion for this – we may really know better and be able to do better, and therefore we can criticize, correct, and instruct. Sometimes we may think or speak or do the same thing but in a slightly or even a very different way. It is more important, however, that in coming to their side we should give them the courage not to be content with the corruption and evil of the world but even within this horizon to look ahead and not back. Shame on us if we let them surpass us in courage for this! The experience, however difficult, of hoping seriously, joyfully, and actively in little things,

of doing the relatively better relatively well, will not only be salutary for us but will drive us truly to the great hope, to new prayer that God will take his great step not merely to the better but to the best: "Come, Lord Jesus." But in so praying we may not and cannot abandon people, human beings in spite of all their disguises. We will always see in them companion human beings and not just future brothers, and we must treat them as such. We must assist them in full commitment in this time between the times and thus bring them the promise and be for them credible witnesses that God, like ourselves, has not abandoned them and will not do so, that his kingdom, the kingdom of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has come and will come even for them, that Jesus Christ is their hope too.⁷

The universal significance of Jesus as the Christ, which is expressed in the symbols of subjection to existence and of victory over existence, can also be expressed in the term "salvation." He himself is called the Savior, the Mediator, or the Redeemer. Each of these terms demands semantic and theological clarification.

The term "salvation" has many connotations as there are negativities from which salvation is needed. But one can distinguish salvation from ultimate negativity and from that which leads to ultimate negativity. Ultimate negativity is called condemnation or eternal death, the loss of the inner *telos* of one's being, the exclusion from the universal unity of the Kingdom of God, and the exclusion from eternal life. In the overwhelming majority of occasions in which the word "salvation" or the phrase "being saved" is used, it refers to salvation from this ultimate negativity. The tremendous weight of the question of salvation is rooted in this understanding of the term. It becomes the question of "to be or not to be."

The way in which the ultimate aim—eternal life—can be gained or lost decides about the more limited meaning of "salvation." Therefore, for the early Greek church death and error were the things from which one needed and wanted to be saved. In the Roman Catholic church salvation is from guilt and its consequences in this and the next life (in purgatory and hell). In classical Protestantism salvation is from the law, its anxiety-producing and its condemning power. In pietism and revivalism salvation is the conquest of the godless state through conversion and transformation for those who are converted. In ascetic and liberal Protestantism salvation is the conquest of special sins and progress toward moral perfection. The question of life and death in the ultimate sense has not disappeared in the latter groups (except in some forms of so-called theological humanism), but it has been pushed into the background.

With respect to both the original meaning of salvation (from *salvus*, "healed") and our present situation, it may be adequate to interpret salvation as "healing." It corresponds to the state of estrangement as the main characteristic of existence. In this sense, healing means reuniting that which is estranged, giving a center to what is split, overcoming the split between God and man, man and his world, man and himself. Out of this interpretation of salvation, the concept of the New Being has grown. Salvation is reclaiming from the old and transferring into the New Being. This understanding includes the elements of salvation which were emphasized in other periods; it includes, above all, the fulfillment of the ultimate meaning of one's existence, but it sees this in a special perspective, that of making *salvus*, of "healing."

⁷Ibid., 261-64.

If Christianity derives salvation from the appearance of Jesus as the Christ, it does not separate salvation through the Christ from the processes of salvation, i.e., of healing, which occur throughout all history. We have discussed the problem of "healing" universally in the section on revelation. There is a history of concrete revelatory events in all periods in which man exists as man. It would be wrong to call that history itself the history of revelation (with some theological humanists). But it would be equally wrong to deny that revelatory events occur anywhere besides the appearance of Jesus as the Christ. There is a history of revelation, the center of which is the event Jesus the Christ; but the center is not without a line which leads to it (preparatory revelation) and a line which leads from it (receiving revelation). Further, we have asserted that where there is revelation, there is salvation. Revelation is not information about divine things; it is the ecstatic manifestation of the Ground of Being in events, persons, and things. Such manifestations have shaking, transforming, and healing power. They are saving events in which the power of the New Being is present. It is present in a preparatory way, fragmentarily, and is open to demonic distortion. But it is present and heals where it is seriously accepted. On these healing forces the life of mankind always depends; they prevent the self-destructive structures of existence from plunging mankind into complete annihilation. This is true of individuals as well as of groups and is the basis for a positive evolution of the religions and cultures of mankind. However, the idea of a universal history of salvation can be developed fully only in the parts of *Systematic Theology* which deal with "Life and the Spirit" and with "History and the Kingdom of God" (Vol. III).

This view of the history of salvation excludes an unbiblical but nevertheless ecclesiastical view of salvation. It is the belief that salvation is either total or non-existent. Total salvation, in this view, is identical with being taken into the state of ultimate blessedness and is the opposite of total condemnation to everlasting pain or eternal death. If, then, the salvation to eternal life is made dependent upon the encounter with Jesus as the Christ and the acceptance of his saving power, only a small number of human beings will ever reach salvation. The others, either through a divine decree or through the destiny which came upon them from Adam's Fall or through their own guilt, are condemned to exclusion from eternal life. Theologies of universalism always tried to escape this absurd and demonic idea, but it is difficult to do so, once the absolute alternative between salvation and condemnation is presupposed. Only if salvation is understood as healing and saving power through the New Being in all history is the problem put on another level. In some degree all men participate in the healing power of the New Being. Otherwise, they would have no being. The self-destructive consequences of estrangement would have destroyed them. But no men are totally healed, not even those who have encountered the healing power as it appears in Jesus as the Christ. Here the concept of salvation drives us to the eschatological symbolism and its interpretation. It drives us to the symbol of cosmic healing and to the questions of the relation of the eternal to the temporal with respect to the future.

What, then, is the peculiar character of the healing through the New Being in Jesus as the Christ? If he is accepted as the Savior, what does salvation through him mean? The answer cannot be that there is no saving power apart from him but that he is the ultimate criterion of every healing and saving process. We said before that even those who have encountered him are only fragmentarily healed. But now we must say that in him the healing quality is complete and unlimited. The Christian remains in the state of relativity with respect to salvation; the New Being in the Christ transcends every relativity in its quality and power of healing. It is just this that makes him the Christ. Therefore,

wherever there is saving power in mankind, it must be judged by the saving power in Jesus as the Christ.⁸

There will be victories as well as defeats in these struggles. There will be progress and regression. But every victory, every particular progress from injustice to more justice, from suffering to more happiness, from hostility to more peace, from separation to more unity anywhere in mankind, is a manifestation of the eternal in time and space. It is, in the language of the men of the Old and New Testaments, the coming of the Kingdom of God. For the Kingdom of God does not come in one dramatic event sometime in the future. It is coming here and now in every act of love, in every manifestation of truth, in every moment of joy, in every experience of the holy. The hope of the Kingdom of God is not the expectation of a perfect stage at the end of history, in which only a few, in comparison with the innumerable generations of men, would participate, and the unimaginable amount of misery of all past generations would not be compensated. And it might even be that those who would live in it, as "blessed animals" would long for the struggles, the victories and defeats of the past. No. The hope of mankind lies in the here and now whenever the eternal appears in time and history. This hope is justified; for there is always a presence and a beginning of what is seriously hoped for.⁹

Process Theology

Process theology, a theological movement owing much to mathematician Alfred North Whitehead(1861-1947) and philosopher Charles Hartshorne (1897-), is generally concerned with an integrated doctrine of nature and theology proper in which God is essentially the soul of the universe – transcendent and immanent, necessary and contingent, omniscient and growing in knowledge. Process theology is especially popular among those attempting to integrate science and theology, for it is the ultimate "both/and" philosophy. That pattern is quite evident in the quotations below, which are selected more for their relation to our topic than for their demonstration of process emphases.

Process theology speaks about God. Whitehead and Hartshorne have both used the word "God" frequently and without embarrassment. However, they have been conscious that what they have meant by the term is philosophically and religiously opposed to much that has been meant by "God" in metaphysical, theological, and popular traditions. Their use of the conventional word for unconventional purposes continues to offend many theists and atheists alike. . . .

God as Cosmic Moralist. At its worst this notion takes the form of the image of God as divine lawgiver and judge, who has proclaimed an arbitrary set of moral rules, who keeps records of offenses, and who will punish offenders. In its more enlightened versions, the suggestion is retained that God's most fundamental concern is the development of moral attitudes. This makes primary for God what is secondary for humane people, and limits the scope of intrinsic importance to human beings as the only beings capable of moral attitudes. Process theology denies the existence of this God. . . .

God as Controlling Power. This notion suggests that God determines every detail of the world. When a loved one dies prematurely, the question 'Why?' is often asked

⁸Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 2:165-68.

⁹Tillich, "The Right to Hope: A Sermon," in *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*, edited by Mark Kline Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 330.

instinctively, meaning 'Why did God choose to take this life at this time?' Also, when humanly destructive natural events such as hurricanes occur, legal jargon speaks of 'acts of God.' On the positive side, a woman may thank God for the rescue of her husband from a collapsed coal mine, while husbands of a dozen other women are lost. But what kind of a God would this be who spares one while allowing the others to perish? Process theology denies the existence of this God.¹⁰

Process thought, with its different understanding of perfection, sees the divine creative activity as based upon responsiveness to the world. Since the very meaning of actuality involves internal relatedness, God as an actuality is essentially related to the world. Since actuality as such is partially self-creative, future events are not yet determinate, so that even perfect knowledge cannot know the future, and God does not wholly control the world. Any divine creative influence must be persuasive, not coercive. . . .

Process theology's understanding of divine love is in harmony with the insight, which we can gain from both psychologists and from our own experience, that if we truly love others we do not seek to control them. We do not seek to pressure them with promises and threats involving extrinsic rewards and punishments. Instead we try to persuade them to actualize those possibilities which they themselves will find intrinsically rewarding. We do this by providing ourselves as an environment that helps open up new, intrinsically attractive possibilities.¹¹

Process theology sees God's fundamental aim to be the promotion of the creatures' own enjoyment. God's creative influence upon them is loving, because it aims at promoting that which the creatures experience as intrinsically good. Since God is not in complete control, the divine love is not contradicted by the great amount of intrinsic evil, or "disenjoyment," in the world. The creatures in part create both themselves and their successors.¹²

For us, Jesus' relation to God can involve no denial of his full humanity. We have already seen that process thought provides the basis for holding both of these ideas together. Every actuality is an occasion of experience, in which other experiences, including the divine one, are incarnated. Hence there is no need for displacement, and the presence of God in Jesus does not make Jesus an exception to actuality in general, let alone humanity. What is necessary, within this context, is a way of thinking of how Jesus' relation to God could be distinctive in such a way as to account for the special characteristics of his sayings.¹³

Christ has been defined as the Logos incarnate which operates as creative transformation. Christ in this sense can be found in all things and especially where there is life. The marks of his work are particularly manifest among human beings who are capable of incarnating in a heightened manner the novelty that marks his presence. Among human beings Christ's effectiveness is especially present where people open themselves to him. Such openness is facilitated where Christ is rightly named. It is

¹⁰John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 8-9.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 53-54.

¹²*Ibid.*, 56.

¹³*Ibid.*, 104.

facilitated also where the relation to Jesus shatters our pretenses and assures us in our brokenness.¹⁴

God works to open others to respond to the new visions and to implement them. Insofar as we allow God to do so, God makes all things new. Thus God is the ground of our hope. This means that we should trust God. Trusting God is not assurance that whatever we do, all will work out well. It is instead confidence that God's call is wise and good. It is sensitizing ourselves to this call so that we can be led and guided by it. It is the renewed willingness to give up the security we experience in accustomed ideas and customs and to enter into the adventure of the trusting life, even when we cannot foresee a favorable outcome. Trust is thus true responsibility, the ability to respond to the concrete situation and God's quite specific call within it.

God offers possibilities that would lead us into the new life we need. God lures, urges, and persuades. We decide. If we decide to enter into the reality into which God calls us, we choose life. If we decide to refuse it, we choose death, a continual dying throughout life and a contribution to the planetary death. This context provides urgency to the words attributed to God in Deut. 30:19: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." The choice of life, which is the choice of God's call, is the highest freedom in itself and provides the basis for the expansion of freedom. The refusal of life expresses bondage to the past and to the self and it progressively reduces our capacity for freedom and life. Hope grows with the ability to respond; despair grows with the self-chosen closing in of horizons.

To be responsible in this context is not finally to shoulder an unendurable burden. It is to share in the divine adventure in the world. Although its outcome is never assured, and although it entails the sacrifice of many past forms of enjoyment, in itself it is joyful. The one who experiences the joy of this participation in the divine life hopes urgently for success, but accepts the risk that the only reward may be in the joy itself.¹⁵

If salvation is essentially a human response to divine invitation, with human choices determining the future not only of individuals but of the cosmos, "salvation" through the sovereign intervention of God becomes an irrelevant concept. Schubert Ogden states the idea in memorable fashion:

The mythology [traditional theology] supposes it must affirm is completely irrelevant to the real meaning of human existence. If the fulfillment of our lives as persons is dependent on our individual decisions concerning self-understanding, and so is something for which we ourselves are each responsible, then "events" like Jesus' virginal conception, his physical resurrection, his bodily ascension, and his visible coming again on the clouds of heaven are of no relevance whatever to such fulfillment. Or, to speak more accurately, they are no more relevant (or irrelevant) than any other event of the same basic type.

Thus, if, *per impossibile*, the corpse of a man was actually resuscitated, this would be just as relevant to my salvation as an existing self or person as that the carpenter next door just drove a nail in a two-by-four . . .¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., 106.

¹⁵Ibid., 159.

¹⁶Schubert Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1961), 136.

Liberation Theology

There are as many types of "liberation theology" as there are oppressed people groups in our world. We are most familiar with the term as it is applied to Latin American theologies of liberation, but it has also been applied to feminist, African, Asian, Jewish, African-American, Asian-American, and Native American theologies. In general, liberation theology consists of a theological explanation and justification of liberating acts in history. That means that the liberation theologians have an *a priori* commitment to the liberation of the poor and oppressed, and their theologizing serves as a comment upon that activity of liberation.

Liberation theologians begin by identifying the cause of suffering among their people. In Latin America the problem is seen as a cycle of dependence upon (and exploitation by) more developed nations (the United States in particular). Among feminists it is a society built and maintained upon patriarchal standards. Among black liberationists it is institutional racism with whites in the seat of power. Liberationists confront these situations and attempt to overturn them, often reducing soteriology to societal change (or revolution) as they ask, "What does it mean to be a Christian in a world of poverty?"

Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian priest who has long been at the forefront of Latin American liberation theology, doesn't ask "quantitative" questions about "the salvation of the pagans" or the number of people saved. Though he favors universalism, he prefers to ask "qualitative" questions about salvation. That is, to what extent are people experiencing fullness of life? What is the quality of the salvation that is being received?

In this view, salvation is not something other-worldly, but this-worldly, involving present human reality. That may be illustrated from a statement made by Ernesto Cardenal:

In the last years of my training I gained a deeper understanding of the danger that so many could end their lives in hell on earth, as with so many millions of Latin Americans and the misery they're suffering. . . . I began to be concerned with the most urgent kind of service of the integral salvation of human beings and the coming of God's kingdom -- the service of the liberation of the poor, here among my people, their humane, economic, social, and political liberation . . .¹⁷

In harmony with this perspective, Gutierrez describes sin as "the break in our friendship with God and humanity," and says, "Sin is found in the refusal to accept any person as a neighbor, in oppressive cultures built up for the benefit of a few, in the despoilation of peoples, races, cultures, and social classes."¹⁸

On conversion, Gutierrez writes,

A spirituality of liberation will center on a conversion to the neighbor, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised race, the dominated country. Our conversion to the Lord implies this conversion to the neighbor. . . . To be converted is to

¹⁷Teofilio Cabestreros in "Christians in a Revolutionary Government," *Third World Book Review*, 1 (1985): 18.

¹⁸Gustavo Gutierrez and Richard Shaull, *Liberation and Change* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 84.

commit oneself to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely.¹⁹

Elsewhere he adds, "To know [God] is to work for justice. There is no other path to reach him."²⁰ This is what Leonardo Boff describes as "the sacrament of compassion", which he says is "absolutely necessary for salvation."²¹ For many (but not all) liberationists, that is all that is required for salvation. Consider the following statement by Fernando Cardenal:

I'm convinced that the biblical concept of the atheist is the correct one. In the Bible, the atheist is the one who doesn't love. That's really who denies God. I have comrades who say that they "don't believe," they they "don't have the faith." But they've been living a life of love, a life of commitment -- they've given the gift of self and of sacrifice -- for twenty years now in the cause of the poor. Certainly this will be acknowledged on the Last Day as genuine faith.²²

Even though liberation theologians disagree widely on this idea, they agree that salvation is at least intimately related to social and political liberation. For this reason, they generally reject traditional interpretations of the atonement and interpret the cross as more of a statement than a transaction.

Maimela provides an interesting insight into liberation thinking when he contends that they ignore the atonement because they no longer regard it as a servicable concept. They are unhappy with Anselm's satisfaction view of the atonement because it seems to justify the sacrifice of innocent human life according to the demands of one who lords it over the the people. They are unhappy with the moralistic view of the atonement because it is applied individually in subjective inspiration instead of corporately in societal transformation. They come closest to the ransom view of the atonement, but they are unhappy with the fact that, like the satisfaction view,

¹⁹Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, p. 205.

²⁰Ibid., p. 272. Cf. Gutierrez and Shaull, p. 92: "To believe is to love God, to be united with the poor and exploited of this world from within the very heart of the social confrontations and 'popular' struggles for liberation. To believe is to preach, as Christ did, the kingdom from within the struggle for justice which led him to his death."

²¹Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, in *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*, edited by Deane W. Ferm, p. 119.

²²Cabestreros, p. 19. The Roman Catholic Church has historically taught that outside the Church there is no salvation, and this concept of a "sacrament of love" making Christians out of those who don't believe does not seem compatible with that teaching. However, the Church also taught that, in some cases, the desire to be a part of the Church is equivalent to actually joining it. According to Karl Rahner, it is possible that those who have not heard the Gospel may, in this way, be "anonymous Christians". (*Theological Investigations*, 1:45-47) Though Rahner would not have applied this principle to those who have heard the gospel and rejected it, liberation theologians have run through the door he left ajar to universalism and the salvation of unbelievers who join the revolution. For example, see Bonino, p. 63 (discussing Segundo) and Boff (in Ferm, p. 118). For a concise statement of Rahner's view, see "The Anonymous Christian According to Karl Rahner," by Klaus Riesenhuber, in *The Anonymous Christian*, by Anita Roper, trans. by J. Donceel, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966. See also Gutierrez's comments on the political motivations of the belief that there was no salvation outside the Church (Gutierrez and Shaull, pp. 13-15).

it regards deliverance from the power of sin as primarily a spiritual matter and fails to "historicize this divine struggle against earthly oppression and injustice."²³

The basic issue is that liberation theologians regard sin as a collective, community concept, not an individual one. Since they understand mankind's problem to be "a state of absence of brotherhood and love in interpersonal relations,"²⁴ liberationists have no need for an understanding of the cross that addresses a need that is primarily spiritual.

A liberationist concept of the kingdom of God often resembles a socialist utopia not unlike that which had been advocated 70 years earlier by the old liberals. Gutierrez writes, "The Kingdom is realized in a society of brotherhood and justice; and, in turn, this realization opens up the promise and hope of complete communion of all men with God. The political is grafted into the eternal."²⁵

Miroslav Volf makes the interesting observation that Pentecostals and liberationists are quite similar in that they both regard the blessings of salvation to be more than just "spiritual." For both movements, so radically different in other ways, salvation has a very strong material element.²⁶

This is not all bad—as discussed in the notes on Pentecostal theology, there are material blessings involved with the salvation Christ brings. Once again, however, the question is one of emphasis. As R. T. France demonstrates, the biblical emphasis with regard to liberation and salvation is primarily spiritual. Material considerations may be present, but they are secondary.²⁷

Another important consideration is that of timing. Like the Pentecostals, the liberation theologians emphasize the present aspect of the kingdom to such an extent that the yet-future elements seem to be wrongly incorporated into their present expectation. By viewing all of history as a unitary process which is largely under human control, the liberation theologians fail to see the distinction between the earthly and heavenly spheres that is at the core of biblical teaching on wealth (Matt. 6:1-6; 19-24; 1 Tim. 6:17-19).²⁸ As a result, they strive for an earthly utopia that cannot and will not exist through human efforts.

New Age Theology

What has recently been called "the New Age movement" defies both description and labeling. Characterized by diversity, this "new paradigm" thinking has few beliefs that are truly universal and it is by no means an organized, cohesive "movement." If any generalization may be made, new age thought emphasizes human potential in the transformation of self and society, with a view toward the ultimate harmonization of all reality. It is generally naturalistic in its belief that all of reality is limited to space and time (including God, if it is relevant to speak of Him) and often monistic, believing in the essential unity of all reality. New age thought is pluralistic, often finding its monism in other philosophies and religions. For example, Peter Russell writes,

²³Simon Maimela, "The Atonement in Liberation Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 39 (1982): 47-52.

²⁴Ibid., 52.

²⁵Gutierrez, p. 232.

²⁶Miroslav Volf, "Materiality of Salvation: An Investigation in the Soteriologies of Liberation and Pentecostal Theologies," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26 (1989): 447-67.

²⁷R. T. France, "Liberation in the New Testament." *The Evangelical Quarterly* 58 (1986): 3-23.

²⁸Cf. France, "Liberation in the New Testament," 15.

This experience of unity can be seen to form the core of all mystical and religious traditions. On the surface, the various religions might appear to offer very different teachings about the nature of reality and the means toward achieving salvation or liberation. But once one begins to pare away cultural trappings and the additions and corrections imposed by later commentators and translators, a basic teaching begins to emerge which is common to them: we are, at our cores, united.²⁹

Monism gives rise to Marilyn Ferguson's statement that "The separate self is an illusion. . . . The self is a field within larger fields. When the self joins the Self, there is power. . . . Even beyond the collective Self, the awareness of one's linkage with others, there is a transcendent, universal Self."³⁰ One's realization of this essential unity leads to a kind of conversion, as Shirley MacLaine's experience in an Andean mineral bath illustrates: "Slowly, slowly, I became the water. . . . I was the air, the water, the darkness, the walls, the bubbles, the candle, the wet rocks under the water, and even the sound of the rushing river outside."³¹

This unity goes far beyond individual experience as many "new age" thinkers anticipate a global (and ultimately a cosmic) harmony through meditation, evolution, or understanding. Peter Russell believes that global telecommunications will cause us to become almost totally integrated. "No longer will we perceive ourselves as isolated individuals; we will know ourselves to be part of a rapidly integrating global network, the nerve cells of an awakened global brain."³² This planetary organism, Gaia, will begin to function like a school of fish or a flock of birds, reacting to danger within a fraction of a second and moving as one.³³ Physics theorist Paul Davies writes,

There is a growing appreciation among scientists that neither mind, nor life, need be limited to organic matter. . . . Taken to its logical conclusion, it is possible to imagine a supermind existing since the creation, encompassing all the fundamental fields of nature, and taking upon itself the task of converting an incoherent big bang into the complex and orderly cosmos we now observe; all accomplished entirely within the framework of the laws of physics. This would not be a God who created everything by supernatural means, but a directing, controlling, universal mind pervading the cosmos and operating the laws of nature to achieve some specific purpose. We could describe this state of affairs by saying that nature is a product of its own technology, and that the universe *is* a mind: a self-observing as well as self-organizing, system. Our own minds could then be viewed as localized 'islands' of consciousness in a sea of mind, an idea that is reminiscent of the Oriental conception of mysticism, where God is then regarded as the unifying consciousness of all things into which the human mind will be absorbed, losing its individual identity, when it achieves an appropriate level of spiritual advancement.³⁴

²⁹Peter Russell, *The Global Brain: Speculations on the Evolutionary Leap to Planetary Consciousness* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1983), 138.

³⁰Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1980), 100-1, in Jeffrey Yutaka Amano and Norman L. Geisler, *The Infiltration of the New Age* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1989), 16.

³¹Shirley MacLaine, *Out on a Limb* (New York: Bantam, 1983), 264, in Amano and Geisler, *Infiltration of the New Age*, 17.

³²Russell, 93.

³³*Ibid.*, 97.

³⁴Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 210.

Similarly, Timothy Ferris says, "Life might be the galaxy's way of evolving a brain."³⁵ From his perspective, "the combination of intelligence and technology could awaken the universe to its own life and thought and history. That would make us all the substance of a cosmic mind."³⁶ Russell explains it vividly:

If, in one way or another, Gaias were able to reach out, make contact, and interact with each other, there could then come a time, millions of years from now, when inter-Gaian interaction and communication would reach a sufficient degree of complexity and synergy for the ten billion Gaias in this galaxy to integrate into a single system. Our own solar system might no longer exist then; stars in the galaxy come and go as do the cells in a living organism. Even if our Gaia were still alive, humanity might have evolved beyond recognition, or perhaps new life-forms would have arisen, taking over humanity's role.

Regardless of when this might occur, this next evolutionary step would signify the transition to a galactic superorganism. The galaxy would become its equivalent of conscious. With this might come the emergence of a sixth level of evolution, one as different from the Gaiafield as the Gaiafield is from consciousness, consciousness from life, and life from matter . . .

If, over thousands of millions of years, the ten billion galaxies in the universe not only evolved into galactic superorganisms but also began to interact and communicate with each other, then there might come the final stage of evolution: a universal superorganism. A seventh level of evolution might then emerge, a level we could call "Brahman," after the Indian word for the wholeness of the universe in both its manifest and unmanifest forms.

If this were to be the final evolutionary development, it would in some respects bring the whole process full circle. Beginning from a unity of pure energy, the universe would have evolved through matter, life, consciousness, Gaias, and galaxies to a final reunion in Brahman. From a unity of total nondifferentiation it would have evolved, through the most multifarious diversities, to a unity of total integration. From Brahman to Brahman.³⁷

There are many paths to enlightenment, but the end result is the same: a realization that you are one with the universe and with God. From a New Age perspective, this realization unlocks one's true potential, making possible a level of spiritual power that was previously unknown. Not-so-subtle variations on this pattern abound in popular literature, some of which is all too frequently recommended by naive believers. A classic example is M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*, in which he writes,

I have said that the ultimate goal of spiritual growth is for the individual to become as one with God. It is to know with God. Since the unconscious is God all along, we may further define the goal of spiritual growth to be the attainment of godhood by the conscious self. It is for the individual to become totally, wholly God. Does this mean that the goal is for the conscious to merge with the unconscious, so that all is unconsciousness? Hardly. We now come to the point of it all. The point is to become God

³⁵Timothy Ferris, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 379.

³⁶Ibid., 380.

³⁷Russell, 235-36, 238.

while preserving consciousness. If the bud of consciousness that grows from the rhizome of the unconscious God can become itself God, then God will have assumed a new life form. This is the meaning of our individual existence. We are born that we might become, as a conscious individual, a new life form of God.³⁸

Conclusion

The people who have been surveyed in this lesson have been brilliant in many ways as they have interacted with contemporary culture and philosophy. They have generally thought of themselves as defenders of the faith, attempting to preserve it with integrity in view of recent scientific discoveries and philosophical developments. From our perspective, they have almost always conceded too much. Their efforts, however well-intentioned, have obscured the gospel. If it is to be recovered, we must be able to speak the truth both in the traditional terms which most of these theologians have redefined and in new, yet precise, ways that will enable us to communicate to without confusion.

We will also need to be aware of their valid concerns and demonstrate a genuine Christian testimony in these areas. For example, the liberationists have identified human dignity as a genuine value. While they may not be able to defend it beyond the assumption that it is essential (their philosophical and theological moorings having been severed), we recognize that people should be treated with respect and dignity as they are made in the image of God. We also recognize that the ministry of the gospel should always be accompanied by a ministry to the poor (Matt. 25:31-40; Gal. 2:10), and it is unfortunate that others have so often taken the lead on these issues. In the same way, those who are caught up in New Age thinking place an exceptionally high premium on experience. What do they see in us? Is it a hope that is attractive, communicated with gentleness (1 Pet. 3:15), or is it a grouchy orthodoxy that drives them back to optimistic denial?

This is a great time in which to minister. May we who know the truth not be clumsy in our use of it as we reach out to those who aren't sure what to believe.

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