

Gustavo Gutiérrez

A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation

Chapter 1 (pp. 3–11) and Chapter 9 (pp. 83–105)

The selected chapters introduce theology as critical reflection and connect liberation to salvation.

GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ

A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

History, Politics, and Salvation

*Translated and edited by
Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson*

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Originally published as *Teologia de la liberacion, Perspectivas* by CEP, Lima, 1971

The text of this book is a revised version of the original English-language translation © 1973 Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545; the present book contains a new introduction by the author, translation © 1988 Orbis Books

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Manuscript editor and indexer: William E. Jerman

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gutierrez, Gustavo 1928-

[Teologia de la liberacion. English]

A theology of liberation: history, politics and salvation/

Gustavo Gutierrez; translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson.

p. cm.

Translation of: Teologia de la liberacion.

Originally published: Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973. With new introd.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-88344-543-3.

ISBN 0-88344-542-5 (pbk.)

1. Liberation theology.

I. Title.

BT83.57.G88313 1988

230' 2--del9

87-34793

CIP

Chapter One

THEOLOGY: A CRITICAL REFLECTION

Theological reflection—that is, the understanding of the faith—arises spontaneously and inevitably in the believer, in all those who have accepted the gift of the Word of God. Theology is intrinsic to a life of faith seeking to be authentic and complete and is, therefore, essential to the common consideration of this faith in the ecclesial community. There is present in *all believers*—and more so in every Christian community—a rough outline of a theology. There is present an effort to understand the faith, something like a pre-understanding of that faith which is manifested in life, action, and concrete attitude. It is on this foundation, and only because of it, that the edifice of theology—in the precise and technical sense of the term—can be erected. This foundation is not merely a jumping-off point, but the soil into which theological reflection stubbornly and permanently sinks its roots and from which it derives its strength.¹

But the focus of theological work, in the strict sense of the term, has undergone many transformations throughout the history of the Church. “Bound to the role of the Church, theology is dependent upon its historical development,” writes Christian Duquoc.² Moreover, as Congar observed recently, this evolution has accelerated to a certain extent in recent years: “The theological work has changed in the past twenty-five years.”³

THE CLASSICAL TASKS OF THEOLOGY

Theological study has fulfilled different functions throughout the history of the Christian community, but this does not necessarily mean that any of these different approaches has today been definitively superseded. Although expressed in different ways, the essential effort to understand the faith has remained. Moreover, the more penetrating and serious efforts have yielded decisive gains, opening paths along which all subsequent theological reflection must travel. In this perspective it is more accurate to speak of permanent tasks—although they have emerged at different moments in the history of the

Church—than of historically successive stages of theology. Two of these functions are considered classical: theology as wisdom and theology as rational knowledge.

Theology as Wisdom

In the early centuries of the Church, what we now term theology was closely linked to the spiritual life.⁴ It was essentially a meditation on the Bible,⁵ geared toward spiritual growth. Distinctions were made between the “beginners,” the faithful, and the “advanced,” who sought perfection.⁶ This theology was above all monastic and therefore characterized by a spiritual life removed from worldly concerns;⁷ it offered a model for every Christian desirous of advancing along the narrow path of sanctity and seeking a life of spiritual perfection.

Anxious to dialogue with the thought of its time, this theology used Platonic and Neoplatonic categories. In these philosophies it found a metaphysics which stressed the existence of a higher world and the transcendence of an Absolute from which everything came and to which everything returned.⁸ The present life, on the other hand, was regarded as essentially contingent and was not valued sufficiently.

It is important to remember, however, that at this same time the reflections of the Greek Fathers on the theology of the world—cosmos and history—go well beyond a mere personal spiritual meditation and place theology in a wider and more fruitful context.

Around the fourteenth century, a rift appears between theologians and masters of the spiritual life. This division can be seen, for example, in such books as *The Imitation of Christ*, which has made a deep impact upon Christian spirituality during past centuries. We are suffering from this dichotomy even today, although it is true that Biblical renewal and the need to reflect upon lay spirituality are providing us with the broad outlines of what might be considered a new spiritual theology.⁹

The spiritual function of theology, so important in the early centuries and later regarded as parenthetical, constitutes, nevertheless, a permanent dimension of theology.¹⁰

Theology as Rational Knowledge

From the twelfth century on, theology begins to establish itself as a science: “The transition has been made from *sacra pagina* to *theologia* in the modern sense which Abelard . . . was the first to use.”¹¹ The process culminated with Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. On the basis of Aristotelian categories, theology was classified as a “subaltern science.”¹² St. Thomas’s view, nevertheless, was broad and syncretical: theology is not only a science, but also wisdom flowing from the charity which unites a person to God.¹³ But this balance is lost when the above-mentioned separation appears between theology and spirituality in the fourteenth century.

The Thomistic idea of science is unclear today because it does not corre-

spond to the definition generally accepted by the modern mind. But the essential feature of St. Thomas Aquinas's work is that theology is an intellectual discipline, born of the meeting of faith and reason.¹⁴ From this point of view, therefore, it is more accurate to regard the theological task not as a science, but as rational knowledge.

The function of theology as rational knowledge is also permanent—insofar as it is a meeting between faith and reason, not exclusively between faith and any one philosophy, nor even between faith and philosophy in general. Reason has, especially today, many other manifestations than philosophical ones. The understanding of the faith is also following along new paths in our day: the social, psychological, and biological sciences. The social sciences, for example, are extremely important for theological reflection in Latin America. Theological thought not characterized by such a rationality and disinterestedness would not be truly faithful to an understanding of the faith.

But it is well to remember, especially with respect to the outdated views which still persist in some quarters, that in Scholastic theology after the thirteenth century there is a degradation of the Thomistic concept of theology.¹⁵ There arises at that time, regardless of outward appearances, a very different way of approaching the theological task. The demands of rational knowledge will be reduced to the need for systematization and clear exposition.¹⁶ Scholastic theology will thus gradually become, especially after the Council of Trent, an ancillary discipline of the magisterium of the Church. Its function will be "(1) to define, present, and explain revealed truths; (2) to examine doctrine, to denounce and condemn false doctrines, and to defend true ones; (3) to teach revealed truths authoritatively."¹⁷

In summary, theology is of necessity both spirituality and rational knowledge. These are permanent and indispensable functions of all theological thinking. However, both functions must be salvaged, at least partially, from the division and deformations they have suffered throughout history. A reflective outlook and style especially must be retained, rather than one or another specific achievement gained in a historical context different from ours.

THEOLOGY AS CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRAXIS

The function of theology as critical reflection on praxis has gradually become more clearly defined in recent years, but it has its roots in the first centuries of the Church's life. The Augustinian theology of history which we find in *The City of God*, for example, is based on a true analysis of the signs of the times and the demands with which they challenge the Christian community.

Historical Praxis

For various reasons the existential and active aspects of the Christian life have recently been stressed in a different way than in the immediate past.

In the first place, *charity* has been fruitfully rediscovered as the center of the Christian life. This has led to a more Biblical view of the faith as an act of trust a going out of one's self, a commitment to God and neighbor, a relationship with others.¹⁸ It is in this sense that St. Paul tells us that faith works through charity: love is the nourishment and the fullness of faith, the gift of one's self to the Other, and invariably to others. This is the foundation of the *praxis* of Christians, of their active presence in history. According to the Bible, faith is the total human response to God, who saves through love.¹⁹ In this light, the understanding of the faith appears as the understanding not of the simple affirmation—almost memorization—of truths, but of a commitment, an overall attitude, a particular posture toward life.

In a parallel development, Christian *spirituality* has seen a significant evolution. In the early centuries of the Church there emerged the primacy, almost exclusiveness, of a certain kind of contemplative life, hermitical, monastic, characterized by withdrawal from the world, and presented as the model way to sanctity. About the twelfth century the possibility of sharing contemplation by means of preaching and other forms of apostolic activity began to be considered. This point of view was exemplified in the mixed life (contemplative and active) of the mendicant orders and was expressed in the formula: *contemplata aliis tradere* ("to transmit to others the fruits of contemplation").²⁰ Viewed historically this stage can be considered as a transition to Ignatian spirituality, which sought a difficult but fruitful synthesis between contemplation and action: *in actione contemplativus* ("contemplative in action").²¹ This process, strengthened in recent years by the search for a spirituality of the laity, culminates today in the studies on the religious value of the profane and in the spirituality of the activity of the Christian in the world.²²

Moreover, today there is a greater sensitivity to the *anthropological aspects* of revelation.²³ The Word about God is at the same time a promise to the world. In revealing God to us, the Gospel message reveals us to ourselves in our situation before the Lord and with other humans. The God of Christian revelation is a God incarnate, hence the famous comment of Karl Barth regarding Christian anthropocentrism, "Man is the measure of all things, since God became man."²⁴ All this has caused the revaluation of human presence and activity in the world, especially in relation to other human beings. On this subject Congar writes: "Seen as a whole, the direction of theological thinking has been characterized by a transference away from attention to the being *per se* of supernatural realities, and toward attention to their relationship with man, with the world, and with the problems and the affirmations of all those who for us represent the *Others*."²⁵ There is no *horizontalism* in this approach." It is simply a question of the rediscovery of the indissoluble unity of humankind and God.²⁷

On the other hand, *the very life of the Church* appears ever more clearly as a *locus theologicus*. Regarding the participation of Christians in the important social movements of their time, Chenu wrote insightfully more than thirty years ago: "They are active *loci theologici* for the doctrines of grace, the

Incarnation, and the redemption, as expressly promulgated and described in detail by the papal encyclicals. They are poor theologians who, wrapped up in their manuscripts and scholastic disputations, are not open to these amazing events, not only in the pious fervor of their hearts but formally in their science; there is a theological datum and an extremely fruitful one, in the *presence* of the Spirit.”²⁸ The so-called new theology attempted to adopt this posture some decades ago. The fact that the life of the Church is a source for all theological analysis has been recalled to mind often since then. The Word of God gathers and is incarnated in the community of faith, which gives itself to the service of all.

Vatican Council II has strongly reaffirmed the idea of a Church of service and not of power. This is a Church which is not centered upon itself and which does not “find itself” except when it “loses itself,” when it lives “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of persons of this age” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 1). All of these trends provide a new focus for seeing the presence and activity of the Church in the world as a starting point for theological reflection.

What since John XXIII and Vatican Council II began to be called a theology of the *signs of the times*²⁹ can be characterized along the same lines, although this takes a step beyond narrow ecclesial limits. It must not be forgotten that the signs of the times are not only a call to intellectual analysis. They are above all a call to pastoral activity, to commitment, and to service. Studying the signs of the times includes both dimensions. Therefore, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 44, points out that discerning the signs of the times is the responsibility of every Christian, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truths can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage. Attributing this role to every member of the People of God and singling out the pastors—charged with guiding the activity of the Church—highlights the call to commitment which the signs of the times imply. Necessarily connected with this consideration, the function of theologians will be to afford greater clarity regarding this commitment by means of intellectual analysis. (It is interesting to note that the inclusion of theologians in the above-mentioned text met opposition during the conciliar debates.)

Another factor, this time of a *philosophical* nature, reinforces the importance of human action as the point of departure for all reflection. The philosophical issues of our times are characterized by new relationships of humankind with nature, born of advances in science and technology. These new bonds affect the awareness that persons have of themselves and of their active relationships with others.

Maurice Blondel, moving away from an empty and fruitless spirituality and attempting to make philosophical speculation more concrete and alive, presented it as a critical reflection on action. This reflection attempts to understand the internal logic of an action through which persons seek fulfillment by

constantly transcending themselves.³⁰ Blondel thus contributed to the elaboration of a new *apologetics* and became one of the most important thinkers of contemporary theology, including the most recent trends.

To these factors can be added the influence of *Marxist thought*, focusing on praxis and geared to the transformation of the world.³¹ The Marxist influence began to be felt in the middle of the nineteenth century, but in recent times its cultural impact has become greater. Many agree with Sartre that "Marxism, as the formal framework of all contemporary philosophical thought, cannot be superseded."³² Be that as it may, contemporary theology does in fact find itself in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism, and it is to a large extent due to Marxism's influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and human action in history.³³ Further, this confrontation helps theology to perceive what its efforts at understanding the faith receive from the historical praxis of humankind in history as well as what its own reflection might mean for the transformation of the world.

Finally, the rediscovery of the *eschatological dimension* in theology has also led us to consider the central role of historical praxis. Indeed, if human history is above all else an opening to the future, then it is a task, a political occupation, through which we orient and open ourselves to the gift which gives history its transcendent meaning: the full and definitive encounter with the Lord and with other humans. "To do the truth," as the Gospel says, thus acquires a precise and concrete meaning in terms of the importance of action in Christian life. Faith in a God who loves us and calls us to the gift of full communion with God and fellowship with others not only is not foreign to the transformation of the world; it leads necessarily to the building up of that fellowship and communion in history. Moreover, only by doing this truth will our faith be "verified," in the etymological sense of the word. From this notion has recently been derived the term *orthopraxis*, which still disturbs the sensitivities of some. The intention, however, is not to deny the meaning of *orthodoxy*, understood as a proclamation of and reflection on statements considered to be true. Rather, the goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation. In a more positive vein, the intention is to recognize the work and importance of concrete behavior, of deeds, of action, of praxis in the Christian life.³⁴ "And this, it seems to me, has been the greatest transformation which has taken place in the Christian conception of existence," said Edward Schillebeeckx in an interview. "It is evident that thought is also necessary for action. But the Church has for centuries devoted its attention to formulating truths and meanwhile did almost nothing to better the world. In other words, the Church focused on orthodoxy and left orthopraxis in the hands of nonmembers and nonbelievers."³⁵

In the last analysis, this concern for praxis seeks to avoid the practices which

gave rise to Bernanos' sarcastic remark: "God does not choose the same ones to keep his Word as to fulfill it."³⁶

Critical Reflection

All the factors we have considered have been responsible for a more accurate understanding that communion with the Lord inescapably means a Christian life centered around a concrete and creative commitment of service to others. They have likewise led to the rediscovery or explicit formulation of the function of theology as critical reflection. It would be well at this point to define further our terms.

Theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles. Only with this approach will theology be a serious discourse, aware of itself, in full possession of its conceptual elements. But we are not referring exclusively to this epistemological aspect when we talk about theology as critical reflection. We also refer to a clear and critical attitude regarding economic and socio-cultural issues in the life and reflection of the Christian community. To disregard these is to deceive both oneself and others. But above all, we intend this term to express the theory of a definite practice. Theological reflection would then necessarily be a criticism of society and the Church insofar as they are called and addressed by the Word of God; it would be a critical theory, worked out in the light of the Word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose—and therefore indissolubly linked to historical praxis.³⁷

By preaching the Gospel message, by its sacraments, and by the charity of its members, the Church proclaims and shelters the gift of the Kingdom of God in the heart of human history."³⁸ The Christian community professes a "faith which works through charity." It is—at least ought to be—real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*, it is the second step.³⁹ What Hegel used to say about philosophy can likewise be applied to theology: it rises only at sundown. The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it. Theology must be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the action of the Christian community.⁴⁰

A privileged *locus theologicus* for understanding the faith will be the life, preaching, and historical commitment of the Church.⁴¹

To reflect upon the presence and action of the Christian in the world means, moreover, to go beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. This is of prime importance. It implies openness to the world, gathering the questions it poses, being attentive to its historical transformations. In the words of Congar, "If the Church wishes to deal with the real questions of the modern world and to attempt to respond to them, ... it must open as it were a new chapter of theologico-pastoral epistemology. Instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start

with facts and questions derived from the world and from history.”⁴² It is precisely this opening to the totality of human history that allows theology to fulfill its critical function vis-a-vis ecclesial praxis without narrowness.

This critical task is indispensable. Reflection in the light of faith must constantly accompany the pastoral action of the Church. By keeping historical events in their proper perspective, theology helps safeguard society and the Church from regarding as permanent what is only temporary. Critical reflection thus always plays the inverse role of an ideology which rationalizes and justifies a given social and ecclesial order. On the other hand, theology, by pointing to the sources of revelation, helps to orient pastoral activity; it puts it in a wider context and so helps it to avoid activism and immediatism. Theology as critical reflection thus fulfills a liberating function for humankind and the Christian community, preserving them from fetishism and idolatry, as well as from a pernicious and belittling narcissism. Understood in this way, theology has a necessary and permanent role in liberation from every form of religious alienation—which is often fostered by the ecclesiastical institution itself when it impedes an authentic approach to the Word of the Lord.

As critical reflection on society and the Church, theology is an understanding which both grows and, in a certain sense, changes. If the commitment of the Christian community in fact takes different forms throughout history, the understanding which accompanies the vicissitudes of this commitment will be constantly renewed and will take untrodden paths. A theology which has as its points of reference only “truths” which have been established once and for all—and not the Truth which is also the Way—can be only static and, in the long run, sterile. In this sense the often-quoted and misinterpreted words of Bouillard take on new validity: “A theology which is not up-to-date is a false theology.”⁴³

Finally, theology thus understood, that is to say as linked to praxis, fulfills a prophetic function insofar as it interprets historical events with the intention of revealing and proclaiming their profound meaning. According to Cullmann, this is the meaning of the prophetic role: “The prophet does not limit himself as does the fortune-teller to isolated revelations, but his prophecy becomes preaching, proclamation. He explains to the people the true meaning of all events; he informs them of the plan and will of God at the particular moment.”⁴⁴ But if theology is based on this observation of historical events and contributes to the discovery of their meaning, it is with the purpose of making Christians’ commitment within them more radical and clear. Only with the exercise of the prophetic function understood in this way, will the theologian be—to borrow an expression from Antonio Gramsci—a new kind of “organic intellectual.”⁴⁵ Theologians will be personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places. They will be engaged where nations, social classes, and peoples struggle to free themselves from domination and oppression by other nations, classes, and peoples. In the last analysis, the true interpretation of the meaning revealed by theology is achieved only in historical praxis. “The hermeneutics of the Kingdom of God,” observed Schillebeeckx,

"consists especially in making the world a better place. Only in this way will I be able to discover what the Kingdom of God means."⁴⁶ We have here a political hermeneutics of the Gospel.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Theology as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word does not replace the other functions of theology, such as wisdom and rational knowledge; rather it presupposes and needs them. But this is not all. We are not concerned here with a mere juxtaposition. The critical function of theology necessarily leads to redefinition of these other two tasks. Henceforth, wisdom and rational knowledge will more explicitly have ecclesial praxis as their point of departure and their context. It is in reference to this praxis that an understanding of spiritual growth based on Scripture should be developed, and it is through this same praxis that faith encounters the problems posed by human reason. Given the theme of the present work, we will be especially aware of this critical function of theology with the ramifications suggested above. This approach will lead us to pay special attention to the life of the Church and to commitments which Christians, impelled by the Spirit and in communion with others, undertake in history. We will give special consideration to participation in the process of liberation, an outstanding phenomenon of our times, which takes on special meaning in the so-called Third World countries.

This kind of theology, arising from concern with a particular set of issues, will perhaps give us the solid and permanent albeit modest foundation for the *theology in a Latin American perspective* which is both desired and needed. This Latin American focus would not be due to a frivolous desire for originality, but rather to a fundamental sense of historical efficacy and also—why hide it?—to the desire to contribute to the life and reflection of the universal Christian community. But in order to make our contribution, this desire for universality—as well as input from the Christian community as a whole—must be present from the beginning. To concretize this desire would be to overcome particularistic tendencies—provincial and chauvinistic—and produce something *unique*, both particular and universal, and therefore fruitful.⁴⁸

"The only future that theology has, one might say, is to become the theology of the future," Harvey Cox has said.⁴⁹ But this theology of the future must necessarily be a critical appraisal of historical praxis, of the historical task in the sense we have attempted to sketch. Moltmann says that theological concepts "do not limp after reality . . . They illuminate reality by displaying its future."⁵⁰ In our approach, to reflect critically on the praxis of liberation is to "limp after" reality. The present in the praxis of liberation, in its deepest dimension, is pregnant with the future; hope must be an inherent part of our present commitment in history. Theology does not initiate this future which exists in the present. It does not create the vital attitude of hope out of nothing. Its role is more modest. It interprets and explains these as the true underpinnings of history. To reflect upon a forward-directed action is not to concentrate

Chapter Nine

LIBERATION AND SALVATION

What is the relationship between salvation and the process of human liberation throughout history? Or more precisely, what is the meaning of the struggle against an unjust society and the creation of a new humanity in the light of the Word? A response to these questions presupposes an attempt to define what is meant by salvation, a concept central to the Christian mystery. This is a complex and difficult task which leads to reflection on the meaning of the saving action of the Lord in history. The salvation of the whole man is centered upon Christ the Liberator.

SALVATION: CENTRAL THEME OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

One of the great deficiencies of contemporary theology is the absence of a profound and lucid reflection on the theme of salvation.¹ On a superficial level this might seem surprising, but actually it is what often happens with difficult matters: people are afraid to tackle them. It is taken for granted that they are understood. Meanwhile, new edifices are raised on old foundations established in the past on untested assumptions and vague generalities. The moment comes, however, when the whole building totters; this is the time to look again to the foundations. This hour has arrived for the notion of salvation.² Recently various works have appeared attempting to revise and deepen our understanding of this idea.³ These are only a beginning.

We will not attempt to study this criticism in detail, but will only note that a consideration of this question has revealed two focal points; one follows the other in the manner of two closely linked stages.

From the Quantitative . . .

The questions raised by the notion of salvation have for a long time been considered under and limited by the classical question of the "salvation of the pagans." This is the quantitative, extensive aspect of salvation; it is the problem of the number of persons saved, the possibility of being saved, and the role

which the Church plays in this process. The terms of the problem are, on the one hand, the universality of salvation, and on the other, the visible Church as the mediator of salvation.

The evolution of the question has been complex and fatiguing.⁴ Today we can say that in a way this evolution has ended. The idea of the universality of the salvific will of God, clearly enunciated by Paul in his letter to Timothy, has been established. It has overcome the difficulties posed by various ways of understanding the mission of the Church and has attained definite acceptance.⁵ All that is left to do is to consider the ramifications, which are many.⁶

Here we will briefly consider one important point and leave for later a treatment of the repercussions of this idea on ecclesiological matters. The notion of salvation implied in this point of view has two very well-defined characteristics: it is a cure for sin in this life; and this cure is in virtue of a salvation to be attained beyond this life. What is important, therefore, is to know how a person outside the normal pale of grace, which resides in the institutional Church, can attain salvation. Multiple explanations have attempted to show the extraordinary ways by which a person could be assured of salvation, understood above all as life beyond this one. The present life is considered to be a test: one's actions are judged and assessed in relation to the transcendent end. The perspective here is moralistic, and the spirituality is one of flight from this world. Normally, only contact with the channels of grace instituted by God can eliminate sin, the obstacle which stands in the way of reaching that life beyond. This approach is very understandable if we remember that the question of "the salvation of the pagans" was raised at the time of the discovery of people belonging to other religions and living in areas far from those where the Church had been traditionally rooted.

... to the Qualitative

As the idea of the universality of salvation and the possibility of reaching it gained ground in Christian consciousness and as the quantitative question was resolved and decreased in interest, the whole problem of salvation made a qualitative leap and began to be perceived differently. Indeed, there is more to the idea of the universality of salvation than simply asserting the possibility of reaching it while outside the visible frontiers of the Church. The very heart of the question was touched in the search for a means to widen the scope of the possibility of salvation: persons are saved if they open themselves to God and to others, even if they are not clearly aware that they are doing so. This is valid for Christians and non-Christians alike—for all people. To speak about the presence of grace—whether accepted or rejected—in all people implies, on the other hand, to value from a Christian standpoint the very roots of human activity. We can no longer speak properly of a profane world.⁷ A *qualitative and intensive* approach replaces a *quantitative and extensive* one. Human existence, in the last instance, is nothing but a yes or a no to the Lord: "Persons already partly accept communion with God, although they do not explicitly

confess Christ as their Lord, insofar as they are moved by grace (*Lumen entium*, no. 16), sometimes secretly (*Gaudium etsy*, nos. 3, 22), renounce their selfishness, and seek to create an authentic fellowship among human beings. They reject union with God insofar as they turn away from the building up of this world, do not open themselves to others, and culpably withdraw into themselves (Mt. 25:31-46).”®

From this point of view the notion of salvation appears in a different light. **Salvation** is not something otherworldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation—the communion of human beings with God and among themselves—is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ: “Thus the center of God’s salvific design is Jesus Christ, who by his death and resurrection transforms the universe and makes it possible for the person to reach fulfillment as a human being. This fulfillment embraces every aspect of humanity: body and spirit, individual and society, person and cosmos, time and eternity. Christ, the image of the Father and the perfect God-Man, takes on all the dimensions of human existence.”⁹

Therefore, sin is not only an impediment to salvation in the afterlife. Insofar as it constitutes a break with God, sin is a historical reality, it is a breach of the communion of persons with each other, it is a turning in of individuals on themselves which manifests itself in a multifaceted withdrawal from others. And because sin is a personal and social intrahistorical reality, a part of the daily events of human life, it is also, and above all, an obstacle to life’s reaching the fullness we call salvation.

The idea of a universal salvation, which was accepted only with great difficulty and was based on the desire to expand the possibilities of achieving salvation, leads to the question of the intensity of the presence of the Lord and therefore of the religious significance of human action in history. One looks then to this world, and now sees in the world beyond not the “true life,” but rather the transformation and fulfillment of the present life. The absolute value of salvation—far from devaluing this world—gives it its authentic meaning and its own autonomy, because salvation is already latently there. To express the idea in terms of Biblical theology: the prophetic perspective (in which the Kingdom takes on the present life, transforming it) is vindicated before the sapiential outlook (which stresses the life beyond).¹⁰

This qualitative, intensive approach has undoubtedly been influenced by the factor which marked the last push toward the unequivocal assertion of the universality of salvation, that is, the appearance of atheism, especially in the heart of Christian countries. Nonbelievers are not interested in an otherworldly salvation, as are believers in other religions; rather they consider it an evasion of the only question they wish to deal with: the value of earthly existence. The qualitative approach to the notion of salvation attempts to respond to this problem.”

The developments which we have reviewed here have allowed us definitively to recover an essential element of the notion of salvation which had been

overshadowed for a long time by the question of the possibility of reaching it. We have recovered the idea that salvation is an intrahistorical reality. Furthermore, salvation—the communion of human beings with God and among themselves—orients, transforms, and guides history to its fulfillment.

HISTORY IS ONE

What we have recalled in the preceding paragraph leads us to affirm that, in fact, there are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, “juxtaposed” or “closely linked.” Rather there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history. His redemptive work embraces all the dimensions of existence and brings them to their fullness. The history of salvation is the very heart of human history. Christian consciousness arrived at this unified view after an evolution parallel to that experienced regarding the notion of salvation. The conclusions converge. From an abstract, essentialist approach we moved to an existential, historical, and concrete view which holds that the only human being we know has been efficaciously called to a gratuitous communion with God. All reflection, any distinctions which one wishes to treat, must be based on this fact: the salvific action of God underlies all human existence.¹² The historical destiny of humanity must be placed definitively in the salvific horizon. Only thus will its true dimensions emerge and its deepest meaning be apparent. It seems, however, that contemporary theology has not yet fashioned the categories which would allow us to think through and express adequately this unified approach to history.¹³ We work, on the one hand, under the fear of falling back again into the old dualities, and, on the other, under the permanent suspicion of not sufficiently safeguarding divine gratuitousness or the unique dimension of Christianity. Although there may be different approaches to understanding it, the fundamental affirmation is clear: there is only one history¹⁴—a “Christo-finalized” history.

The study of two great Biblical themes will allow us to illustrate this point of view and to understand better its scope. The themes are the relationship between creation and salvation and the eschatological promises.

Creation and Salvation

The Bible establishes a close link between creation and salvation. But the link is based on the historical and liberating experience of the Exodus. To forget this perspective is to run the risk of merely juxtaposing these two ideas and therefore losing the rich meaning which this relationship has for understanding the recapitulating work of Christ.

Creation: the First Salvific Act

The Bible does not deal with creation in order to satisfy philosophic concerns regarding the origin of the world. Its point of view is quite diverse.

Biblical faith is, above all, faith in a God who gives self-revelation through

historical events, a God who saves in history. Creation is presented in the Bible, not as a stage previous to salvation, but as a part of the salvific process: "Praise be to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ... In Christ he chose us before the world was founded, to be dedicated, to be without blemish in his sight, to be full of love; and he destined us—such was his will and pleasure—to be accepted as his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:3-5).¹⁵ God did not create only in the beginning; he also had an end in mind. God creates all to be his children.¹⁶ Moreover, creation appears as the first salvific act: "Creation," writes Von Rad, "is regarded as a work of Yahweh in history, a work within time. This means that there is a real and true opening up of historical prospect. No doubt, creation as the first of Yahweh's works stands at the very remotest beginnings—only, it does not stand alone, other works are to follow."¹⁷ The creation of the world initiates history,¹⁸ the human struggle, and the salvific adventure of Yahweh. Faith in creation does away with its mythical and supernatural character. It is the work of a God who saves and acts in history; since humankind is the center of creation, it is integrated into the history which is being built by human efforts.

Second Isaiah—"the best theologian among Old Testament writers"¹⁹—is an excellent witness in this respect. His texts are frequently cited as one of the richest and clearest expressions of the faith of Israel in creation. The stress, however, is on the saving action of Yahweh; the work of creation is regarded and understood only in this context: "But now this is the word of the Lord, the word of your creator, O Jacob, of him who fashioned you, Israel: Have no fear; for I have paid your ransom; I have called you by name and you are my own" (43:1; cf. 42:5-6). The assertion is centered on the redemption (or the Covenant). Yahweh is at one and the same time Creator and Redeemer: "For your husband is your maker, whose name is the Lord of Hosts; your ransom is the Holy One of Israel who is called God of all the earth" (54:5). Numerous psalms sing praise to Yahweh simultaneously as Creator and Savior (cf. Pss. 74, 89, 93, 95, 135, 136). But this is because creation itself is a saving action: "Thus says the Lord, your ransom, who fashioned you from birth: I am the Lord who made all things, by myself I stretched out the skies, alone I hammered out the floor of the earth" (Isa. 44:24; cf. also Amos 4:12ff.; 5:8ff.; Jer. 33:25ff.; 10:16; 27:5; 32:17; Mai. 2:10). Creation is the work of the Redeemer. Rendtorff says: "A more complete fusion between faith in creation and salvific faith is unimaginable."²⁰

Political Liberation: Human Self-Creation

The liberation from Egypt—both a historical fact and at the same time a fertile Biblical theme—enriches this vision and is moreover its true source.²¹ The creative act is linked, almost identified with, the act which freed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Second Isaiah, who writes in exile, is likewise the best witness to this idea: "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O arm of the Lord, awake as you did long ago, in days gone by. Was it not you who hacked the Rahab in pieces and ran the dragon through? Was it not you who dried up the

sea, the waters of the great abyss, and made the ocean depths a path for the ransomed?" (51:9-10). The words and images refer simultaneously to two events: creation and liberation from Egypt. Rahab, which for Isaiah symbolizes Egypt (cf. 30:7; cf. also Ps. 87:4), likewise symbolizes the chaos Yahweh had to overcome to create the world (cf. Pss. 74:14; 89:11).²² The "waters of the great abyss" are those which enveloped the world and from which creation arose, but they are also the Red Sea which the Jews crossed to begin the Exodus. Creation and liberation from Egypt are but one salvific act. It is significant, furthermore, that the technical term *bara*, designating the original creation, was used for the first time by Second Isaiah (43:1, 15; cf. Deut. 32:6) to refer to the creation of Israel. Yahweh's historical actions on behalf of the people are considered creative (41:20; 43:7; 45:8; 48:7).²³ The God who frees Israel is the Creator of the world.

The liberation of Israel is a political action. It is the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery and the beginning of the construction of a just and comradely society. It is the suppression of disorder and the creation of a new order. The initial chapters of Exodus describe the oppression in which the Jewish people lived in Egypt, in that "land of slavery" (13:3; 20:2; Deut. 5:6): repression (Exod. 1:10-11), alienated work (5:6-14), humiliations (1:13-14), enforced birth control policy (1:15-22). Yahweh then awakens the vocation of a liberator: Moses. "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their outcry against their slave-masters. I have taken heed of their sufferings, and have come down to rescue them from the power of Egypt. . . . I have seen the brutality of the Egyptians towards them. Come now; I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall bring my people Israel out of Egypt" (3:7-10).

Sent by Yahweh, Moses began a long, hard struggle for the liberation of the people. The alienation of the children of Israel was such that at first "they did not listen to him; they had become impatient because of their cruel slavery" (6:9). And even after they had left Egypt, when they were threatened by Pharaoh's armies, they complained to Moses: "Were there no graves in Egypt, that you should have brought us here to die in the wilderness? See what you have done to us by bringing us out of Egypt! Is not this just what we meant when we said in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us be slaves to the Egyptians'? We would rather be slaves to the Egyptians than die here in the wilderness" (14:11-12). And in the midst of the desert, faced with the first difficulties, they told him that they preferred the security of slavery—whose cruelty they were beginning to forget—to the uncertainties of a liberation in process: "If only we had died at the Lord's hand in Egypt, where we sat round the fleshpots and had plenty of bread to eat" (16:3). A gradual pedagogy of successes and failures would be necessary for the Jewish people to become aware of the roots of their oppression, to struggle against it, and to perceive the profound sense of the liberation to which they were called. The Creator of the world is the Creator and Liberator of Israel, to whom is entrusted the mission of establishing justice: "Thus speaks the Lord who is God, he who created the skies, . . . who fashioned the earth. . . . I, the Lord, have called you with righteous purpose

and taken you by the hand; I have formed you, and appointed you ... to open eyes that are blind, to bring captives out of prison, out of the dungeons where they lie in darkness" (Isa. 42:5-7).

Creation, as we have mentioned above, is regarded in terms of the Exodus, a historical-salvific fact which structures the faith of Israel.²⁴ And this fact is a political liberation through which Yahweh expresses love for the people and the gift of total liberation is received.

Salvation: Re-Creation and Complete Fulfillment

Yahweh summons Israel not only to leave Egypt but also and above all to "bring them up out of that country into a fine, broad land; it is a land flowing with milk and honey" (3:8). The Exodus is the long march towards the promised land in which Israel can establish a society free from misery and alienation. Throughout the whole process, the religious event is not set apart. It is placed in the context of the entire narrative, or more precisely, it is its deepest meaning. It is the root of the situation. In the last instance, it is in this event that the dislocation introduced by sin is resolved and justice and injustice, oppression and liberation, are determined. Yahweh liberates the Jewish people politically in order to make them a holy nation: "You have seen with your own eyes what I did to Egypt. ... If only you will now listen to me and keep my covenant, then out of all peoples you shall become my special possession; for the whole earth is mine. You shall be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation" (19:4-6). The God of Exodus is the God of history and of political liberation more than the God of nature. Yahweh is the Liberator, the *goel* of Israel (Isa. 43:14; 47:4; Jer. 50:34). The Covenant gives full meaning to the liberation from Egypt; one makes no sense without the other: "The Covenant was a historical event," asserts Gelin, "which occurred in a moment of disruption, in an atmosphere of liberation; the revolutionary climate still prevailed: an intense spiritual impulse would arise from it, as often happens in history."²⁵ The Covenant and the liberation from Egypt were different aspects of the same movement,²⁶ a movement which led to encounter with God. The eschatological horizon is present in the heart of the Exodus. Casalis rightly notes that "the heart of the Old Testament is the Exodus from the servitude of Egypt and the journey towards the promised land. . . . The hope of the people of God is not to return to the mythological primitive garden, to regain paradise lost, but to march forward towards a new city, a human and comradely city whose heart is Christ."²⁷

Yahweh will be remembered throughout the history of Israel by this act which inaugurates its history, a history which is a re-creation. The God who makes the cosmos from chaos is the same God who leads Israel from alienation to liberation. This is what is celebrated in the Jewish passover. Andre Neher writes: "The first thing that is expressed in the Jewish passover is the certainty of freedom. With the Exodus a new age has struck for humanity: redemption from misery. If the Exodus had not taken place, marked as it was by the twofold sign of the overriding will of God and the free and conscious assent of

men, the historical destiny of humanity would have followed another course. This course would have been radically different, as the redemption, *thegeulah* of the Exodus from Egypt, would not have been its foundation. ... All constraint is accidental; all misery is only provisional. The breath of freedom which has blown over the world since the Exodus can dispel them this very day.”²⁸ The memory of the Exodus pervades the pages of the Bible and inspires one to reread often the Old as well as the New Testament.

The work of Christ forms a part of this movement and brings it to complete fulfillment. The redemptive action of Christ, the foundation of all that exists is also conceived as a re-creation and presented in a context of creation (cf. Col' 1:15-20; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:2; Eph. 1:1-22).²⁹ This idea is particularly clear in the prologue to the Gospel of St. John.³⁰ According to some exegetes it constitutes the foundation of this whole Gospel.³¹

The work of Christ is a new creation. In this sense, Paul speaks of a “new creation” in Christ (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17). Moreover, it is through this “new creation,” that is to say, through the salvation which Christ affords, that creation acquires its full meaning (cf. Rom. 8). But the work of Christ is presented simultaneously as a liberation from sin and from all its consequences: despoliation, injustice, hatred. This liberation fulfills in an unexpected way the promises of the prophets and creates a new chosen people, which this time includes all humanity. Creation and salvation therefore have, in the first place, a Christological sense: all things have been created in Christ, all things have been saved in him (cf. Col. 1:15-20).³²

Humankind is the crown and center of the work of creation and is called to continue it through its labor (cf. Gen. 1:28)—and not only through its labor. The liberation from Egypt, linked to and even coinciding with creation, adds an element of capital importance: the need and the place for human active participation in the building of society. If faith “desacralizes” creation, making it the area proper for human work, the Exodus from Egypt, the home of a sacred monarchy, reinforces this idea: it is the “desacralization” of social praxis, which from that time on will be the work of humankind.³³ By working, transforming the world, breaking out of servitude, building a just society, and assuming its destiny in history, humankind forges itself. In Egypt, work is alienated and, far from building a just society, contributes rather to increasing injustice and to widening the gap between exploiters and exploited.

To dominate the earth as Genesis prescribed, to continue creation, is worth nothing if it is not done for the good of humanity, if it does not contribute to human liberation, in solidarity with all, in history. The liberating initiative of Yahweh responds to this need by stirring up Moses' vocation. Only the *mediation of this self-creation*—first revealed by the liberation from Egypt—allows us to rise above poetic expressions and general categories and to understand in a profound and synthesizing way the relationship between creation and salvation so vigorously proclaimed by the Bible.

The Exodus experience is paradigmatic. It remains vital and contemporary due to similar historical experiences which the People of God undergo. As

Neher writes, it is characterized “by the twofold sign of the overriding will of God and the free and conscious consent of humans.” And it structures our faith in the gift of the Father’s love. In Christ and through the Spirit, persons are becoming one in the very heart of history, as they confront and struggle against all that divides and opposes them. But the true agents of this quest for unity are those who today are oppressed (economically, politically, culturally) and struggle to become free.³⁴ Salvation—totally and freely given by God, the communion of human beings with God and among themselves—is the inner force and the fullness of this movement of human self-generation initiated by the work of creation.

Consequently, when we assert that humanity fulfills itself by continuing the work of creation by means of its labor, we are saying that it places itself, by this very fact, within an all-embracing salvific process. To work, to transform this world, is to become a man and to build the human community; it is also to save. Likewise, to struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a just society is already to be part of the saving action, which is moving towards its complete fulfillment. All this means that building the temporal city is not simply a stage of “humanization” or “pre-evangelization” as was held in theology until a few years ago. Rather it is to become part of a saving process which embraces the whole of humanity and all human history. Any theological reflection on human work and social praxis ought to be rooted in this fundamental affirmation.

Eschatological Promises

A second important Biblical theme leads to converging conclusions. We refer to the eschatological promises. It is not an isolated theme, but rather, as the former one, it appears throughout the Bible. It is vitally present in the history of Israel and consequently claims its place among the People of God today.

Heirs according to the Promise

The Bible is the book of the Promise, the Promise made by God to human beings, the efficacious revelation of God’s love and self-communication; simultaneously it reveals humankind to itself. The Greek word which the New Testament uses to designate the Promise is *epangelia*, which also means “word pledged,” “announcement,” and “notification”; it is related to *evangelion*,³⁵ This Promise, which is at the same time revelation and Good News, is the heart of the Bible. Albert Gelin says that “this Promise lies behind the whole Bible, and it makes it the book of hope, the slight hope stronger than experience, as Peguy said, which persists through all trials and is reborn to greater strength after every setback.”³⁶ The Promise is revealed, appeals to humankind, and is fulfilled throughout history. The Promise orients all history towards the future and thus puts revelation in an eschatological perspective.³⁷ Human history is in

truth nothing but the history of the slow, uncertain, and surprising fulfillment of the Promise.

The Promise is a gift accepted in faith. This makes Abraham the father of believers. The Promise was first made to him (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-16) that he and his posterity would be, as St. Paul says in a vigorous and fertile expression “the heirs of the world” (Rom. 4:13).³⁸ For this reason Jesus, John the Baptist (Luke 3:8; 13:16; 16:22; 19:9), and Paul (Gal. 3:16-29; Rom. 4; Heb. 11) place Abraham at the beginning of the work of salvation.³⁹ This Promise is “given to those who have such faith” in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:22). The Promise is fulfilled in Christ, the Lord of history and of the cosmos. In him we are “the ‘issue’ of Abraham, and so heirs by promise” (Gal. 3:29). This is the mystery which remained hidden until “the fullness of time.”

But the *Promise* unfolds—becoming richer and more definite—in the *promises* made by God throughout history. “The first expression and realization of the Promise was the Covenant.”⁴⁰ The kingdom of Israel was another concrete manifestation. And when the infidelities of the Jewish people rendered the Old Covenant invalid, the Promise was incarnated both in the proclamation of a New Covenant, which was awaited and sustained by the “remnant,” as well as in the promises which prepared and accompanied its advent. The Promise enters upon “the last days” with the proclamation in the New Testament of the gift of the Kingdom of God.⁴¹

The Promise is not exhausted by these promises nor by their fulfillment; it goes beyond them, explains them, and gives them their ultimate meaning. But at the same time, the Promise is announced and is partially and progressively fulfilled in them. There exists a dialectical relationship between the Promise and its partial fulfillments. The resurrection itself is the fulfillment of something promised and likewise the anticipation of a future (cf. Acts 13:23); with it the work of Christ is “not yet completed, not yet concluded”; the resurrected Christ “is still future to himself.”⁴² The Promise is gradually revealed in all its universality and concrete expression: it is *already* fulfilled in historical events, but *not yet* completely; it incessantly projects itself into the future, creating a permanent historical mobility. The Promise is inexhaustible and dominates history, because it is the self-communication of God. With the Incarnation of the Son and the sending of the Spirit of Promise this self-communication has entered into a decisive stage (Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13; Acts 2:38-39; Luke 24:29). But by the same token, the Promise illuminates and fructifies the future of humanity and leads it through incipient realizations towards its fullness.⁴³ Both the present and future aspects are indispensable for tracing the relationships between Promise and history.

Eschatology: The Future and the Historical Present

In recent years the eschatological dimension of revelation—and consequently of Christian existence—has been rediscovered.

According to traditional dogmatic theology, the treatise on the “last things” (death, judgment, heaven, hell, the end of the world, the resurrection of the dead) was a kind of appendix not too closely related to the central themes. This

treatise began to be referred to as eschatology.⁴⁴ Its etymology suggested its appropriateness: *escatos*, “last,” and *logos*, “treatise.”⁴⁵

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the eschatological theme appeared in liberal Protestant theological studies (Johannes Weiss, Albert Schweitzer) on the message of Jesus and the faith of the primitive Christian community. Moltmann points out the impact of the rise of this line of thinking, but recalls also the pointlessness of these first efforts.⁴⁶ “Dialectical theology” came onto this scene from another vantage point and made eschatology the center of its thinking. The “first” Barth is its best representative. Under the influence of Kant, Barthian eschatology is what Urs von Balthasar calls “transcendental eschatology”: eternity is the form of true being; time is nothing but appearance and shadow; the ultimate realities are the first principle of everything⁴⁷ and therefore the limit of all time.⁴⁸ It was this viewpoint, according to Moltmann, “which prevented the break-through of eschatological dimensions in dogmatics.”⁴⁹

But the eschatological theme has continued to gain in importance.⁵⁰ The term is controversial;⁵¹ the notion much debated.⁵² One idea, however, has emerged: the Bible presents eschatology as the driving force of salvific history radically oriented toward the future. Eschatology is thus not just one more element of Christianity, but the very key to understanding the Christian faith.

Basing his study on a rigorous exegesis of the Old Testament, Von Rad has completed an important attempt at clarification in this area. He believes it is inaccurate to think of the eschatological sphere as a “consistent body of ideas, made up of complex cosmic and mythological expectations about the future, from which the prophets drew what they wanted.”⁵³ To reserve the term *eschatological* to designate the end of time, the fulfillment of history, that is to say, extrahistorical events, he thinks is not enough.⁵⁴ For Von Rad, the prophets have “eschatologized” Israel’s conceptions of time and history. However, what is characteristic of the prophets is, on the one hand, their orientation toward the *future* and, on the other, their concern with the *present*.

It is due to their posture toward the *future* that the prophets are the typical representatives of the Yahwist religion. What is characteristic of the prophets’ message is that the situation they announce “cannot be understood as the continuation of what went before.”⁵⁵ Their starting point is an awareness of a break with the past; the sins of Israel have rendered it unacceptable; the guarantees given by Yahweh are no longer in force. Salvation can come only from a new historical action of Yahweh which will renew in unknown ways the earlier interventions in favor of the people; the signs announcing this action come to be dimly seen by the prophets’ rereading those earlier events. The Exodus is a favorite theme of the prophets; what they retain of it is fundamentally the break with the past and the projection toward the future.⁵⁶ This causes Von Rad to conclude that “the message of the prophets has to be termed eschatological whenever it regards the old historical bases of salvation as null and void,” and he notes that “we ought then to go on and limit the term. It should not be applied to cases where Israel gave a general expression of her

faith in the future, or . . . in the future of one of her sacred institutions.” Von Rad ends by saying that “the prophetic teaching is only eschatological when the prophets expelled Israel from the safety of the old saving actions and suddenly shifted the basis of salvation to a future action of God.” The core of eschatological thought is in this tension towards that which is to come, towards a new action of God. Hope in new acts of God is based on Yahweh’s “fidelity,” on the strength of his love for his people which was manifested in the past initiatives on their behalf. These new actions lead to and are nourished by an act to take place at the end of history.⁵⁸

But there is another facet of the prophetic message which we have already considered and which will help us—despite its apparent opposition to the orientation toward the future which we have just mentioned—to pinpoint the notion of eschatology. We refer to the prophets’ concern for the present, for the historical vicissitudes which they witness. Because of this concern the object of their hope is very proximate. But, this “closeness” does not exclude an action of Yahweh at the end of history. Indeed, the prophetic message proclaims and is realized in a proximate historical event; at the same time, it is projected beyond this event. This has been perceptively and clearly explained by Steinmann with respect to messianism in his comments on Isaiah’s oracle of the “soul.” The author distinguishes two meanings in this prophecy: the first, the only one comprehensible to his contemporaries, points to something “immediately offered by Yahweh to remedy the tragic situation created in Jerusalem by the onslaught of the Syro-Ephraimitic League”;⁵⁹ this is the birth of a new heir to the crown. The second sense is but dimly perceived by the prophet: “It is through the gift of a child that Yahweh will save the world.”⁶⁰ The eschatological prophecy refers, therefore, to a concrete event, and *in* it to another fuller and more comprehensive one to which history must be open.⁶¹ What is especially important for an accurate understanding of eschatology is the relationship between these events. The relationship is found in the projection towards the future included in the present event. From a similar point of view, Von Rad interprets Deuteronomy, the book which contains the theology of the Covenant: “It is certain, literally, that Deuteronomy comes from the time after the conquest, for it speaks of the people on Mt. Horeb; thus it functions as fiction; because they had been living on the land for a long time. But here we see a clearly eschatological feature which permeates the whole. All the salvific benefits which it mentions, including a life of ‘rest,’ are proposed to the community again, now that it is called to decide for Yahweh. We are faced with one of the most interesting problems of Old Testament theology: the promises which have already been realized historically are not invalidated, but continue to be true in a new context and somewhat different form. The promise of the land was preached again without interruption as a future good, even after it had been achieved.”⁶² This interpretation allows him to speak of the eschatological scope of Deuteronomy, an opening to the future which is not only not suppressed by the implementations in the present, but is rather affirmed and dynamized by them.

The historical implementations of promises in the *present* are—insofar as ^{are} ordered toward what is to come—as characteristic of eschatology as ^{opening} to the *future*. More precisely, this tension toward the future lends meaning to and is expressed in the present, while simultaneously being nourished by it—h is thus that the attraction of “what is to come” is the driving force of history. The action of Yahweh in history and at the end of history are inseparable. It has been said often in recent years that the expression used in Exod. 3:14 (*Ehyeh asher 'ehyeh*) is correctly translated not as “I am who am,” which can be interpreted within our categories in the sense of a vigorous but static assertion of God’s transcendence, but rather as “I will be who will be.” A new kind of transcendence is emphasized: God is revealed as a force in our future and not as an ahistorical being.⁶³ Grammatically both translations are valid. It would be better perhaps to use an expression which emphasizes the characteristic of permanence: “I am he who is being.” But the use of similar expressions (thirty-one times throughout the Bible) and the context of the Covenant in which the above passage is found, lead us rather to stress the active sense of the terminology employed. “To be” in Hebrew means “to become,” “to be present,” “to occupy a place.” “I am” would mean “I am with you,” “I am here ready to act” (“When I put forth my power against the Egyptians and bring the Israelites out from them, then Egypt will know that I am the Lord” [Exod. 7:5]). “I am the Lord, I will release you. ... I will rescue you. ... I will adopt you as my people. ... I will lead you to the land. ... I will give it to you for your possession” (Exod. 6:6-9; cf. also 3:10, 17; 8:18).⁶⁴

The full significance of God’s action in history is understood only when it is put in its eschatological perspective; similarly, the revelation of the final meaning of history gives value to the present. The self-communication of God points towards the future, and at the same time this Promise and Good News reveal humanity to itself and widen the perspective of its historical commitment here and now.

Eschatological Promises: Historical Promises

What has been said will help us to frame better a classic question regarding the interpretation of Old Testament texts. We refer to the so-called spiritualizing influence which the New Testament has on them.⁶⁵

According to this hypothesis, what the Old Testament announces and promises on the “temporal” and “earthly” level has to be translated to a “spiritual” level. A “carnal” viewpoint kept the Jewish people from seeing the hidden, figurative sense of these announcements and promises, which is revealed clearly only in the New Testament. This hermeneutical principle is strongly held in Christian circles. And it is not new. A famous text of Pascal’s echoes this ancient tradition: “The prophecies have a hidden and spiritual meaning to which this people were hostile, under the carnal meaning which they loved. If the spiritual meaning had been revealed, they would not have loved it.”⁶⁶

Let us take as a recent and representative example of this line of interpretation the opinion of a well-known exegete. Regarding the prophetic promises,

Grelot asserts with his usual precision that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the object of these promises. "On the one hand," he writes "they seem to refer to the *temporal redemption* of Israel, freed from secular oppression and reestablished in its past status in such a way that all nations participate in its privileges and enjoy with it the earthly goods promised at the time of the first Covenant. But on the other hand, they also seem to refer to the *spiritual redemption* of all men, as can be inferred from some of the brightest pages, not the longest but the purest."⁶⁷ In order to clarify this ambiguity, it is necessary to argue from the principle that the true object of the promises is veiled by the figurative language used by the prophets. The problem at hand, therefore, is to discover "what has to be taken literally and what is to be understood figuratively."⁶⁸ The answer is clear: the object of these promises is the "permanent *spiritual* drama of humanity which touches directly on the mystery of sin suffering, and salvation, which constitutes the substance of its destiny"; the texts which transmit these promises to us, however, have only an "accidental relationship with *political* history."⁶⁹ The true sense is therefore the "spiritual" one. The New Testament will make this sense perfectly clear.⁷⁰

But is this really a true dilemma: either spiritual redemption or temporal redemption? Is there not in all this an "excessive spiritualization" which Congar advises us to distrust?⁷¹ All indications seem to point in this direction. But there is, perhaps, something deeper and more difficult to overcome. The impression does indeed exist that in this statement of the problem there is an assumption which should be brought to the surface, namely a certain idea of the spiritual characterized by a kind of Western dualistic thought (matter-spirit), foreign to the Biblical mentality.⁷² And it is becoming more foreign also to the contemporary mentality.⁷³ This is a disincarnate "spiritual," scornfully superior to all earthly realities. The proper way to pose the question does not seem to us to be in terms of "temporal promise or spiritual promise." Rather, as we have mentioned above, it is a matter of partial fulfillments through liberating historical events, which are in turn new promises marking the road towards total fulfillment. Christ does not "spiritualize" the eschatological promises; he gives them meaning and fulfillment today (cf. Luke 4:21);⁷⁴ but at the same time he opens new perspectives by catapulting history forward, forward towards total reconciliation.⁷⁵ The hidden sense is not the "Spiritual" one, which devalues and even eliminates temporal and earthly realities as obstacles; rather it is the sense of a fullness which takes on and transforms historical reality.⁷⁶ Moreover, it is only in the temporal, earthly, historical event that we can open up to the future of complete fulfillment.

It is not sufficient, therefore, to acknowledge that eschatology is valid in the future as well as in the present. Indeed, this can be asserted even on the level of "spiritual" realities, present and future. We can say that eschatology does not lessen the value of the present life and yet expresses this in words which might be misleading. If by "present life" one understands only "present *spiritual* life," one does not have an accurate understanding of eschatology. Its presence is an intrahistorical reality. The grace-sin conflict, the coming of the Kingdom,

and the expectation of the parousia are also necessarily and inevitably historical, temporal, earthly, social, and material realities.

The prophets announce a kingdom of peace. But peace presupposes the establishment of justice: "Righteousness shall yield peace and its fruit [shall] be quietness and confidence forever" (Isa. 32:17; cf. also Ps. 85).⁷⁷ It presupposes the defense of the rights of the poor, punishment of the oppressors, a life free from the fear of being enslaved by others, the liberation of the oppressed. Peace, justice, love, and freedom are not private realities; they are not only internal attitudes. They are social realities, implying a historical liberation. A poorly understood spiritualization has often made us forget the human consequences of the eschatological promises and the power to transform unjust social structures which they imply. The elimination of misery and exploitation is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom. It will become a reality, according to the Book of Isaiah, when there is happiness and rejoicing among the people because "men shall build houses and live to inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit; they shall not build for others to inhabit nor plant for others to eat. . . . My chosen shall enjoy the fruit of their labor" (65:21-22) because the fruit of their labor will not be taken from them. The struggle for a just world in which there is no oppression, servitude, or alienated work will signify the coming of the Kingdom. The Kingdom and social injustice are incompatible (cf. Isa. 29:18-19 and Matt. 11:5; Lev. 25:10ff. and Luke 4:16-21). "The struggle for justice," rightly asserts Dom Antonio Fragoso, "is also the struggle for the Kingdom of God."⁷⁸

The eschatological promises are being fulfilled throughout history, but this does not mean that they can be identified clearly and completely with one or another social reality; their liberating effect goes far beyond the foreseeable and opens up new and unsuspected possibilities. The complete encounter with the Lord will mark an end to history, but it will take place in history. Thus we must acknowledge historical events in all their concreteness and significance, but we are also led to a permanent detachment. The encounter is present even now, dynamizing humanity's process of becoming and projecting it beyond its hopes (1 Cor. 2:6-9); it will not be planned or predesigned.⁷⁹ This "ignorance" accounts for the active and committed hope for the gift: Christ is "the Yes pronounced upon God's promises, every one of them" (2 Cor. 1:20).

CHRIST AND INTEGRAL LIBERATION

The conclusion to be drawn from all the above is clear: salvation embraces all persons and the whole person; the liberating action of Christ—made human in this history and not in a history marginal to real human life—is at the heart of the historical current of humanity; the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history.

It is fitting, nevertheless, to reconsider the question, reviewing how it has been posed and examining other aspects of it. This will allow us, furthermore, to summarize the ideas presented in this chapter.

Temporal Progress and the Growth of the Kingdom

Chapter 3 of the first part of *Gaudium et spes* begins by asking about the meaning and value of human activity (no. 33) and ends by recalling in an often-quoted text, that “earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God” (no. 39). The terms used are intentionally general, making different interpretations possible. The history of this text can help both our exegetical efforts and—what is of special interest to us—clarification of the question it poses.

The so-called Schema 13 became the most awaited document of the Council after the interventions of Cardinals Montini and Suenens towards the end of the first session of the Council. Its principal task was to show the attitude of the Church towards the world.⁸⁰ A preliminary text, the so-called “Schema of Zurich,” was presented at the third session of the Council; it was heavily attacked both inside and outside the conciliar chambers due to what was considered a “dualistic” approach to the natural and supernatural orders.⁸¹ Its recasting produced what became known as the “Schema of Ariccia,” which formed the basis for the present Constitution.

The tone of the Schema of Ariccia was very different from the former document. It vigorously stresses the unity of the human vocation (see Part 1, Chapter 4) and recalls what its principal drafter calls “this elemental but very forgotten truth that redemption embraces the totality of creation.” And he adds, “This profound unity of the divine plan for humankind, creation, and the Kingdom is a leitmotiv of Schema 13.”⁸² Indeed, the Schema asserts that human “history and the history of salvation are closely implicated with each other; in the present, definitive economy of salvation the order of redemption includes the order of creation” (no. 50).⁸³ Two consequences flow from this statement. The first concerns the mission of the Church: “Since redemption includes the order of creation, the ministry of the Church necessarily encompasses—from its particular point of view—the whole complexus of human realities and problems” (no. 51). The phrase “from its particular point of view” seeks to establish the angle from which the scope of the mission of the Church ought to be considered. But this restriction does not detract from the strength and even the boldness of the text. The second consequence also results from “the inclusion of all creation in the order of redemption”; it refers to the unity of the Christian life: “All human activities, even the most humble, must be vivified for Christians by the Spirit of God and ordered to the Kingdom of God” (no. 52).⁸⁴ The text is based on the attitude of the prophets who “saw in injustice not a social disorder or an offense to the poor, but a violation of the divine law and an insult to the holiness of God.” It emphasizes the fact that Christ not only did “not soften this doctrine; he perfected it” (no. 52). In this connection it refers to 1 John 3:14 and Matt. 25:31-46, texts which emphasize the oneness of the human attitude toward God and one’s neighbor;

these texts have disappeared from the final version of the Constitution.

These texts make it very clear that the Schema of Ariccia adopts the “one history” approach. It defines, helps us to understand, and even corrects the formulation of the distinction which constitutes the immediate antecedent of no 39 of *Gaudium et spes*: “It is clear that the perfection of the social state is of an order completely different from that of the growth of the Kingdom of God, and they cannot be identified” (no. 43). The text continues, “In all, the form of organization and government adopted by society has a great impact on the human and moral behavior of its citizens, making their entrance into the Kingdom easier or more difficult.” Despite the intentions, the choice of words here is unfortunate and gives the impression of a static, extrinsicist, and even moralistic treatment of the question. In comparison, the present text, despite its general character, is better, but it lacks the context of the unified vision which the Schema of Ariccia presented.

The Schema of Ariccia was discussed at the beginning of the fourth session of the Council. At this time it was asked that the distinction between the natural and supernatural orders be clarified and that the confusion between temporal progress and salvation be avoided. This was supported, both by the “minority” as well as some representatives of the conciliar “majority” (Cardinals Doepfner and Frings). There was also objection to an excessive optimism. It was asked that more stress be laid on the meaning of sin and it was feared that the autonomy of the temporal sphere was not sufficiently emphasized. The text was watered down. The present Chapter 4 of the first part of *Gaudium et spes* does not emphasize as strongly as did the Schema of Ariccia the concrete and historical unity of these two orders.⁸⁵ With this background, the distinction established in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 39, can be seen in a different light.⁸⁶

The Council refrained from delving into debatable theological questions. It did not oppose the position adopted in the Schema of Ariccia, but fell back on only those assertions which enjoyed a large consensus. This approach had been the intention of the drafters at Ariccia when they presented the text. Because these were “extremely serious questions deeply affecting the spirit of our contemporaries and at the same time referring to very difficult and unclarified problems of Christian revelation,” the Mixed Commission did “not wish to espouse specific opinions; rather it preferred to limit itself to transmitting the common doctrine of the Church.”⁸⁷ However, in the judgment of many persons the Ariccia text went beyond this moderate and prudent approach, and therefore its expressions had to be softened. The final text is limited to two general affirmations: there is a close relationship between temporal progress and the growth of the Kingdom, but these two processes are distinct. Those engaged in the latter not only cannot be indifferent to the former; they must show a genuine interest in and value it. However, the growth of the Kingdom goes beyond temporal progress. In short, there is close relationship but no identification. The conciliar text does not go beyond this. The field is open, within this framework, for different theological postures.⁸⁸ The dialogue among them will

allow a penetration of this question and will gradually lead to a new consensus as has happened so often in the history of the Church.

Populorum progressio goes a step further. Integral development is regarded as the change from less human to more human living conditions: "Less human conditions first affect those who are so poor as to lack the minimum essentials for life; . . . then they affect those who are oppressed by social structures which have been created by abuses of ownership or by abuses of power, by the exploitation of the workers or by unfair business deals." This subhuman condition is characterized by sin and injustice. It is necessary to rise gradually from this position toward a more human state of things: "More human conditions of life clearly imply passage from want to the possession of necessities, overcoming social evils, increase of knowledge and acquisition of culture. Other more human conditions are increased esteem for the dignity of others, a turning toward the spirit of poverty, cooperation for the common good, and the will for peace. Then comes the human acknowledgment of supreme values and of God, their source and finality." Then comes the most important text, expressed in new terms: "Finally, and above all, are faith, a gift of God accepted by man's good-will, and unity in the charity of Christ, who calls us all to share as sons in the life of the living God, the Father of all men" (no. 21). "More human . . . finally, and above all"—not superhuman or supernatural. This is a fuller idea of what is human, the reaffirmation of the single vocation to the grace of communion with God. This is why there is no solution based on a continuity between what is "natural" and grace; rather there is a profound integration and an ordering toward the fullness of all that is human in the free gift of the self-communication of God. This text is rich in implications and has a freshness absent from other parts of the encyclical dealing with social and economic questions. These ideas are not, however, treated in depth or outlined with great detail and their ramifications are not elaborated. That is a task which still would have to be undertaken.

The Horizon of Political Liberation

The texts of the magisterium of the Church to which we have referred (with the exception of some points in *Populorum progressio*) are typical of the way contemporary theology treats this question. The approach seems to preclude the question regarding the ultimate meaning of human action in history or, to express it in the terms of *Gaudium et spes*, of the relationship between temporal progress and the growth of the Kingdom. Temporal progress is seen preferably in the dominion of nature by science and technology and in some of the repercussions on the development of human society; there is no radical challenge to the unjust system on which it is based. The conflictual aspects of the political sphere are absent; or rather they have been avoided.

Theologically, therefore, we will consider temporal progress as a continuation of the work of creation and explore its connection with redemptive action. Redemption implies a direct relation to sin, and sin—the breach of friendship

with God and others—is a human, social, and historical reality which originates in a socially and historically situated freedom.

“Creation,” the cosmos, suffers from the consequences of sin. To cite Rom. 8 in this regard is interesting and does broaden our perspective, but this passage is not directly related to the question at hand. The immediate relationship between creation and redemption easily leads to a juxtaposition or to an artificial inclusion of the former into the latter, in which creation is granted autonomy and yet struggles to escape from the straitjacket it is thus put into. It will be necessary to look at the question from a greater distance, or in other terms, to penetrate it more deeply, in order to capture in a single view or to establish on a single principle the creation-redemption relationship. In the way the problem has previously been stated, there is a curious omission of the liberating and protagonistic role of humankind, the lord of creation and co-participant in its own salvation.⁸⁹ As we have already pointed out in this chapter, only the concept of the mediation of human self-creation in history can lead us to an accurate and fruitful understanding of the relationship between creation and redemption. This line of interpretation is suggested by the outstanding fact of the Exodus; because of it, creation is regarded as the first salvific act and salvation as a new creation. Without the perspective of political liberation we cannot go beyond a relationship between two separate “orders,” that of creation and that of redemption.⁹⁰ The liberation approach subverts also the very “order” involved in the posing of the question.

The human work, the transformation of nature, continues creation only if it is a human act, that is to say, if it is not alienated by unjust socio-economic structures. A whole theology of work, despite its evident insights, appears naive from a political point of view. Teilhard de Chardin is among those who contributed most to a search for a unity between faith and the “religion of the world,” but he does so from a scientific point of view. He values the dominion over nature that humankind has achieved and speaks of it as the penetration point of evolution, enabling humankind to control it. Politically his vision is, on the whole, neutral.⁹¹ This focus has had a definite impact, as could be expected, on the views of theologians of the developed world. The faith-science conflict and the application of science to the transformation of the world have sapped most of their energy. This is why concern for human society is translated into terms of development and progress.⁹² In other areas the problems are different. The concerns of the so-called Third World countries revolve around the social injustice-justice axis, or, in concrete terms, the oppression-liberation axis.⁹³ Thus there is a great challenge to the faith of Christians in these countries. In contradistinction to a pessimistic approach to this world which is so frequent in traditional Christian groups and which encourages escapism, there is proposed in these other countries an optimistic vision which seeks to reconcile faith and the world and to facilitate commitment. But this optimism must be based on facts. Otherwise, this posture can be deceitful and treacherous and can even lead to a justification of the present order of things. In the underdeveloped countries one starts with a rejection of the existing situation,

considered as fundamentally unjust and dehumanizing. Although this is negative vision, it is nevertheless the only one which allows us to go to the root of the problems and to create without compromises a new social order, based on justice and fellowship. This rejection does not produce an escapist attitude but rather a will to revolution.

The concept of political liberation—with economic roots—recalls the conflictual aspects of the historical current of humanity. In this current there is not only an effort to know and dominate nature. There is also a situation—which both affects and is affected by this current—of misery and despoliation of the fruit of human work, the result of the exploitation of human beings; there is a confrontation between social classes and, therefore, a struggle for liberation from oppressive structures which hinder persons from living with dignity and assuming their own destiny. This struggle is the human activity whose ultimate goal must in the first place be enlightened by faith. Once this has been achieved other facets will likewise be illuminated. The horizon of political liberation allows for a new approach to the problem, it throws new light on it, and it enables us to see aspects which had been but dimly perceived; it permits us also to get away from an alleged apolitical science and provides a different context for the crucial role of scientific knowledge in the historical human praxis. Other religions think in terms of cosmos and nature; Christianity, rooted in Biblical sources, thinks in terms of history. And in this history, injustice and oppression, divisions and confrontations exist. But the hope of liberation is also present.

*Christ the Liberator*⁹⁴

The approach we have been considering opens up for us—and this is of utmost importance—unforeseen vistas on the problem of sin. An unjust situation does not happen by chance; it is not something branded by a fatal destiny: there is human responsibility behind it. The prophets said it clearly and energetically and we are rediscovering their words now. This is the reason why the Medellin Conference refers to the state of things in Latin America as a “sinful situation,” as a “rejection of the Lord.”⁹⁵ This characterization, in all its breadth and depth, not only criticizes the individual abuses on the part of those who enjoy great power in this social order; it challenges all their practices, that is to say, it is a repudiation of the whole existing system—to which the Church itself belongs.

In this approach we are far, therefore, from that naive optimism which denies the role of sin in the historical development of humanity. This was the criticism, one will remember, of the Schema of Ariccia and it is frequently made in connection with Teilhard de Chardin and all those theologies enthusiastic about human progress. But in the liberation approach sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior reality—asserted just enough to necessitate “spiritual” redemption which does not challenge the order in which we live. Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of

fellowship and love in relationships among persons, the breach of friendship with God and with other persons, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture. When it is considered in this way, the collective dimensions of sin are rediscovered. This is the Biblical notion that Jose Maria Gonzalez Ruiz calls the "hamartiosphere," the sphere of sin: "a kind of parameter or structure which objectively conditions the progress of human history itself."⁹⁶ Moreover, sin does not appear as an afterthought, something which one has to mention so as not to stray from tradition or leave oneself open to attack. Nor is this a matter of escape into a fleshless spiritualism. Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of humans by humans, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation.⁹⁷ It cannot be encountered in itself, but only in concrete instances, in particular alienations.⁹⁸ K is impossible to understand the concrete manifestations without understanding the underlying basis and vice versa. Sin demands a radical liberation, which in turn necessarily implies a political liberation.⁹⁹ Only by participating in the historical process of liberation will it be possible to show the fundamental alienation present in every partial alienation.

This radical liberation is the gift which Christ offers us. By his death and resurrection he redeems us from sin and all its consequences, as has been well said in a text we quote again: "It is the same God who, in the fullness of time, sends his Son in the flesh, so that he might come to liberate all men from all slavery to which sin has subjected them: hunger, misery, oppression, and ignorance, in a word, that injustice and hatred which have their origin in human selfishness."¹⁰⁰ This is why the Christian life is a passover, a transition from sin to grace, from death to life, from injustice to justice, from the subhuman to the human. Christ introduces us by the gift of his Spirit into communion with God and with all human beings. More precisely, it is because he introduces us into this communion, into a continuous search for its fullness, that he conquers sin—which is the negation of love—and all its consequences.¹⁰¹

In dealing with the notion of liberation in Chapter 2, we distinguished three levels of meaning: political liberation, human liberation throughout history, liberation from sin and admission to communion with God. In the light of the present chapter, we can now study this question again. These three levels mutually affect each other, but they are not the same. One is not present without the others, but they are distinct: they are all part of a single, all-encompassing salvific process, but they are to be found at different levels.¹⁰² Not only is the growth of the Kingdom not reduced to temporal progress; because of the Word accepted in faith, we see that the fundamental obstacle to the Kingdom, which is sin, is also the root of all misery and injustice; we see that the very meaning of the growth of the Kingdom is also the ultimate precondition for a just society and a new humanity. One reaches this root and this ultimate precondition only through the acceptance of the liberating gift of Christ, which surpasses all expectations. But, inversely, all struggle against exploitation and alienation, in a history which is fundamentally one, is an

attempt to vanquish selfishness, the negation of love. This is the reason why any effort to build a just society is liberating. And it has an indirect but effective impact on the fundamental alienation. It is a salvific work, although it is not all of salvation. As a human work it is not exempt from ambiguities, any more than what is considered to be strictly "religious" work. But this does not weaken its basic orientation or its objective results.

Temporal progress—or, to avoid this aseptic term, human liberation—and the growth of the Kingdom both are directed toward complete communion of human beings with God and among themselves. They have the same goal, but they do not follow parallel roads, not even convergent ones. The growth of the Kingdom is a process which occurs historically *in* liberation, insofar as liberation means a greater human fulfillment. Liberation is a precondition for the new society, but this is not all it is. While liberation is implemented in liberating historical events, it also denounces their limitations and ambiguities, proclaims their fulfillment, and impels them effectively towards total communion. This is not an identification.¹⁰³ Without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the Kingdom. But the process of liberation will not have conquered the very roots of human oppression and exploitation without the coming of the Kingdom, which is above all a gift. Moreover, we can say that the historical, political liberating event *is* the growth of the Kingdom and *is* a salvific event; but it is not *the* coming of the Kingdom, not *all* of salvation. It is the historical realization of the Kingdom and, therefore, it also proclaims its fullness. This is where the difference lies. It is a distinction made from a dynamic viewpoint, which has nothing to do with the one which holds for the existence of two juxtaposed "orders," closely connected or convergent, but deep down different from each other.

The very radicalness and totality of the salvific process require this relationship. Nothing escapes this process, nothing is outside the pale of the action of Christ and the gift of the Spirit. This gives human history its profound unity. Those who reduce the work of salvation are indeed those who limit it to the strictly "religious" sphere and are not aware of the universality of the process. It is those who think that the work of Christ touches the social order in which we live only indirectly or tangentially, and not in its roots and basic structure. It is those who in order to protect salvation (or to protect their interests) lift salvation from the midst of history, where individuals and social classes struggle to liberate themselves from the slavery and oppression to which other individuals and social classes have subjected them. It is those who refuse to see that the salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation. It is those who by trying to "save" the work of Christ will "lose" it.

In Christ the all-comprehensiveness of the liberating process reaches its fullest sense. His work encompasses the three levels of meaning which we mentioned above. A Latin American text on the missions seems to us to summarize this assertion accurately: "All the dynamism of the cosmos and of human history, the movement towards the creation of a more just and fraternal

world, the overcoming of social inequalities among persons, the efforts, so urgently needed on our continent, to liberate humankind from all that depersonalizes it—physical and moral misery, ignorance and hunger—as well as the awareness of human dignity (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 22)—all these originate, are transformed, and reach their perfection in the saving work of Christ. In him and through him salvation is present at the heart of human history, and there is no human act which, in the last instance, is not defined in terms of it.”¹⁰⁴