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THE PROBLEM OF THE PENULTIMATE

THEORIES OF SALVATION RECONSIDERED IN A SOUTH AFRICAN TOWN

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The concept of penultimate in the title I have of course borrowed from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* where Bonhoeffer suggests that in certain circumstances, penultimate issues – bread for the hungry, first aid for the wounded – have to take even theological precedence over what are still, in Bonhoeffer's eyes, the ultimate issues of eternity, justification, and grace.¹

I think we must develop this further than Bonhoeffer was able in the 1930s. If Liberation Theology has taught us anything, it is to recognize that people living in miserable penultimate conditions like poverty, personal degradation and powerlessness, are the victims not only of their own sin, nor even the sin of those who oppress them, but of particular social systems; and that until the system is changed there can be little change in the individual's power to direct his or her own life along new paths. A Christian lifestyle is impossible under some conditions. No doubt there will be heroic exceptions to this generalization, although to be honest, I am not sure even of this.

It does depend, of course, on what we mean by "being saved". If we believe in Original Guilt, we may believe that S. Francis Xavier, forbidden to evangelize in 16th century India, was nevertheless instrumental in bringing salvation to those babies in the crowded streets whom he baptized by sprinkling water on them surreptitiously under his robes as he passed by. Die of hunger they might, but they would go to heaven, not to hell or limbo. Time and scholarship do not permit me to enter arguments in this paper about the Biblical meaning of *yasha*, *lutrosis*, *soteria* and the like. I will only say briefly that I am sure that in the Old Testament salvation did not refer primarily to an other-worldly bliss; that the kingdom of God in the preaching of Jesus was at least in part about bringing God's kingdom on this earth; and that where Paul talks about liberation from the four tyrants of sin, flesh, death and powers he means that Christians will live as new men and women, reborn, risen in Christ, in this present life as well as in heaven. In short, we believe that God loves us now, helps us now, and saves us now, even though the fullness of salvation may lie in the as yet unrealized *eschaton*.

Where no here-and-now help appears to be forthcoming, and where some people at least live under a social system which renders it extremely difficult to make moral choices, to live as a responsible human person, or to achieve any of our human potential, then our Christian understanding of how God saves in Jesus must deal with that issue – or else Christianity has no relevance to the problems, penultimate as they may be, that beset us. William James made the point in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: people choose a God for his or her saving power. When that saving power is no longer evident or credible, their religious views change.²

Perhaps mention of James and his pragmatism is enough already to ruffle philosophical sensibilities. We cannot reduce the concept of truth to the concept of usefulness. We cannot reduce God-talk to what is empirically verifiable in terms of benefits. We cannot judge God by the standards of what seems to us to be pragmatic.

All this is true – of truth in general, of God in particular. But Christianity claims not only to be true. It claims of God not only that he exists, that he is Creator and Lawgiver and Ground of our Being. It claims to be of *saving* truth, and it says that God loves us. It claims that salvation is to be experienced not only in heaven but on earth.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

So that, if salvation talk is not to be mere shibboleth, perhaps there has to be some evidence of just how Jesus has actually helped in a particular situation.

I return to my title: theories of salvation reconsidered in a South African town. It seems to me then that although we may draw a distinction between what is ultimately and wholly true, and what is immediately and partially true, the demand for Christian soteriological claims to be shown to have *relevance* and *credibility* in particular situations cannot be bypassed.

I cannot ask English theologians, of course, to share my concern for our South African particular situation. Nor, as a very middle-class Anglicized white person living in the ordinary middle-class circumstances of a teacher's salary, can I claim to share in the situation of black people in South Africa. I can only think and speak as a concerned person who is something of an outsider to the black experience, although as a parish priest of scores of black and "coloured" persons their life has been part of my life too.

It worries me that in the South African church, salvation talk is usually no different from salvation talk in England. South African black theology tends to be an historical survey of the evil things which black people have had to endure, rather than an investigation of how God (and if God) can help. I recall a paper read by a black priest and academic, on "Jesus in South Africa today". He used two books as the background to his paper, which never departed far from the lines taken in those books. One was Oliver Quick's *Doctrines of the Creeds*, the other John Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology*. His paper was followed by one from a Roman Catholic black priest. It offered a lucid summary of some of the Vatican II documents. Neither paper touched on what I see as major problems for the credibility of Christian soteriology in South Africa today.

1. South Africa is by and large a Christian country, in the sense that 80% of the population claims to be Christian. Not all of these are churchgoers or what we might describe as practising Christians, but amongst both black and white (excepting the English-speaking white minority, whose patterns of worship are very similar to England) the proportion of regular worshippers would be very much higher than in Europe. Probably 50% would be at least monthly worshippers.

2. The leaders of the apartheid government are also virtually all Christians, and regularly worshipping Christians. The whole concept of constitutional apartheid, while its roots can be traced back to English colonial government in Victorian Natal, was worked out by devout Afrikaans Christian persons. Dr Malan, first Prime Minister of the apartheid era, was a Christian clergyman.

Many of the black leaders, both in South Africa and in exile, are also Christian: some even fellow members of the Dutch Reformed Church family. Almost all of them are products of the Christian mission schools.

We have to face the fact that sincere Christian belief has not prevented the development by those believers of a cruel, often violent system of government, nor so far provided a means for oppressed and oppressor to meet in any kind of reconciliation or promotion of change, nor for the oppressed to throw off their yoke.

3. What is of even more importance, most black people in South Africa live under conditions to which the conventional salvation theories in Christian tradition simply do not apply. That is what I hope to show in this paper.

4. In fact there is some evidence that some of the conventional salvation theories have in fact contributed to the development of an apartheid ideology.

It would take too long to give a detailed sociological analysis of the black situation in South Africa. In order to give some bones to my thesis, I hope I may be forgiven a personalizing of the situation as a way of trying to encapsulate it. I will take for my model a little boy I know called Linda. He is the fifth child of his mother, who has never been married. This is a very normal state of affairs in black urban life. His mother, Antonia Sikakane, is a most respectable, hardworking person who earns her living as a charwoman. The children have a number of different fathers, none of whom pay maintenance of any kind – again, a fairly normal situation.

They all live, together with Antonia's three sisters and some of their children, in a three-bedroomed house in a township near Pietermaritzburg where I live. None of the older sisters can find work. As the only breadwinner Antonia is expected within the Zulu context of the extended family to support them all. Thus, there are, I think, 15 people living in three rooms – again, a fairly normal situation.

Linda is Antonia's last born. He is four now. Sometimes he comes to work with Antonia, but usually she must leave him at home with the unmarried sisters – who, unfortunately, are inclined to drink all day, not surprisingly in their unemployed and hopeless situation, and are not very reliable. At present Linda is a smiling, cheerful child, but already he has had three bad attacks of dysentery, one of measles; he is statistically lucky to have survived to four years old. Antonia loves him dearly, but as she must leave for work by 6 am to catch her bus, and does not return until 6 pm, she sees little of him except at weekends. Linda, therefore, has very little opportunity to have his character shaped by parental modelling; his models are his drunken and uncaring aunts.

In two years' time, Linda will be old enough to go to school with his brothers. Unfortunately, the brothers are not always able to attend school, not only because Antonia is unable to pay the fees, but because some older children in the Pietermaritzburg townships believe that education in a government school in apartheid South Africa is a waste of time, so that they periodically go on boycotts. Freedom first, education later, is their cry. This means that no children may attend school, for the boycotters keep watch. Police or army guard the schools to prevent direct picketing there, but the organizers, themselves probably still teenagers, know the pupils. They catch them later in the day. Perhaps they beat them; perhaps they kill them. So that the years in which a South African black school stays open long enough for children to write end-of-year examinations is rare indeed.

Pietermaritzburg, normally a quiet market town, is also, unfortunately for Linda, the main battleground at present between two rival black approaches to liberation. Chief Buthelezi leads the Zulu-based Inkatha movement which co-operates guardedly with government agencies in order to get into a stronger bargaining position. Others prefer the non-tribal, mostly urban based United Democratic Front, which resents traditional tribal authority, refuses even limited co-operation with the government, and sees Buthelezi as a sell-out.

Antonia and her children have no preferences either way. Like many in her position, Antonia knows and cares little about politics but wants her children to have a better education than she did, and to live in peace. That is, however, not possible. Their house is situated in a block which is regarded as Inkatha territory. The local school is therefore by association an Inkatha school. Periodically UDF supporters lie in wait for these Inkatha scholars. Three children at the primary school which Linda's brothers attend were found dead on the perimeter of the playground last year. If they were to live in a UDF area, the situation would of course merely be reversed. There is no peace to be found. In January of this year alone, 100 people were killed around Pietermaritzburg. Some of the killers were themselves mere children.

I could go on with this sad story and we could analyse cause and effect; but for now all I want to do is ask, what does salvation mean for Linda? Realistically, in these circumstances, Linda is unlikely to learn at school to do more than read or write. He will, therefore, never be equipped for anything other than manual work, whatever his natural potential. He will always be at the bottom of society. He may be killed before he leaves school. His laughing little face now will, within ten years, have changed because of fear, and death, and violence, and hopelessness, and self-destructiveness. If Linda himself in later years becomes a killer or a thief – or, as will almost surely be the case, the father of several children by women with whom he has no permanent relationship, for whom he will care nothing, and who will grow up in similar hopelessness – can normal Christian criteria of judgement be applied?

Antonia is a fervent Christian. She is a Zionist, a member of that very large group of what might be regarded as a kind of indigenous house church. There is very little formal theology in her church – the minister, although called *mfundisi*, the Zulu name for a "reverend", is very much a part-time clergyman: he earns his living as

proclaim to your congregations the Word of God and the Gospel of Christ.”⁹

It encourages black pietism too. To quote Ned Temko from the *Christian Science Monitor*,

“Many blacks, at least older ones, draw on a heritage of Christianity rooted in the white missionary work of the 18th and 19th centuries, which has endowed many with what seems to be a bottomless mix of patience and goodwill.”¹⁰

Perhaps this is a good thing. Other perhaps, to quote an angry young black man,

“The white man’s God has been used to tame the black people.”¹¹

Perhaps it would seem, therefore, that Aulen, Macquarrie and others are right when they say that a return, in demythologized form, to the older victory theory would be much more helpful. It would seem very relevant to Linda. In Jesus, God has overcome death and devil and all that is hostile to his loving purposes. Again, I pass over the scriptural and traditional theological arguments for and against the theory, and ask, does it in fact help Linda? Certainly the theory seems to lie behind many of the confident statements made by prominent Christian leaders in South Africa.

“It may seem as if the dictators, the powerful and the mighty have full control over this world. Their arrogance seems to have no bounds. But the Church knows that Jesus Christ is Lord of history, he is Lord of life, and his truth will have the final word.”¹²

“Real peace and real security will come to our land only when apartheid has been dismantled. I have no doubt that this will happen. If God be for us, who can be against us.”¹³

Perhaps most clearly of all,

“God cares, and God will act decisively to bring justice, peace and reconciliation to our land.”¹⁴

Of course, if black people can believe that God is on their side, they will be restored to hope and confidence in their cause. I cannot, and would not wish to, deny that their Christian belief has been a source of courage for a great number of brave black leaders, from Chief Albert Luthuli to Archbishop Tutu himself. But we have to ask, because increasing numbers of young black people are asking, if God is going to act, why does he stay his hand? If God were to act tomorrow to overthrow apartheid, would we not accuse him of having been too slow? Whole generations of black people have lived and died in humiliation and suffering: did he not care about them?

The whole concept of God acting in history is a problematic one, as Maurice Wiles has shown us in his recent Bampton lectures.¹⁵ In South Africa, it has a particularly lurid history. The Voortrekkers, believing themselves to be God’s children in a world of heathen darkness, and having suffered a grievous loss when a whole party of men, women and children were killed by a Zulu band, set out to meet the Zulu army head on. They met on the banks of a river in Northern Natal. The

Trekker leaders prayed for victory, and promised that if God gave them victory they would erect a church in his honour, and each year on the anniversary of the battle would remember and thank him. Although few in number, they did, of course, have guns against the Zulu spears. So many Zulus were killed that the river ran red, and is called Blood River to this day. The Trekker prayers were answered. The battle was won. The church was built, and each year on 16 December, the Day of the Covenant, all of Afrikaans South Africa observes a holy day of sabbath. God acted to save his people.

Indeed, if God is lord of history in South Africa we would have to say that Dr Malan was right: God has made the Afrikaner mighty. This is exactly what they have in the past believed. As well as being Calvinists, the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa were much influenced by Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper taught his own version of the victory theory. He taught that Jesus is lord of all life, political and spiritual. The Church and the *Volk* (the people, the nation of God), are one and the same, chosen by God for victory over the forces of heathenism and of ungodly secular humanism. The belief sustained the Afrikaner nation through their battles with blacks and with the English, and indeed enables them still to regard the criticisms of the outside world as being nothing but ungodly liberal and communist attacks on the true people of God.

The victory theory can thus be used by either side in the struggle. There is no doubt that the Afrikaans people did triumph over real oppression and injustice, as well as over circumstantial disasters – and that their religious beliefs did have a great part to play in that triumph. I would be reluctant to describe this as God’s action except in a most indirect sense. Expectations of divine intervention to restore justice in South Africa are unlikely to be realized.

Of course, that is not what the victory theory meant in the early church, we might say. They had no illusions that Jesus as Victor meant that Christians would triumph in any political way over their enemies in this world. The theory means victory over physical death, and victory over spiritual death; victory over temptation, over sin, over the power of evil to distort my life. It is in these ways that Jesus is victorious.

But what can victory over death mean for Linda? If he dies at five – remembering that a high proportion of South African children still die before their sixth birthday – can we honestly say that, since he and they have gone to heaven, Jesus has brought salvation to them? Is this really a message of hope to their mothers? In an ultimate sense, of course, it is, but we can be excused some penultimate scepticism.

And victory over sin? We see indeed that Jesus was triumphantly victorious to the end. But is this true of Christians in general? S. Athanasius in his *de Incarnatione* provided various arguments against the ridicule by Jews and Greeks of the idea of incarnation. He invokes scripture, and resurrection. He invokes the New Testament miracles of Jesus. But then he points to the growth of the Church, to the chastity of young Christian men and women, to the way that fierce and savage heathen, when they hear of Jesus, turn from fighting to farming, from extending swords to extending hands in

prayer. People change in Christianity, he says, as they do not in your false and empty religions.¹⁶

We might have problems with much of Athanasius' argument now, when church growth is static, perhaps even declining, when standards of sexual morality are no different within and without the church. We might have difficulty, with Ireland or Lebanon or South Africa in mind, to say that Christians prefer farming to fighting. But surely Athanasius was right in his expectations? If the claim of victory is true, there ought to be some discernible difference between the lives of Christians and non-Christians. I do not think it lets us off the hook to say that war-loving or sexually immoral or politically unjust Christians are not really Christians; if that is true, then who are the "real Christians", and who would qualify? The fact that Christian government, meaning by "Christian" someone who believes in and sincerely wants to follow the teachings of Jesus, can impose the apartheid regime raises serious questions about the credibility of Christian salvation claims.

One of the problems for victory theorists has always been to show how Jesus' victory extends to us in any real way. This is just another example of the same problem. It brings me back to my pragmatic starting point. Salvation-talk must have some grounding in empirical reality if it is not to be mere talk, mere airy theory with no present reality. How does God in Jesus make a real difference for Linda and his world?

I have dealt critically with the penal and victory theories, because they are so prominent in church teaching, and said nothing about the solace and strength to be gained by black people from worship, from hearing the word, from uniting in sacramental sacrifice and celebration. I think though that the same difficulties apply. The solace is real, there is no doubt; but is solace what is required? And is there evidence that strength in Christ, strength in Christian sacraments, strength in hearing the Word, is greater and more effective than strength from other religions? Is there in fact not counter-evidence? Jews, Hindus, Moslems – particularly in recent years the last named of these – seem to produce proportionately as many courageous resisters as Christians, and we have the nagging point that sincere and regular participation in Word and Sacrament has not prevented other devout Christians from imposing the apartheid regime. How may Linda find salvation made available to him in Jesus?

I have said nothing about Moltmann, nothing about Liberation Theology, partly because outside of some of the universities and seminaries these approaches play little part as yet in ordinary local Christian life and teaching in South Africa. There is much more to be said, but not in this paper! We can always say that Christian life and salvation is really not about mundane and transient things, however painful, but about ultimate and eternal salvation in the last days. This would mean, though, that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with this world, which would be a move away from an important part of Biblical teaching. If God's kingdom is to come to reality in even a small way in this world for Linda, an interpretation of the salvation which Jesus offers will have to be found which does help Linda to throw off the circumstances which presently imprison him. The traditional models do not seem to do this.

Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, tr. Neville Horton Smith (London: SCM, 1955), p. 94.
2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* ed. Martin E. Marty (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 239.
3. Hymns Ancient & Modern Revised no. 214.
4. I. D. MacCrine, *Race Attitudes in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1937).
5. *Ibid.* p. 127.
6. *Ibid.* p. 126.
7. Quoted van der Merwe, 1975, p. 27.
8. Quoted in Sheila van der Horst, ed., *Race Discrimination in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1981), p. 189.
9. Quoted John W. de Gruchy and W. B. de Villiers, *The Message in Perspective* (Johannesburg: SA Council of Churches, 1968), p. 34.
10. Ned Temko, *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 6-12, 1987, p. 18.
11. *The Argus*, 6 November 1976 (after the first Soweto riots).
12. Allan Boesak at the World Council of Churches Vancouver Assembly 1983.
13. Desmond M. Tutu in *Apartheid is a Heresy*, ed. John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983), p. 47.
14. Desmond M. Tutu in *Bishop Desmond Tutu: the voice*, ed. John Webster (London: Mowbray, 1982), p. 88.
15. Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM, 1986).
16. Ed. and tr. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p. 263-265.