

# Salvation from God and human experiences of disaster: Theology as *intellectus amoris* between *compassio* and justice<sup>1</sup>

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## I

Whenever Christians speak about “salvation”, God comes into play. At least, that is what the ecclesiastical tradition maintains. In the quasi-magisterial *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, ed. Walter Kasper) we read:

“Salvation in its Christian meaning is the ultimate fulfilment of being human through the taking-in of the person into God’s life, whereby the creature receives a participation in the everlasting divine fullness of life”.<sup>2</sup>

Described in a more exact theological way: the question about human salvation is intimately related to the doctrine of God’s creation. In his early days – in his lectures at the house of studies of the Dominicans in Louvain (1947–57) – and repeatedly thereafter, Edward Schillebeeckx called attention to the connection between creation and salvation, between the *Creator-God* and the *Deus salutaris*.<sup>3</sup> In his book, *Mensen als verhaal van God*, published in 1989, he writes:

“Creation is an act of God, which, on the one hand, sets us absolutely in our finite, non-divine, human peculiarity, destined for true humanity, and, on the other hand, within that, at the same time expresses itself in selfless love as our God: our salvation and bliss – the most noble content of true and good humanity. God creates humankind of his free will for salvation and for bliss, but, in the same action, he himself wants to be the deepest meaning, the greatest salvation and bliss of human life, just as sovereignly free”.<sup>4</sup>

From what has been said I conclude: the world and history, into which and in which God accomplishes salvation, are the basis and the

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Bonifatius Hicks OP, Oxford and Mainz.

<sup>2</sup> M. Knapp, Art. Heil, IV. Systematisch-theologisch, in: LThK<sup>3</sup>, Bd. 4, Freiburg-im-Breisgau. i.a. 1995, 1262–1264, here 1262.

<sup>3</sup> cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Theologische bezinning op het scheppingsgeloof*, Vol. 2., ms. Manuscript 1956/57.

<sup>4</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Mensen. Die Geschichte von Gott*, trans. from the Dutch by H. Zulauf, Freiburg-im-Breisgau. – Basle – Vienna 1990, (engl: *Church. The Human Story of God*), 163f.

place where we find all the reality of salvation. Salvation is accomplished in the middle of the historically composed world – or it is denied. Having said this, it is no longer possible to monopolise the coming salvation for particular places of salvation: neither for the religions nor for the churches! In this context, Edward Schillebeeckx stated: “There is no salvation outside the world of humankind”<sup>5</sup> – “*Extra mundum nulla salus*”<sup>6</sup>. To this *mundus*, in which the *salus* is realised or betrayed, the political and cultural greatness of *Europa* undoubtedly also belongs.

In the sense referred to, religions and churches are only *sacraments* of divine salvation in this world. They *are not*, therefore, themselves *salvation*, but merely mediating signs of this salvation, which God is accomplishing in his created world through people in a quite specific socio-historical context. Religions and churches belong to the sphere of “signs”, as far as their statements (which are always statements “of the second order”!) are out to raise the subject of salvation; in other words: to designate. “Churches are the places where salvation-from-God is made the theme and turned into words, expressly confessed, prophetically preached and liturgically celebrated.”<sup>7</sup>

## II

The multifarious experiences of the opposite of salvation – *disaster* – which permeate human history – which have their final consequence in the extreme disaster of Nazi death camps – radically call into question the theological thesis of the salvation of God in the middle of this world.

One of the main disasters today – even in Europe (!) – is *poverty*, both outside and inside the borders of the European Union. As a consequence of the geopolitical system changes in 1989 and afterwards, and promoted by the process of globalisation, at the present time between 61 and 65 million people in Europe (including the European parts of the former Soviet Union) are living in relative or absolute poverty. Particularly affected by this are children, the unemployed, immigrants, the mentally ill and old people. In all these categories, females are proportionately overrepresented.<sup>8</sup> As far as

<sup>5</sup> E. Schillebeeckx., *Weil Politik nicht alles ist. Von Gott reden in einer gefährdeten Welt*. trans. from the Dutch by U. Ruh, Freiburg-im-Breisgau 1987, (*Jesus in Our Western Culture: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics*, 1987), 19.

<sup>6</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Menschen*, op. cit. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> cf. L. de Sebastián Carazo, *Europa: Globalisierung und Armut*, in: *Concilium* (D) 37 (2001), 582–589, referring to reports from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (London), from Eurostat (Brussels), the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (York, UK), from Caritas Española (Madrid) und the German Federal Government (Berlin).

this is concerned, Europe must be understood as a “revelation of disaster”.

Like Edward Schillebeeckx, I interpret the disaster which so many (too many!) people in Europe are experiencing in the form of their being (or being made) poor theologically as a *negative contrast experience*.<sup>9</sup> Experiences of suffering, oppression, not being free and, here also, of poverty are basic human experiences; they bring people to protest about this world as it is. “This refusal of people to come to terms with such a situation creates an illuminating perspective. It unveils an *openness towards* another situation”<sup>10</sup>. This protest is based on the feeling of *outrage*. Out of this, prophetic protest and resistance grows up against the causes of the disaster and, therefore, provides a basis for acting in solidarity. “In that way, a negative contrast experience becomes effective against that which should not be [disaster], on the basis of hope for that which should be [salvation].”<sup>11</sup>

The figure of the *negative contrast experience* comes close to what Johann Baptist Metz calls *negative universalism*; this opposite of universalism of power is based on the generality of suffering as a *malum commune*. And what Schillebeeckx called the moment of outrage recurs in Metz’s writings as the English-language term of *compassion*.<sup>12</sup> (Hereinafter I shall use the Latin form *compassio*.)

Both categories – *outrage* as well as *compassio* – belong first of all to the field of affection. They are an expression of sympathy towards another, which arises from the universal human memory of suffering. Because of this, *outrage/compassio* precede any ethics. In his book *Ethik der Erinnerung*, the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit describes a triangular relationship: “One side of the triangle links memory with sympathy, the second sympathy with ethics; only after that can you localise the relationship between memory and ethics.”<sup>13</sup> So sympathy comes first.

The Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino asserts something similar: “In the face of a suffering world, the first answer is sympathy [in the original: *compassion*; Ulrich Engel], which urges us to remedy this suffering. Like all other human and Christian actions, theology also participates in this first answer, but in its own unique way. That is

<sup>9</sup> cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Menschen*, op. cit., 27–29.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> P. Kennedy, *Edward Schillebeeckx. Die Geschichte von der Menschlichkeit Gottes* (Theologische Profile), trans. from English by K. Pichler, Mainz 1993 (engl: *Schillebeeckx*, 1993), 207 (insertions in brackets by Ulrich Engel).

<sup>12</sup> cf. J.B. Metz, *Compassion. Zu einem Weltprogramm des Christentums im Zeitalter des Pluralismus der Religionen und Kulturen*, in : J.B. Metz/L. Kuld/A. Weisbrod, *Compassion. Weltprogramm des Christentums. Soziale Verantwortung lernen*, Freiburg-im-Breisgau. 2000, 9–20.

<sup>13</sup> A. Margalit, *Ethik der Erinnerung*. Max Horkheimer lectures. trans. from English by Rainer Stach, Frankfurt-am-Main. 2000, 17.

why theology becomes an *intellectus amoris*, a perception through love, which takes on historical forms when it is confronted with a suffering people (love as justice). (...) Put into contemporary terms, sympathy becomes liberation. I reaffirm, therefore, that there is something ultimate, pre-theological and even pre-religious in such sympathy, just as this is to be seen in the suffering of the world today.”<sup>14</sup>

### III

It remains to be asked how we can reconcile sympathy, which is based on the level of feeling, (outrage, *compassio*) with the universal claim of the message of the Gospel?

Let us note the following: globalisation is constitutionally suited to pluralism. The multifarious experiences of salvation and disaster of people in Europe belong here as well, in a particular way. In the face of this situation, the question must be raised (according to Metz) “how theology, with its ‘face turned towards the world’ (...) deals offensively with this pluralism, without thereby dodging the *question of truth* and the *question of authority*, and without abandoning the conviction that Christianity also, and especially in terms of this constitutional pluralism, has something to say to *all* people.”<sup>15</sup>

There is a danger that such sympathy will be exhausted by affective self-pity and thereby instrumentalise the suffering of the sufferers in a perfidious way. To prevent this, we need the category of *justice*. Thomas Aquinas already recognised that sympathy only becomes a virtue when it converges with justice.<sup>16</sup> Formulated more exactly (and going further than Thomas): *sympathy* and *justice* are to be found on two different levels of responsibility, which, however, require each other.

*Compassio* – to be found on the *affective level* – underlines the *asymmetrical responsibility principle*. “It relates to an individual person, against whom only the I who is spoken to has a duty. The distinguishing marks of this [asymmetrically constructed] responsibility are unpredictability, infinity, rebelliousness, strangeness and a heteronomous state. That is how a moral sense is able to arise in the first place.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> J. Sobrino, *Theology in a Suffering World*. Theology as *intellectus amoris*, in: P. Knitter/R. Panikkar (ed.), *Pluralism and Oppression. Theology in World Perspective* (The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society Bd. 34), Lanham 1991, 153–177, here 165.

<sup>15</sup> J.B. Metz, *Das Christentum im Pluralismus der Religionen und Kulturen* (Lucerne University Speeches Vol. 14), Lucerne 2001, 3 (italics: Ulrich Engel).

<sup>16</sup> cf. STh II-II, 30,3.

<sup>17</sup> J. Manemann, *Kritik als zentrales Moment des Glaubens. Zur gesellschaftlichen Dimension der Fundamentaltheologie*, in: K. Müller, *Fundamentaltheologie*, Regensburg 1998, 217–241, here 237 (insertions in brackets: Ulrich Engel).

*Justice* – at home on the *cognitive level* – underlines the *symmetrical responsibility principle*. It names – I cite here the Münster theologian Jürgen Manemann – “the rights and duties (...) which I have towards all other people. The other person encounters [me] here in the role of the generalised other and shares the same duty, which one seeks over and over again to affirm in a procedural way. The distinguishing marks of this [symmetrically constructed] responsibility are the ability to balance out, action in accordance with the statutes, and predictability”<sup>18</sup>; we could speak, along with Jacques Derrida, of a “system of regular, registered, codified regulations”.<sup>19</sup>

A form of justice which arises out of *compassio* has its beginnings in an asymmetry. That is valid in so far as *sympathy* recognises “the asymmetry between those who are suffering and those who are not suffering”<sup>20</sup>. The consequence of this is an *inequality* with reference to the distribution of duties and rights. *Compassio* perceives subjects behind the global structures of disaster. These appear in our vision as others, indeed as concrete others.

*Justice*, on the other hand, is based on the universal equality of all moral subjects. Accordingly, justice perceives “the other person by way of the normative equality that is so understood, and, therefore, as ‘a generalised other person’”.<sup>21</sup> Let me summarise that in the words of the ethics teacher Hille Haker, who works in Tübingen:

“Sympathy is (...) a function, a specific dimension of justice itself, it is, so we could say, the ‘other person of justice’ who appears in justice itself.”<sup>22</sup>

#### IV

It is in this sense that I read the gospel pericope of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10,30b–35):

‘A man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of bandits; they stripped him, beat him and then made off, leaving him half dead. Now a priest happened to be travelling down the same road, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite who came to the place saw him, and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan traveller who came on him was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him onto his own mount and took him to an inn and looked after him. Next day, he took out

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. (insertions in brackets: Ulrich Engel).

<sup>19</sup> J. Derrida, *Gesetzeskraft. Der „mystische Grund der Autorität“*. trans. from French by A. García Düttmann, Frankfurt-am-Main. 1992, 44f.

<sup>20</sup> H. Haker, „Compassion“ als Weltprogramm des Christentums?, in: *Concilium* (D) 37 (2001), 436–450, here 446.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper and said, "Look after him, and on my way back I will make good any extra expense you have."<sup>23</sup>

The dialogue between the lawyer and Jesus, which frames this pericope, ends, as we well know, as follows (Luke 10,36–37):

'Which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the bandits' hands?' He replied, 'The one who showed pity towards him.' Jesus said to him, 'Go, and do the same yourself.'

We are doubly challenged, as Christians, to the necessary reflection on the gift of salvation-from-God in this world (orthodoxy) on the one hand and to the committed action of the just in a world full of outrageous disaster (orthopraxy) on the other hand. The theologies, which we are pursuing in Europe (moulded by different cultural and political contexts and sometimes even linked with opposed ecclesiastical traditions), must be present, in the words of Pierre Claverie, the bishop and Dominican who was murdered in Algeria: "at the points of fracture which crucify the body and the unity of humanity. Jesus is dead, torn two ways between heaven and earth, his arms stretched out to gather together God's children who have been scattered through sin, which divides and isolates, incenses the one against the other, even against God. He [Jesus] has taken up residence in these dividing lines which have arisen through sin".<sup>24</sup>

That is the right place for Dominican preaching and theology. Only there can our theology become an *intellectus amoris*, a perception of truth out of love, which is justice. If we want to bring *Gaudium et spes* to the world, salvation, then we must be present in these places of *luctus et angor*, of disaster.<sup>25</sup> There, where, in Europe and elsewhere, people are living in sorrow and pain, are our genuine *loci theologici!*

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<sup>23</sup> Bible quotations from *The New Jerusalem Bible*. 1985 London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

<sup>24</sup> P. Claverie, *Lettres et Messages d'Algérie*, Paris 1996, quoted by T. Radcliffe, *Gemeinschaft im Dialog. Ermutigung zum Ordensleben* (Dominikanische Quellen und Zeugnisse Vol. 2), Leipzig 2001, 289. On Claverie himself cf. J.-J. Pérennès, *Pierre Claverie. Un Algérien par alliance* (L'histoire à vif), Paris 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. T. Radcliffe, *Gemeinschaft im Dialog*, op. cit., 289; cf. *Gaudium et spes* 4.