

Topic 22: The Point of Fundamental Theology: The Quest for Salvation

Salvation in history is not to be equated completely with salvation history; but the former is the body of the latter, its visible aspect, the thing, which enables it to be operative. Ignacio Ellacuria

I. The Roots of the Religious Question: The question of God arises as the problem of the ground and goal of our human striving. Where did we come from and where are we going? Implicit in these anthropologically centered questions one finds the question of ultimacy, of God, and of human wholeness. (Rahner notes that we humans are, in our very being, a question and a mystery. Our questions are endless, a fact that can be verified in the personal experience of everyone.)

The roots of religious experience lie within the human subject and his/her experience. It is not only a question of where from or where to, but why? And for what? The "religious" as a category should not be understood initially on the level of content as though religious experience begins with a religious "object." Rather, the religious question arises as a dimension of human existence as given. Human existence is driven by positive desire and the striving for wholeness. At the same time human existence is finite, limited and ultimately ends in death.

The religious question arises most poignantly in the experience of suffering. We raise questions about what is implicitly experienced as absent or lacking to our integral existence. If it were not lacking, there would be no question. The dialectics of positive desire and finitude, of beauty and suffering, give rise to the religious question.

The religious question thus arises out of experiences of negativity which can only be recognized as negative in the context of positive desires for "life and life to the full." For this reason, the religious question is intrinsically the question of salvation.

II. Salvation in History: Salvation history is a salvation in and of history. The belief that salvation has a history points to the historical character of salvific acts. The expectation that salvation should influence history highlights the salvific character of historical acts. This "historical soteriology" focuses on the relationship between Christian salvation and historical liberation. It seeks to liberate soteriology from the idealistic temptations to split the world of God from the human world and to articulate the relationship of transcendence to history by showing how the presence of God's salvation becomes manifest in history.

Historical soteriology overcomes the twin temptations of objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism reduces the actions of God in history to objective intellectual formulas and is alien to God in human history. It results in soteriological docetism. Subjectivism appeals to personal subjectivity as the basis for verifying every other reality. It leads to a truncated view of the connection between the world of God and the human historical world.

Historical soteriology puts us in touch with the "gratuitous newness of God." The historical revelation of God reaches its apex in Jesus, who lived in a specific place and time, from various tradition-laden strands of human history. The Word of God that irrupts into history configures history as a history of revelation.

From the perspective of historical soteriology, creation does not refer to a discrete "point" on a time-line: i.e. the starting point. In the Bible, creation is not a once-and-for-all act of God, nor is it limited merely to establishing the "time and space" for the drama of salvation. Creation and "new creation" language are about how God is forming a world and a people. God is constantly "remaking" it, because it constantly fails to show forth the glorious image and destiny that the Creator has in mind. Hence, salvation and creation are one unified grace of God.

Historical soteriology links the salvation mediated by Jesus to the ones Ellacuria calls "the crucified people." The death of Jesus is viewed from the perspective of the ongoing crucifixion of the people and the oppression of the people from the perspective of the cross of Jesus. A believer who comes face to face with this historical reality and recognizes it as "that which should not be" faces the religious question about "the sin of the world." Viewing the death of Jesus in light of the oppression of the crucified people serves to safeguard against the tendency to romanticize either the crucifixion or the historical suffering of the poor.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you think we will ever fully understand the answer to the purpose of human existence? Why or why not?
2. What sort of religion would exist in the world without the concept of suffering?