

**Gaudium et Spes and the
Metaphysics of Christian Soteriology**

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One of the most important aspects of the attempt to understand recent currents in theological anthropology in its dialogue with contemporary western cultures, concerns the doctrine of salvation.¹ *Gaudium et Spes* provides a wonderful case study in this connection. In the context of its own time of social and intellectual upheaval, and in looking to address “the entire human family”, one of its most overarching themes concerns the salvation of the world at large. As such, it looks to relate the Christian doctrine of salvation to the widest human concerns.²

If the same challenge is to be taken up by the Christian community in its own time and context fifty years later, it is important to take into account not only the great diversity of views concerning salvation in our own day, but to also offer some account of the underlying *structures of difference* that give rise to this diversity. This paper looks to make a contribution to this goal, while also investigating something of the soteriological vision of *Gaudium et Spes* itself and of the implicit metaphysics underpinning it.

I

The Doctrine of Salvation and the Context of *Gaudium et Spes*

What does ‘salvation’ mean, and in what sense is it affected? Can the doctrine of salvation be articulated in ways that are accessible to western secular culture, or is the proclamation of salvation in Christ (*kerygma*) counter-cultural by definition? Central to the contentions of this essay is the claim that such fundamental theological questions cannot begin to be meaningfully posed without a thorough examination of metaphysical issues which are deeply implicated in theological discourses. Any soteriological account proceeds from a great many generally *implicit* understandings of both the metaphysics of human being and of Divine transcendence. No contemporary soteriological reflection (or indeed theological anthropology at large) can side-step such matters; for even when disregarded they continue (perhaps even more profoundly) to shape the terms of the debate. Still less can any attempt to bring Christian soteriology into dialogue with contemporary multi-religious and secular societies afford to ignore such matters.

There is, and long has been, enormous diversity within the Christian community concerning the nature and meaning of the doctrine(s) of salvation. It is deeply curious, perhaps even ironic, that while conceptualisation and articulation of the Christian doctrines of Christ and Trinity were exhaustively debated and definitively expressed by the mid fifth century – with such debates and creedal statements being filled with the sophisticated ‘state of the art’ Greek metaphysical concepts of the day – the doctrine of *salvation* in Christ as such (surely the very heart of the Gospel) received comparatively scant attention during the patristic era. What is more, as J.N.D. Kelly long ago pointed out, “while the conviction of redemption through Christ has always been the motive force of Christian faith, no universally accepted definition of the manner of its achievement has been formulated to this day”;³ nor, it should be added, to ours. This is especially perplexing considering the fact that perhaps the central consideration operative in patristic theological debates – that which was often used to distinguish orthodox from heterodox – was precisely the concern to safeguard the primacy of Christ’s role as mediator of salvation. Christological,

¹ Throughout this essay, the terms “salvation” and thus “soteriology” will be used in preference to “atonement” or “redemption” which arguably carry a more specific and interpretive sense of the ‘work’ of Christ.

² See *GS*, a. 3.

³ J N D. Kelly. *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977), 163

Trinitarian and pneumatological doctrines were not developed prior to, but were rather consciously derived from, *underlying* anthropological and soteriological imperatives.

Christian soteriology as such developed little beyond the rich metaphorical allusions of the New Testament, which are primarily “evocative” rather than “descriptive”.⁴ Biblical soteriology works almost exclusively through analogical models, each of which operate according to a root metaphor. Dominant New Testament soteriological models include those based on metaphors of “battle” (e.g., Col 2: 14ff); “law” (e.g., Eph 1: 7; Rom 8: 1); “slavery” (e.g., Mk 10: 45; Rom 6: 15ff); “adoption” (e.g., Gal 4: 4-7; Rom 8: 12ff); “sacrifice” (e.g., Heb 9: 11ff; 1Jn 1: 7ff); “scapegoat” (e.g., 2Cor 5: 21); “new birth” (e.g., Jn 3: 1ff; Rom 6: 1ff); “healing” (e.g., 1Pet 2: 24); and “relationships” (e.g., Rom 5: 10).⁵ Such imagery is the very heart and fibre of Christian soteriology. In speaking directly to the human soul and cutting beneath all propositional truth-claims, their evocative power is essential to their effectiveness. But consequently, while they *orientate* Christian soteriology, they cannot in themselves bear the weight of more searching analyses. In *what sense* are human beings in need of salvation, and by what means can/has it been affected? Unless one *already* has a sense of one’s personal (or corporate) need for salvation, and an experience of salvation from this state, then it is very difficult to intellectually capture the ‘content’ of such soteriological imagery, translating it into conceptually elaborated formulations.

If such biblical imagery is the heart of Christian soteriology, each era is then faced with the task of situating and mediating this inheritance within its own context and realities. *Gaudium et Spes* is a striking example of this task in action. Its strongly historically-embedded presentation resonated strongly with the tenor of its (and our) time, even while it maintained a strong degree of metaphysical realism.

Before this can be specifically considered (see section 3, below), it is first necessary to explore some of the metaphysical parameters of Christian soteriology in general. There are a great many of these, far more than can be broached (let alone done justice) here. In what follows, the focus will be on two parameters in particular and the way assumptions in these areas determine the kind of claims made concerning Christ’s ‘saving work’. The parameters chosen concern the ontology of identity and temporality. In focusing on the onto-temporal parameters of Christian soteriology, a range of matters of great import in the history of metaphysics will arise concerning the status of universals and the nature of historical causation, though again this paper can hope only to scratch the surface of these vastly complex issues.

II

The Metaphysics of Christian Soteriological Diversity: A Survey

Typological analysis is particularly well suited to the task at hand, given the way it facilitates a systematisation of the *bases* of difference, as distinct from simply *enumerating* the instances of difference. Relationships among various opposed points of view are presented as part of a larger matrix, thus sharpening the understanding of the relationship between diverse views, as well as pointing out hitherto unrecognised points of both disagreement and similarity. In this way simple dichotomies are opened into a series of related but distinct conceptual issues. While risking of a certain hermeneutical violence at the margins, such approach can be very helpful in highlighting a variety of metaphysical issues pertaining to traditions of soteriology.

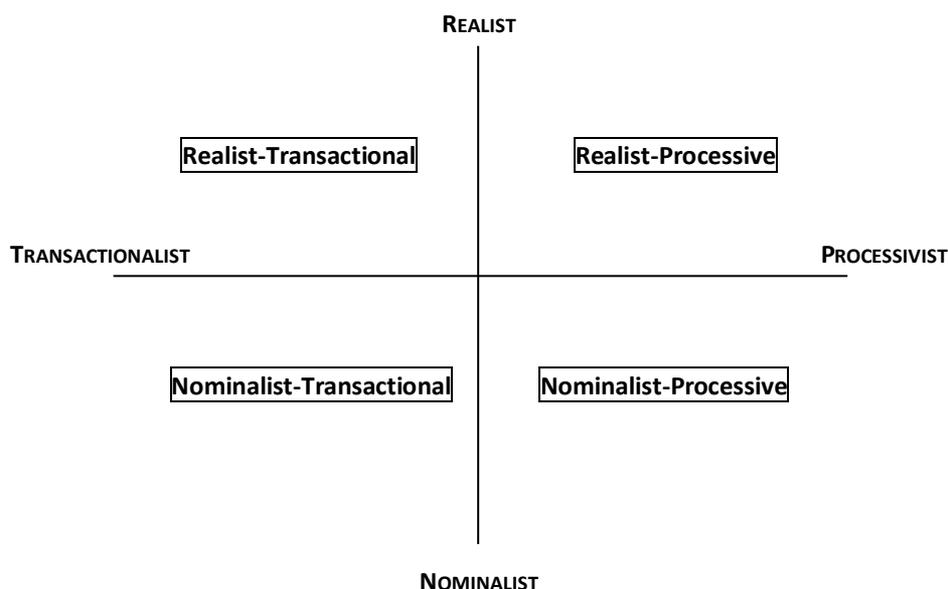
George Rupp’s soteriological typology (outlined in his seminal *Christologies and Cultures*⁶) provides an extremely valuable framework for analysing the metaphysical roots of the striking diversity within

⁴ This distinction is central to the philosophy of religious language developed by Ian Ramsey several decades ago. See: Wim de Pater, “Religious Language: The Ramsey Model” in André Cloots (ed), *Framing a Vision of the World: Essays in Philosophy, Science, and Religion* (Leuven University Press, 1999), 99-128.

⁵ This list is of course far from complete and the references provide only a sample. Further, there is no indication of either the subtle distinctions among the various kindred models, or of the intricate way in which New Testament texts consistently interweave these categories.

⁶ George Rupp *Christologies and Cultures: Towards a Typology of Religious Worldviews* (The Hague: Moulton, 1974).

Christian soteriology. His approach works by plotting two dimensions – identity (realism-nominalism) and temporality (transactional-processive) – along different axes,⁷ and in this way four basic soteriological types emerge:



The realist vs nominalist distinction (identity axis) is continuous with the great medieval debates over the status of universals; that is, whether collective nouns (e.g., in this case, ‘humankind’ and ‘sinners’) signify realities transcendent to language and thought, or whether individuals alone exist. The repercussions of this debate for the understanding of the universality of the fall and redemption, are clearly enormous. Accordingly, realist theologies of salvation assume or rely on notions of ‘real’ collectivity with regard to fallen and saved humanity. Such a metaphysics makes it possible to speak coherently of Adam’s individual action having a lasting corporate effect on the whole of humanity, as well as Christ’s actions reconciling the whole of humanity to God. On the other hand, nominalist soteriologies function without recourse to such universalist assumptions, focusing instead on the fallenness and/or salvation of individual people and/or particular communities. On this account, only individuals (or perhaps individuals in immediate community) exist, and consequently salvation can only be affected at this level.

If the identity axis concerns the possibility of *trans-personal collectivity*, the temporality axis relates to possibilities concerning *historical fulfilment*, and the focus here is on understanding of the effect of the Christ event in history. Accordingly, Rupp defines a transactionalist approach as one in which “final religious value in some sense transcends historical life”,⁸ in which (to elaborate somewhat) a single historical or metahistorical event can have a determining ‘in-principle’ influence on the whole of history, quite independent of its actualisation in the historical process itself. Thus, the life, death and resurrection of Christ had (and have) a determining “transhistorical” effect on the whole of history, even if this needs to be appropriated by each individual in order to be actualised. On the other hand, the processive approach sees meaning only in historical particularity – in temporal change and development – whether or not any over-arching determinative ‘end’ or historical teleology is perceived. Hence, the effects of the life and death of Jesus are mediated only through on-going changes and developments in history: through the agency of socio-cultural, institutional and intellectual movements, through individuals who have been profoundly moved by their encounter with the Christian story, and/or through the direct oversight of divine providence.

⁷ The naming of the axes and their representation above is my own (not Rupp’s).

⁸ Rupp, *Christologies*, 7.

In what follows, following Rupp's own lead in this regard, various scriptural, historical and recent theologies of salvation will be discussed in the context of their exemplification of one of the quadrants identified above.

Realist-Transactional [RT] Quadrant

The RT approach represents a central biblical and patristic understanding that is deeply in accord with both the earliest Christian evangelists' conviction about the absolute and concrete change in the human situation wrought by the life and death of Christ (ontology), and the paramount scriptural motif of the God of Israel's decisive interventions in history (temporality). The idea that the death-resurrection of Jesus irrevocably changed the human condition vis-a-vis God, is found throughout scripture, from texts which operate primarily out of the 'redemption' model, such as Col 1:13-14, to those which explicitly invoke the idea of sacrifice, such as Heb 9:11 and Rom 3:23-25.

According to this approach (and notwithstanding the Pauline "effective through faith" qualifier, discussed below), the Jesus-event is understood as having an ontologically and cosmically significant impact on humanity as a whole, somehow changing the very nature of the human condition and our relationship with God. Change and development throughout history are interpreted as *consequences of* the single ontological 'event' or salvific transaction of the cross-resurrection. The transactionalism of these approaches is logically underpinned by their realism. Just as Adam and Eve are understood to represent all humanity in their succumbing to sin and death, so too Christ's representative humanity serves as the mechanism by which all people are objectively redeemed from this state. For without the idea that Jesus acted *on behalf of* all humanity, the whole death-resurrection drama loses its trans-historical significance, and is rendered a purely personal triumph.

On the whole, patristic soteriology is characterised by a general RT approach. Fundamentally RT assumptions are implicit across a range of patristic soteriologies: from the 'satisfaction' approach of Hilary of Poitiers, to the sacrifice-ransom understanding of Cyril of Alexandria, to the "fishhook" theory of Gregory of Nyssa, Rufinus of Aquileia and Gregory the Great (according to which Christ's Divinity served as the "trap" hidden in the "bait" of Jesus on the cross, thereby deceiving the devil and breaking the gates of hell⁹). Athanasius provides a vivid example of this approach which is unthinkable without a thoroughly RT metaphysics:

Since [Christ] has come into our realm and has dwelt in a body similar to ours, now every machination of the enemy against men has ceased and the corruption of death, which formerly held power over them, has been destroyed. For the race of men would have perished, unless the Lord of all and saviour, the Son of God, had come to put an end to death.¹⁰

Anselm's *Cur Deus-Homo?* is similarly underpinned by an eminently RT metaphysics. For Anselm, the infinite seriousness of human sin meant that the offence to God could only be removed by a 'God-human': human since we were the offending party, and Divine since an act of infinite value was required. The salvific event of Christ's death is a 'transaction' (in this case, amends for offence) underwritten by the realist notion of Jesus' representative humanity.

⁹ See, Alister McGrath's *A Christian Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 180.

¹⁰ Athanasius "De Incarnatione", in Thomson, R W. (ed; transl) *Athanasius: 'Contra Gentes' and 'De Incarnatione'* ix (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 155.

Karl Barth's enormously nuanced soteriology outlined in his "Doctrine of Reconciliation",¹¹ represents one of the most systematic and uncompromising RT approaches in recent theology.¹² First, there is an uncompromising realism at the heart of his approach. Christ is mediator in an absolute sense: "the middle point in which the sovereign act of the reconciling God and the being of reconciled man are one";¹³ he is God and man and "in the unity of the two, the guarantor and witness of our atonement."¹⁴ Indeed, presumably in reference to Bultmann style NT approaches (see below), he even speaks of the need to be "on our guard against" approaches which treat Christ "in a purely 'nominalistic' way, as a formal historical or symbolical sign of the event of atonement", countering that "[t]his event ... corresponds not only to cognition but Being ... necessarily enclosed in [Jesus] ... tak[ing] place in Him".¹⁵ Jesus Christ is not to be understood merely as "one man side by side with many others ... [but as] *the* One, whose existence necessarily touches that of all other men"; for there is an "ontological connection between the man of Jesus on one side and all other men on the other".¹⁶

This raises a central difficulty for any soteriological realism, and characteristically, Barth faces it head on: viz, the dual assertion of the 'in principle' achievement of the cross, alongside the fact of continuing sin and death. While he acknowledges the distinction between the 'objective' achievement of the cross and the need for the individual's "recognition, acknowledgment and acceptance of [God's] verdict",¹⁷ he struggles with the vast problem raised by the very *possibility* of the individual's refusal that seemingly negates "the Divine Yes spoken by Jesus Christ".¹⁸ Soteriological realism makes sin all but incomprehensible, for how can the continued reality (indeed, the rude health!) of the very phenomenon objectively defeated by the cross be explained? Barth describes it as "an impossible possibility".¹⁹

Second, the essentially transactionalist nature of Barth's theology is clear: the Christ even was a once-only event in history that changed everything. "The atonement", as he puts it, "is history. [We must] know it .. think of it .. speak of it as such. To try to grasp it as supra-historical or non-historical truth, is not to grasp it at all. It is truth actualised ... not revealed ... in history."²⁰ Or as he puts it elsewhere, it is "not a repeated, let alone a general occurrence [for] there is no other reconciliation of the world with God for any other man, than that which took place in this One".²¹ As for the precise nature of the reconciling action that took place in Jesus, Barth seems far less concerned. While seemingly preferring Anselmic language of debt and restoration of order,²² he also deals with the 'Christus Victor' model and a range of scriptural models, arguing that a variety of conceptions are possible.²³ The crux of his understanding of the transactional 'how' of the salvific work of Christ, is simply that it be understood as God "do[ing] that which is sufficient for the taking away of sin, to restore order between himself ... and His creation".²⁴

¹¹ It is a moot point whether it is even permissible to speak of 'Barthian soteriology' as such, for the very structure of his Christology means that any clear distinction between the "person" and "work" of Christ is to be avoided by definition. See Barth *Church Dogmatics* (CD), IV(i) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 124-125.

¹² It is of course impossible to do justice to the vast nuance of Barth's account here. One might, for instance, gesture toward the theme of eschatological consummation in his thought and see faint echoes of Irenaeus. But such typological contraindications should to be read in the context of his strong metaphysically RT assumptions.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁶ Barth, CD, IV(ii) (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1956), 36; 275. See also his theology of "election".

¹⁷ Barth, CD, IV(i), 93.

¹⁸ See *Ibid.*, 138-45. Quotation on p.145.

¹⁹ Barth, CD, III(iii), quoted in Rupp, *Christologies*, 55.

²⁰ Barth, CD, IV(i), 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 254-55.

²² *Ibid.*, 250ff.

²³ *Ibid.*, 170-83.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 254-55.

Realist-Processive [RP] Quadrant

Soteriological positions underpinned by a realist-processivist metaphysics speak of the cross and resurrection (often in conjunction with incarnation and other divine salvific moments) as an event of cosmic significance that is teleologically ‘worked through’ history, a process that will eventually reach eschatological fulfilment. In this way, God’s saving work is a function not simply of a once-and-for-all overcoming of evil in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but of a vast historical journey by which creation is drawn to back to its source. What is at stake here is not simply an alternative theological vision, but a different conception of time and reality as such.

RP soteriologies draw on a range of scriptural passages. Rev 21 presents a vision of Christ as “the Alpha and the Omega” of history, “making all things new” (v.5-6). This resonates with the prologue to John’s gospel in which the Christ is presented as integral to the world’s creation and salvation in history, a vision that is reinforced by various Pauline passages such as the hymns to Christ at the beginning of the letters to the Colossians (esp. 1:15-20) and Ephesians (esp. 1:8-10).

Among patristic theologies of salvation, an eminently RP approach is clear in one of the earliest: Irenaeus.²⁵ Certainly, his approach is deeply realist, for a central premise of his thought is of God acting decisively in history, not least in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. However, his vision is very different from one in which a single disastrous primeval event is made right by a single reconciling transaction in Christ by which reconciliation is affected. For Irenaeus, far from being a matter of a reversal to the origin, salvation history is rather the milieu of maturation: from the intellectual, moral, even sexual innocence of Adam and Eve²⁶ to the eventual fulfilment of maturity and perfection in Christ at the eschaton.²⁷ According to this vision, even the original sin of the first humans was the first painful step along the path to maturity.²⁸ The Old Covenant is presented as an intrinsic stage in the inexorable process of God drawing all things to himself, and the life and death of Christ is seen in a similar context.²⁹ In the meantime, “the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs” (Rom 8:32). Irenaeus speaks of “the long suffering of God” as humanity “pass[es] through all these things”,³⁰ while his vision climaxes in a powerful pneumatological soteriology by which the Spirit brings the great human drama to completion in immortality and perfection.³¹

An exemplary contemporary exponent of RP soteriology is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard’s vision of Christ as the Omega Point of history has intellectual and spiritual roots that draw deeply on various threads of tradition: from Irenaeus, to Darwin to Hegel.³² Teilhardian soteriology is unambiguously realist; as real and objective as organic evolution which is itself part of something much larger and more profound. The Teilhardian Christ is the ultimate universal; beyond even the concept of universal humanity, Christ is *the* cosmic reality in whom all individuals exist and move, and toward whom they strive. Central to this all-pervasive soteriological realism is an axiomatic commitment to the intrinsic inter-

²⁵ It is true that there are moments of ‘transactionalist’ language in Irenaeus’ thought as well, but these this need to be understood within the broader picture he presents of God’s on-going salvific action in history, without which – presumably – the Christ event alone would be profoundly unfulfilled. For him, the events of the incarnation must be seen in the context of the whole history of God’s salvific drawing-forth of humankind, from garden to eschaton.

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, (AH), III:22(iv) in Roberts. A, Donaldson, J (eds) *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol 1, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1981), 251.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, IV:38(i), 521.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, IV:39(i), 522.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, V:1:(i), 523. See also Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* (London: SPCK, 1931), 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, III:20(ii), 450.

³¹ *Ibid.*, IV:38(iii), 522.

³² It is worth noting in passing that the figure of Hegel looms large in Rupp’s account of Christian soteriology. On his account, Hegel is instrumental in the nascent coming together of realist and nominalist approaches, with Hegelian processivism being itself, in some sense, a dialectical fulfilment of the truth of both soteriological realism and nominalism.

connectedness of all things in Christ. Indeed, salvation itself has no other meaning for Teilhard outside of this inter-connected striving, for “I can only be saved as part of the universe”.³³

But second, Teilhard’s realism is also programmatically processivist. While he shares with Barth an insistence on the influence of Christ as the ultimate ‘in principle’ reality in history, this influence is not for him focused on a single transaction in time, but on the whole teleological flow of history. Informed by both theology and evolutionary science, Teilhardian thought was revolutionary in its day for its inclusion of the larger bio-cosmological context within its theological vision; a process in which the physical and the spiritual dimensions are one. All of creation is wrapped up in the salvific work of God in history, with humankind being the “leading shoot” of this cosmic evolution.³⁴ In an absolutely Realist sense, Christ is seen as the principle and source of the drive of all things toward final unity, and hence the meaning of history itself. The Omega Point of organic evolution *is* the Cosmic Christ. This pan-historical soteriological vision is underpinned by a thoroughly teleological (albeit at times messy) process which transforms and defines all the particulars of history as it moves toward synthesis. For Teilhard, the cross is most of all a symbol – *the* symbol – in time and space, for the totality of what is going on in the whole of history; indeed, “the human epic resembles nothing so much as a way of the cross”.³⁵ But the actual ‘work’ of salvation is accomplished not *by* the cross as such, but by the vast historical process of the Cosmic Christ drawing all things to himself.

Nominalist-Transactional [NT] Quadrant

In turning to the third quadrant – and thus the nominalist bottom half of the typology – what slips away are any references to the reality of salvation as either ‘achieved’ or in the process of being achieved *per se*. Salvation is no longer understood to apply ‘in principle’, but only insofar as it is enacted in the life of the individual (and to some degree the immediate community of individuals).

While NT soteriologies focus on the cross and resurrection as the core locus of salvation (the transactionalist aspect), their nominalism is highlighted in the fact that salvation is seen as affected only insofar as it is ‘real’ in the life of the individual. Indeed, except for this reality in/for the individual, it might even be said that there *is* no ‘fact’ of the salvific achievement of the cross and resurrection of Christ at all. This approach takes seriously the telling Pauline qualification “effective through faith” in Rom 3:23-25, and which is sharpened further by other passages such as Rom 10:9: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”.

Throughout the patristic and medieval periods, distinct NT approaches seem not to have arisen; the Pauline qualification having been fully subsumed within the realist accounts of the transactionality of the cross-resurrection. Rupp identifies the fourteenth century figure of Gabriel Biel as a key transitional figure in this respect, but it is with Immanuel Kant that a sophisticated and distinctively RT position most clearly emerges, particularly with his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*.³⁶ Having systematically dismantled traditional metaphysics, Kant was obviously in no position to argue for any kind of *a priori* realist interpretation of the cross-resurrection, and his nominalism is clearly shown by his placement of the doctrine of salvation within the context of human morality. For Kant, salvation amounts to a total revolution in the individual’s moral constitution from one in which evil holds sway to one in which the moral law has victory. Yet this transaction occurs not in time (and is thus not open to empirical confirmation), but belongs to noumenal reality.³⁷

³³ From “Comment je Crois”, quoted in Norbert Wilders *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1968), 147.

³⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Collins, 1955), 31.

³⁵ Teilhard *Phenomenon*, 313.

³⁶ See Rupp, *Christologies*, 56ff.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

If Karl Barth's work provides an archetypal recent NT soteriology, then Rudolf Bultmann's approach provides probably the most striking example of a consistently NT account. While Barth's uncompromising realism led him to insist on the objective, in-principle reality of the work of Christ quite apart from its subjective realisation in the individual, Bultmann's strident nominalism refused to allow the historical event of the cross any practical reality apart from its 'subjective' acceptance in faith. In a 1952 letter to Barth, he is very clear on this point:

I can see well enough that in the N[ew] T[estament], the cross of Christ is described as an *intrinsically* significant event which *then* may be and can become significant for faith too. But I cannot follow this sequence, which is possible in mythological thinking, because I cannot understand the phrase "intrinsically significant"; I can understand significance only as a relation.³⁸

Again, what is at stake here is a fundamental metaphysical point at issue. While sharing a commitment to the transactional interpretation of the cross-resurrection of Christ, their differing views about what makes 'sense' metaphysically meant that each theologian had an utterly different understanding of how this is to be understood. For Bultmann, the saving transaction takes place – and can only take place – when the individual receives the *kerygma* in faith, for as Walter Schmithals put it, for Bultmann "the word does not speak *of* the saving event, but is itself the saving event".³⁹ This amounts to an outright denial by Bultmann that the historical event of the cross-resurrection is in any way salvific in and of itself. He understands such talk as mythological in nature, which when taken literally is quite nonsensical. After all, "it is not possible to establish *first* that Christ's crucifixion is the saving event and then to believe (for this would mean seeing Jesus as Christ *before* believing him to be so)". Consequently, "[t]he crucifixion can be seen as the saving event ... only *in faith*".⁴⁰

For Bultmann, eternity is present not on Golgotha as such, but (to coin a phrase) in the 'transaction of faith'. This is because an eschatological event is, by definition, one which cannot be tied down to a fixed time and place, but rather transcends such categories, being present only in proclamation.⁴¹ In this way, the eschatological event of the cross-resurrection can be regarded as 'saving' only to the extent that they are proclaimed and believed to be such.

Nominalist-Processive [NP] Quadrant

NP soteriologies are the most metaphysically 'stripped down', and in this respect there is a strong case for seeing it as the one most in tune with the contemporary metaphysical *Zeitgeist*. This approach de-emphasises or rejects both the cosmic transactional nature of the cross-resurrection, as well as the notion of trans-historical realities or processes. Instead, the focus is shifted to the struggle of individuals and communities to work for the salvation of all people under the inspiration of the message of Jesus. Consequently, the emphasis is strongly on praxis, and in this connection the death of Jesus is generally understood in the context of his life, teachings and example, usually as the historically enacted climax to the gospel he proclaimed. Also emphasised is what the death and resurrection of Jesus reveals about the nature of God's loving engagement with humanity; for it is this insight that underpins the ethical imperative: the Christian response to the disarming passion of God.

³⁸ Quoted in Bernd Jaspert (ed) *Karl Barth - Rudolf Bultmann Letters* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 93. It is fascinating to read the frank but warm and respectful correspondence between the two, especially given Barth's contention that at the end of the day he had to regard Bultmann's approach as "heretical" (Jaspert *Barth - Bultmann Letters*, 143). For Bultmann, Barth's approach was merely "nonsense" (*ibid*, 95)!

³⁹ Walter Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (London: SCM, 1968), 174.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴¹ Rudolf Bultmann, "Jesus Christ and Mythology", in Johnson, R. (ed) *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era* (London: Collins, 1987), *passim*.

An NP perspective emerges through scriptural passages in which Jesus is presented as exemplar, and in which action in the world is called forth (e.g., 1Pet 2:21-23). The nature of this action varies from more communal (1 Jn 3:16) to more universal (Matt 25:31ff). Nonetheless, the focus is always on present action in the world by which God's salvific action is realised.

Peter Abelard is a key pre-modern proponent of NP soteriology. As with Irenaeus, the distinctiveness of his approach is at times masked by the use of traditional RT imagery,⁴² though it is clear that his understanding of such language is sharply nominalistic (centred on the individual's acceptance of his/her reconciliation in Christ's blood⁴³). But further, in Abelard's understanding, the motive and effect of the cross-resurrection is almost exclusively linked to the revelation of God's love for humanity. He explicates Rom 3:21-25, for example, by wholly equating the revelation of the righteousness of God in Jesus, with the revelation of his love; a love "which justifies us before him, or in other words, reveal[s] his love to us, convinc[ing] us how much we ought to love him 'who spared not even his own Son' ".⁴⁴

Since, for Abelard, the cross is purely the result of God's free choice to reveal himself to humanity, and in particular the depth of his love, thereby calling forth a response of self-giving love in return, he explicitly rejects any soteriological approach which speaks either of God's compulsion to act, or of any quasi-judicial 'due process' or transaction which changes God's basic attitude towards humanity. After all, in his love for humanity God is free to forgive sin at any time. Indeed, he foreshadows something very much like the disdain shown by many contemporary philosophers of religion and theologians concerning models of horrific suffering that are presented as paving the way for Divine forgiveness, or which are said to serve Divine ends:

Indeed how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain; still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world.⁴⁵

In Rupp's judgment, Abelard's influence can be traced into modern times via movements such as Reformation pietism and English Deism, and individuals such as Italian Reformer Faustus Socinus and twentieth century theologian Albrecht Ritschl.⁴⁶ To this list might be added contemporary theologian, Sebastian Moore, who approaches Christian salvation specifically from the angle of human experience and the individual's psycho-emotional encounter with the living crucified and risen Jesus.⁴⁷

One of the most highly developed examples of a contemporary NP soteriology is that developed by Edward Schillebeeckx in his later and major works which show an uncompromising commitment to understanding salvation in terms of Jesus' own authentic personhood, and the consequent gospel imperative toward praxis.⁴⁸ His focus in these works is based on the need for communities and individuals to 'do' the gospel, to continually work towards the Kingdom of God. The nominalism (or at least the

⁴² See, e.g., his statement that "God in Christ has united our human nature to himself"; and that we are redeemed "in the blood, which means through [the] death [of Christ]". Peter Abelard "Exp in Epist.ad Rom", [ER], 2(iv), quoted in Weingart *The Logic of Divine Love : A Critical Analysis of the Soteriology of Peter Abelard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 79, 81.

⁴³ ER, 2(iv), *ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁴ ER, 2(iv), *ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁵ ER, 2(v), *ibid.*, 88. For contemporary parallels, consider, e.g., the anti-theodicy movement in Christian philosophical theology (e.g., Kenneth Surin. *Theology and the Problem of Evil*. Wipf & Stock, 2004; and D Z. Philips. *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God*. Fortress Press, 2009).

⁴⁶ Rupp, *Christologies*, 68-72.

⁴⁷ See Sebastian Moore. *The Inner Loneliness* (London: DLT, 1982) and *The Fire and the Rose are One* (London: DLT, 1980).

⁴⁸ These works include his *Christ : The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1980) and *Jesus : An Experiment in Christology* (London: SCM, 1979).

highly-chastened realism) of his thought is seen in his refusal to sanction any notion of an ahistorical, acultural 'universal' human condition.⁴⁹ While at one point he does use a broadly inductive approach in suggesting a list of seven "anthropological constants" that delineate general human orientations and values valid across a range of historical and cultural contexts⁵⁰, this list is far from being intended as a definitive outline of universal human characteristics; and they are certainly a long way from any realist notion of an essential and unified human essence which can be assumed and thereby transformed by the "God-man". In a similar vein he comments concerning Jesus that "it is impossible to determine whether a human being bound by time and history has a universal significance ... for all human beings".⁵¹ He does write of Jesus' simultaneous closeness to God and familiarity with human suffering,⁵² but this is only a pale reflection of a fully-fledged RT Anselmian or Barthian Christ who is "very God and very man", ontologically reconciling the two.

Schillebeeckx's soteriology is also strongly processivist. Like Hans Kung, he insists that it is Jesus' life – and not his death as such – which is salvific. The idea of salvation by virtue of Jesus' execution deeply conflicts with his bedrock notion that salvation is salvation *from* suffering. Suffering thus has no salvific significance in and of itself, and he goes as far as to describe the idea that God required Jesus' suffering "as compensation for what *we* make of history", as blasphemous.⁵³ The death of Jesus is to be understood in the light of his life as a whole, and in this regard his interpretation in *Christ* has significant parallels with Abelard's understanding. For Schillebeeckx, "we are not redeemed *thanks* to the death of Christ, but *despite* it".⁵⁴ Its salvific meaning is in the fact that it was the "historical expression of the *unconditional* character of [Jesus'] proclamation and practice."⁵⁵ For Schillebeeckx (as for Liberation Theology generally) this becomes the model for praxis: the imitation, through grace, of Jesus' selfless service in solidarity with all people, even unto death.⁵⁶ Still, Schillebeeckx leaves no doubts about what he sees as the scale of this pervasive reality of 'un-salvation'. In speaking of suffering as "the alpha and omega of the whole history of mankind",⁵⁷ there is a rejection both of the sweeping optimism of RP approaches, as well as RT schemas in which 'victory' has already (in principle) been won.

III

On the Soteriology of *Gaudium et Spes*

Against this typological backdrop, what then might be said of the implicit soteriological vision of *Gaudium et Spes*? While a varied approach is evident, what emerges most strongly is an approach underpinned by a distinctively *RP metaphysics*.

The document exudes a processivist sense of salvation history, embedded in the particularity of place and in the flow of time. Certainly, there are some instances of transactionalist (indeed RT) language in the document, such as images of our having been "emancipated now by Christ, Who was crucified and rose again to break the stranglehold of personified evil";⁵⁸ of Christ having "won this victory when He rose to life, for by His death He freed man from death";⁵⁹ of the cross having "reconciled all men with God".⁶⁰ However, vastly more common is the logic of salvation being enacted across time, supported by a

⁴⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 1-79.

⁵⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 734ff.

⁵¹ Schillebeeckx *Jesus*, 636.

⁵² See, *ibid.*, 266-67, 625 and 606-07 respectively.

⁵³ Schillebeeckx *Christ*, 728.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 729.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 794.

⁵⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 310.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 725.

⁵⁸ *GS*, a. 2.

⁵⁹ *GS*, a. 18.

⁶⁰ *GS*, a. 78.

Christian humanist agenda in which the “thirst for a full and free life worthy of man”,⁶¹ the desire for justice to overcome oppression, for peace and development overcoming violence and poverty, is met by the force of God acting in history.

What is just as striking as the strongly processivist themes, however, is the unhesitating realism of this soteriological narrative. On one hand, it is clear that individual human beings (not the least, Christians themselves) are called forth to act in ways that address human ills. To this extent there is a clear call toward *praxis*: Christians are reminded, for example, of “their obligation to work with all men in the building of a more human world”;⁶² there is extensive exhortation toward “reforms in the socioeconomic realm”;⁶³ of the importance of the guarantee of religious freedom;⁶⁴ of the obligation to work for peace and co-operation among nations;⁶⁵ and so on. Nonetheless, the reason why this vast agenda of the document cannot legitimately be read as an endorsement of a NP soteriological vision is that this would be to read these passages in isolation from the substantial theologically realist narrative that is both threaded through them, and which structurally forms the basis (in Part I) for this material in Part II.

Thus, beyond the notion of Christ simply as *inspiration* for such work,⁶⁶ beyond even the claim that “His Spirit offers Man the light and the strength to measure up to his destiny”,⁶⁷ is the claim that Christ is “the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of human history”.⁶⁸ This unmistakably realist and teleological view of history is announced throughout the text. Indeed, the climax of Part I of the document contains one of its strongest statements of such a vision, replete with repetition of the quasi-Teilhardian language of Christ as “focal point”:

The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings ... Enlivened and united in His Spirit, we journey toward the consummation of human history, one which fully accords with the counsel of God's love: "To re-establish all things in Christ, both those in the heavens and those on the earth" (Eph. 11:10). The Lord Himself speaks: " ... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:12-13).

The effect of this unmistakable RP framework is that other less dramatic passages need to be read in its light. For instance, in any reading of the text as an integrated unity, the notion of Christ being “at work in the hearts of men through the energy of the Holy Spirit”⁶⁹ cannot simply be understood as a mere rhetorical flourish by which we are simply exhorted to work for justice; instead they become statements concerning an immanent teleology at work in history. In this sense, the whole drama of the ‘now and not yet’ of history – of the intersection of immanence and transcendence – is being played out here. Accordingly, even as the vast teleology by which God is *drawing all of creation to himself*, there remains the billions of individual dramas being played out in human hearts as *individuals are called forth to act* in accord with this world-historical teleology.

IV

Metaphysical Realism and Christian Soteriology in Contemporary Context

⁶¹ GS, a. 9.

⁶² GS, a. 57.

⁶³ GS, a. 63.

⁶⁴ GS, a. 73.

⁶⁵ GS, a. 79ff.

⁶⁶ On this, however, see the passages on Jesus' life and ministry as such (e.g., a. 32).

⁶⁷ GS, a. 10.

⁶⁸ GS, a. 10. See also: “By suffering for us He *not only* provided us with an example for our imitation, He blazed a trail ...” (GS, a. 22; emphasis added).

⁶⁹ GS, a. 38.

There is little doubt, I would suggest, that the way *Gaudium et Spes* situated the Christian Gospel of salvation in terms of concrete contemporary socio-cultural, political and economic concerns – framing it in terms of “the signs of the times” and the numerous human exigencies of its day – spoke to its time (and continues to speak to ours) in a fresh and effective way. Salvation thereby becomes understood as that which is happening now in the midst of human history, and in this light everything is important: from the decisions of powerful politicians and captains of industry, to events in even the most humble communities and family groupings. This rootedness in the here-and-now clearly resonates with the mood of the times, as well as the contemporary tendency in western culture to be underwhelmed and often sceptical about the uniqueness (let alone *a priori*) significance of past events, and unimpressed by indicative truth claims about them. Transactionalist language about the significance of the cross-resurrection tends to lack the traction and impact it seems to have had in the past when the metaphysical parameters of both the popular and educated discourses were somewhat different. Thus, a large part of the reason for the power of *Gaudium et Spes* is precisely its ‘this-worldly’, praxis-orientated and historically processivist orientation.

Nonetheless, what remains essential to its vision is the unrelenting metaphysical realism spanning the immanent and transcendent spheres. A compelling question for our own time concerns the extent to which such realism is *essential* for any robust Christian account of salvation, and the extent to which contemporary Christian thought may – with Schillebeeckx, Kung and others – accommodate itself to our metaphysically more nominalistic times. Is this what is meant by heeding the “signs of the times” in our own day? Or is this – as many have suggested in various ways – to risk throwing out the ‘baby’ of the Gospel along with the ‘bathwater’ of realist metaphysics? How should the Church in its proclamation of the Gospel respond to the contemporary “incredulity concerning meta-narratives” characteristic of the contemporary intellectual climate (whether or not it is characteristic of the *popular* discourse – this being another question again⁷⁰)? Was Lyotard speaking perceptively also of the Christian doctrine of salvation when he famously wrote that “[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation”?⁷¹

It seems to me that there are two ways of responding to these questions: a conservative and an adaptive route. The first is typified in the contention of Pauline scholar J. C. Beker who now over thirty years ago wrote in defence of the need for Christian proclamation to retain both the word *and* the worldview of Pauline soteriology in order to be true to its teaching. In his *Paul the Apostle*, Beker argued strongly against the proposition that any prevailing worldview should be allowed to interpret biblical teaching; the line of interpretation must only go in the other direction: the worldview underlying New Testament theology cannot be simply discarded and imported into a contemporary framework without distorting the revelation itself. For Beker, the worldview – far from being a mere husk that can be removed – is inseparable from the message.⁷² On this account, it is not a matter of contemporary metaphysics reinterpreting the Gospel, but rather of the ‘conversion’ of the metaphysics.

Now it seems to me that *Gaudium et Spes*, albeit only implicitly, can be read as making a not dissimilar claim. “The Church”, it says, “has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel”. Accordingly, it needs to “respond to the perennial questions which men ask ... in language intelligible to each generation”.⁷³ Yet, seen in the light of Beker’s contention, this raises the question of *the extent to which “the signs of the times” should also be understood to call the Church to scrutinise the Gospel in their light?*

⁷⁰ Contemporary popular culture is actually quite difficult to read in this regard. At times, it would seem, there is an almost alarming lack of critical suspicion concerning all matter of meta-narratives (from politics and economics, to cultural truisms, to religious ideas at large). At other times, Lyotard’s diagnosis of the “postmodern condition” rings true ever more strongly in our own time (especially among Gen Y) than when he wrote.

⁷¹ Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 37.

⁷² J. C. Beker. *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

⁷³ *GS*, a. 4.

Much hangs on any response to this question. On it, however, there is space to make just two comments. The first is what I take to be the obvious and fundamental point in the light of the last half century of progress in philosophical hermeneutics. Whatever answer we might feel is the 'correct' answer to the question just posed – of whether the Gospel should be read in the light of the times and much as the other way around – the truth is that Christians have always done, and must always do, both. As Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and many others taught us long ago, no text may be read in isolation from the process of interpretation, a process that is always situated. This site of interpretation is the site of *dialogue* in which the horizons of understanding of both parties are stretched. Dialogue is an inherently two-way process, and understanding is calcified when one partner scrutinises the other while remaining impervious to the searching questions of its interlocutor. This is no small matter: as history has repeatedly shown, the moment religious frameworks of meaning become disconnected from the conceptual life-world of a people, they lose their authority and are soon discarded.

The second comment is this. In our day, I would suggest, by far the most significant source of theological division among western Christians, as well as the most difficult task for proclaiming the Gospel within the secular culture at large, concerns the types of issues dealt with in this essay: i.e., the metaphysical frameworks *for* belief. More often than not, such fault lines run *across* rather than between traditional denominational divisions, both transcending and (in certain senses) underlying them. Philosophy thus remains as central to theology as it ever was. If it is the case that Christians can only have a soteriology that their metaphysics can afford, then metaphysics matters enormously for contemporary (and all future) theology.