

# Liberative Elements in Christian Salvation

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*The following essay is a slightly edited version of the keynote address delivered at the 5th Inter-Religio Conference on "Liberative Elements in Asian Religions." In it the author, a professor of fundamental theology, attempts to lay out the standpoint from which Christians look to other religions and ask questions about human liberation.*

We stand today at the verge of the third millennium.<sup>1</sup> In the past several decades of this century, people have experienced profound and rapid changes in many areas of their lives. Scientific and technological progress has transformed this earth into the Global Village, in which human beings feel a vivid sense of unity and interdependence. It is our sincere wish that such a sense of unity and interdependence will grow and deepen in the course of time.

It is of great significance that the 5<sup>th</sup> Inter-Religio Conference will deal with the theme "Liberative Elements in East Asian Religions." For all the progress that science and technology have brought, countless numbers of human beings are still tormented by poverty and oppression. The presence of economically deprived and politically oppressed people throughout the entire world, especially the Third World, is a great challenge not only to Christianity, but also to other religions, insofar as both have to do with salvation or full realization of human beings.

It seems to be characteristic of the signs of the times that a yearning for liberation from poverty and oppression is spreading across the Global Village. How will Christianity and other Asian Religions en-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Shim Sang-Tai, "Die koreanische Kirche im Jahr 2000," *Catholic Theology and Thought* 2 12 (1989): 240-64.

counter this challenge of our times? Could they fulfill desires and expectations of the poor and oppressed in the Third World? What does the term “liberative elements in Asian religions” mean? How could this term be related to the non-religious concept of “liberation”? These are the questions we have gathered here to consider.

To begin, I would like to clarify what I see as the liberative elements in salvation according to the Christian faith. We know that the concept “salvation” has been understood in many different ways throughout the centuries by various individuals and groups.<sup>2</sup> Christians of all denominations understand salvation primarily as a gift offered by God, not as the result of human effort alone, but the reality of this divine gift has been understood in diverse forms since the very beginning of Christianity, as theologians are only too well aware. The idea of human salvation is a source of controversy not only between Christianity and other religions or ideologies, but also among the Christians themselves.

On the one hand, then, as Christians we should aim for a comprehensive grasp of the reality of God’s salvation that makes it acceptable to non-Christians as well, since Christianity always stresses the universality of its truth. On the other hand, we should not overlook the fact that the existence of Christianity is not grounded on a metaphysical system or ahistorical religious concepts, but on a concrete historical event that has essentially to do with a Jewish person, Jesus of Nazareth. The fate of Christianity depends on him, for he is believed to be the savior of the human race who became a human being as the son of God. must not forget this basic Christian starting point. In spite of this, my viewpoint cannot be simply identified with that of traditional Western Christianity whose understanding of the Christian faith in general is regarded as dualistic, individualistic, and ahistorical. The position I wish to speak from may be defined therefore as totally Christian and universal, but from the viewpoint of Korean Christianity.

I understand the presence and works of Jesus Christ as the realization of God’s salvation in this world, and this salvation means liberation from everything that oppresses us human beings. As such, this standpoint is in accord with that of the so-called Liberation Theology of Latin America, Africa, and Asia.<sup>3</sup>

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2 A more detailed treatment of the salvation can be found in my works: *Glaube und Heil. Eine Untersuchung zur Theorie von den “anonymen Christen” Karl Rahners* (Tübingen, 1975); and *Christ and Salvation I: A Belief-Understanding at the Turning Point* (Seoul: St. Paul Editions, 1981) [in Korean].

3 See my Korean articles: “The De-Westernized Character of the Third World’s Theology,” *Christian Thought* 278/8 (1981): 92-101; “Basic Problems in Theological Inculturation,” in Shim, *Christ and Salvation II* (Seoul, St. Paul Editions, 1984), 326-86.

Salvation can be realized only in the kingdom of God. Or put the other way around, as the reality of salvation, the kingdom of God is total liberation itself. This means that the kingdom of God does not only belong to another world that will come after death. It is a well-established historical fact that the kingdom of God had central place in the life of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> I concur here with many other contemporary theologians that the historical Jesus did not preach about himself, or God or the church, but rather about the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup> By looking more closely at the message and presence of Jesus, we will perceive the reality of the kingdom of God as liberative salvation.

I will focus my attention in the main on the fullness of the reality of God's kingdom, which is preached and realized by Jesus Christ. On this basis, I will then attempt to evaluate, though only in brief and general terms, what I see as the liberative elements in genuine religion.

### ***Liberative Elements in the Kingdom of God***

It is true that Jesus does not tell us in detail about the kingdom of God (βασιλεια του θεου)<sup>6</sup> He preaches simply that the kingdom is at hand, thus presupposing that his audience knows about this kingdom and is waiting for its coming. "The time has come. The kingdom of God is close at hand! Repent, and believe the Good News" (Mk 1:15).

Jesus makes this proclamation after the ground has already been prepared by John the Baptist, who preached the imminence of God's judgment.<sup>7</sup> John sought to gather Israel and to prepare it for the coming end. In this sense Jesus does not preach anything absolutely new, but has much in common with John. On an important point, though he differs

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4 See my Korean articles: "The Modern Understanding of Christ," in *Christ and Salvation I*, 141-61; "The Church as the Kingdom of God," in Shim, *The Korean Church and Theology* (Soul, St. Paul Editions, 1988), 63-151, especially 65-66.

5 I would refer to reader to the following works about the kingdom of God: J. Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1973); G. Lohfink, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982), *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (London: SPCK, 1985); H. Küng, *Die Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 55-127; R. Schnackenburg, *Gottes Herrschaft und Reich: Eine biblischtheologische Studie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1959).

6 See W. Kasper, *Jesus der Christus* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1975), 83.

7 See G. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 7-9.

from the Baptist. He does not preach a coming judgment of fire. He preaches the nearness of the kingdom as the “good news” (gospel, εὐαγγέλιον). Unlike John, Jesus preaches the good news of God’s salvific grace.

The nearness of the kingdom is due to God’s initiative. And the arrival of this kingdom takes the form of liberation from everything that oppresses human beings – like sin, suffering, division and death – and then liberation for everlasting life in communion with God, other human beings, and the entire universe.

#### LIBERATIVE ELEMENTS IN JESUS’ PREACHING AND EXISTENCE

Let us now consider the liberative elements in the life of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> They are to be found in his preaching about the kingdom of God and in his presence among the people.

1. Jesus begins his public activity by proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom of God is good news for the entire people of God. Like John the Baptist Jesus preaches the nearness of God’s kingdom to the people of Israel. “Jesus, too, wanted to gather the people of God. Jesus too wanted to prepare Israel for God. Jesus, too, wanted to answer Israel’s profound identity crisis.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus chooses twelve disciples from a larger circle of disciples. They are to do what Jesus himself does. The twelve disciples can symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. Although the system of twelve tribes had long since ceased to exist, the complete restoration of the twelve-tribe people was expected for the eschatological time of salvation. The twelve then represent the awakening of Israel and its gathering in the eschatological salvific community, which starts through Jesus. But above and beyond this, Jesus’ choosing of twelve disciples is the beginning of something for the future, something which is already present in an anticipatory manner in a prophetically performed sign.<sup>10</sup>

These twelve were sent by Jesus to preach the good news of the coming kingdom to the whole house of Israel. They exemplify Jesus’

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8 For works in English on liberation theology consulted for this essay, see L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (New York: Maryknoll, 1979); J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (New York: Maryknoll, 1978); J. Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, (New York: Maryknoll, 1987); see also my Korean works: *Christ and Salvation I*, 142-81; *The Korean Church and Theology*, 65-94.

9 G. Lohfink, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?*, 9.

10 See my article “The Church as the Kingdom of God,” 67-69; also G. Lohfink, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?*, 9-12.

claim on Israel as the entire people, which are like a scattered flock that has been led astray (Mt 10:5-6) but which Jesus now seeks to restore. It is noteworthy that Jesus deliberately chooses the twelve from different regions of the country and from different factions within Israel in order to make the gathering of all Israelites obvious. They are surely an odd mixture from Matthew, a tax collector (Mt 10:3) to Simon, a Zealot (Lk 6:15). Including both a tax collector and a Zealot in a single group unites the most opposed forces that existed anywhere in Israel at that time, for the tax collectors collaborated with the Romans, while the Zealots rejected the Roman occupation as incompatible with the kingdom of God. It is precisely because Jesus seeks to draw together what has been broken apart that he goes to tax collectors and to Zealots, to the poor and to the rich, to the rural region of Galilee and to the capital city of Jerusalem. Such attitudes symbolize God's gathering of his entire people through Jesus.

2. Jesus' message about the kingdom of God is a concrete, historical good news to the poor.<sup>11</sup> Jesus himself feels especially called to the poor.

His public appearance in the synagogue of Nazareth has a programmatic character: "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor" (Lk 4:18-19). His proclamation of the Lord's year of grace becomes in concrete forms the reality of liberation for the poor. Here, he makes it clear that the good news has to do essentially with the liberation of the poor.

The poor (*πτωχος*) can be understood as those who are sinners, publicans, prostitutes (Mk 2:6; Mt 11:19, 21:32; Lk 15:1), the simple (Mt 11:25), the little (Mk 9:2; Mt 10:42, 18:10, 14), the least (Mt 25:40-45), those of lowly profession like shepherds, doctors, tailors, barbers, butchers (Mt 21:31; Lk 18:11). And the poor are also those in real need; the suffering, the hungry, the thirsty and the naked, foreigners, the sick and the imprisoned, those who weep, and those weighted down

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11 See my Korean articles: "The Modern Understanding of Christ"; "Christ and Salvation," *Christ and Salvation I*, 171-72. Note also the comment of J. Jeremias: "To say that Jesus proclaimed the dawn of the consummation of the world is not a complete description of his proclamation of the *basileia*. On the contrary, we have still to mention its most decisive feature... The reign of God belongs 'to the poor alone'" (*New Testament Theology*, 108, 116). See also J. Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 89-94; *Christology at the Crossroads*, 46-50; L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 272-78.

with a burden. The poor are all those who are living in some kind of misery, which they cannot overcome. The poor are seen as the real victims of the alienated situation because they were voided, humiliated, and even condemned in the religious and social order at Jesus' time. It is to these poor that Jesus proclaims the liberation in the kingdom of God which is near.

Jesus breaks with the social conventions of his time, which observed strict social distinctions between rich and poor, neighbors and strangers, just persons and sinners. Jesus does not respect this deep-rooted order. He visits the poor and relates with them; he goes to the sick, to the lepers, and to others of this sort. Jesus converses with a prostitute and welcomes Gentiles. He allows women to follow in his company. He eats meals not only with his friends but also with sinners. Thus he shows clearly that God offers salvation to those who live in the hopeless situation, and stresses that God's merciful love surpasses any human expectation.

This reality of God's kingdom as preached and performed by Jesus even causes scandal. The Pharisees refuse to accept this way of the kingdom, because it seems to shatter the justice of the law, and criticize Jesus' behavior: "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 11:19). But Jesus does not concern himself with such social conventions, and indeed claims that the tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before others (Mt 21:31). Jesus' polemics with his critics show us the otherness of the approaching kingdom of God as grace. In the arrival of the kingdom, the poor know that they are loved and accepted by God.

3. Jesus does not merely seek to awaken the hope of the poor for salvation, but also to liberate them from their real misery. His works must therefore also be seen as liberative actions. Jesus' healing miracles are to be regarded as the signs of the approaching kingdom of God.<sup>12</sup> There is no reason to denounce the New Testament for healing miracles. Jesus evidently has healed the sick frequently in various situations. "It was precisely his miracles of healing which made him known so quickly and permanently throughout the country."<sup>13</sup> healing miracles belong to the approaching kingdom of God. One who sees his many mighty works should know that the kingdom of God is near (Lk 21:3 1), but they

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12 See my "The Modern Understanding of Christ," 155; "The Church as the Kingdom of God," 69-71; also G. Lohfink, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?*, 12-14.

13 G. Lohfink, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?*, 12.

also show that the kingdom of God is already present: “But if it is through the finger of God that I cast out devils, then know that the kingdom of God has overtaken you” (Uk 11:20; Mt 12:28). His healing miracles are closely connected with the breakthrough of the kingdom of God.

There is also no convincing reason to deny the jubilant exclamation of Luke 7:22 (Mt 11:5) to Jesus. With the help of the decisive biblical background of Isaiah, Jesus interpreted his own message and praxis. The seeing of the blind, the hearing of the deaf, the walking of the lame and the singing of the dumb are regarded as an integral part of Israel’s eschatological restoration by Isaiah (Is 35:5-6). In the eschatological time of salvation, God will heal and lead his people (57:18); he will bind up their wounds (30:26); the entire people will then see what the hands of God have wrought in their midst (29:23).

Jesus’ deep compassion for suffering is obvious in his healing of the sick, but it should not be overlooked that this was aimed directly at the gathering and the restoration of God’s people. His healing miracles are real symbols which represent the transformation of an alienated reality into a redeemed eschatological reality: “In the eschatological people of God no one may be excluded from salvation; not outsiders, not sinners, not the sick.”<sup>14</sup>

4. Jesus’ forgiveness of sins is also to be understood as a sign of the approaching of God’s kingdom as liberative grace.<sup>15</sup> The forgiveness of sins signifies the same liberative activity of the kingdom of God that is embodied in Jesus’ solidarity with the poor and in the healing miracles.

“Sinners” (ἁμαρτωλός) are those human beings who have no hope of salvation if judged by God according to their works. Jesus said to sinners that their sins would be forgiven if they would accept his proclamation of approaching kingdom in grace. Jesus chooses to address his proclamation to those people whose present situation in society allows them no hope of salvation. If they are to have any hope at all, it can come only from God. If they accept the God who is coming, then they have done the best that they can do. They have accepted the fact that God is drawing near in grace to give them hope and a future.<sup>16</sup> Here,

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14 *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?*, 14.

15 See my “The Modern Understanding of Christ,” 160-64; “Christ and Salvation,” 171 f. See also L. Boff *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 111-13; J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 50-55.

16 See J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 49-50.

Jesus makes it clear that it is not sufficient to do what the laws demand in order to enter into the kingdom of God. For him, the present order of alienated society cannot save the people from their sinful situation. This present world cannot be identified with the coming kingdom of God. This is why Jesus requires that people accept the kingdom of God as their liberation from the sin (Lk 24:47; Acts 2:38, 5:31, 13:38).

For Jesus, sin is not directly against God, but is the refusal to see the approaching kingdom of God and to work for its partial realization. Every sin comes from the heart of a human being who lives in two-dimensional reality, personal and social.<sup>17</sup> Every sin has personal and social aspects.

Jesus stresses the personal character of sin as coming from the human heart. He does not regard sin in legalistic terms as a transgression of the law but as a reality rooted in the heart of human beings. Hence sin is already present in intent long before it shows tip in exterior conduct. Jesus regards the refusal of the relationship with the kingdom of God as sin. Indeed, he sees the essence of sin to lie in the refusal to accept the coming of this kingdom. People close their hearts to the reality of the coming of the kingdom by concentrating on their own works that are regarded as just by law. They believe that good works secure their eternal salvation.

Jesus also denounces the public, social and structural aspects of sin. He criticizes the unjust features of social life that are not only in opposition to the final kingdom, but also to the kingdom already present in this world. The social dimension of sin is a refusal to realize the kingdom at least partially in social life. We might even think that the twofold commandment of loving God and neighbor is clearly grounded in the logic of the kingdom. Sin is no longer seen as directed against God but against the kingdom of God. The sin consists of breaking one's relationship with God by breaking one's relationships with other human beings.

Jesus frequently refers to sinners as hypocrites. Their hypocrisy is to be found in their sin against the coming of God's kingdom as grace. The following remarks are to be understood in this light:

Jesus hurls anathemas at the Pharisees because they pay no attention to justice; at the legal experts because they impose intolerable burdens

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<sup>17</sup> See my work, *Man: An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, (Seoul, Seo Kwang Sa, 1989), 108-47.



on people and have expropriated the keys to knowledge for their own use; at the rich because they refuse to share their wealth with the poor; at the priests because they impose restrictions on people's freedom; and at the rulers of the world because they govern despotically.<sup>18</sup>

It is noteworthy that Jesus' anathemas are directed against manifestations of collective egotism. Such collective egotism creates a sinful atmosphere that is wholly contrary to the spirit of the kingdom of God. Also, Jesus harshly condemns the improper use of any power, be it religious, intellectual, economic, or political. Improper use of power produces a division between those who use power and those who suffer from it. Jesus sees the relationships existing between improper use of power and situation of oppression. Such an inhuman situation is doubtlessly the historical consequence of collective sin. Jesus clearly looks at the relationship between sinning against God and sinning against the kingdom in historical terms.

Because people's attitude toward the God coming in grace is radically false, their use of power turns into sinful oppression that is destructive of the kingdom . . . . Oppressive use of power groves one's false relationship to God who is coming in grace.<sup>19</sup>

The relationship of oppressor and oppressed can of course be found in all human beings. Jesus frames this universal truth in historical terms. He does not hesitate to spell Out clearly who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed in given concrete situations. He analyzes concretely the meaning of sin against the kingdom and the meaning of the partial realization of it in history. Jesus sees the personal dimension of sin as tangibly verified in the oppression, and he relates the essence of sin to the essence of power. For him, only one kind of power is proper, the search to realize in a limited way God's kingdom in the world. It is the power of love and service. One accepts the kingdom of God by using power for service to the people, preferentially to the poor.

5. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God ends with an exhortation: "Repent, and believe the good news". This conversion (*μετανοια*) is

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18 J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 53.

19 *Christology at the Crossroads*, 54.

related to a universal love, agape ( $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\eta$ )<sup>20</sup> It does not mean a conversion to the law. The Jewish religion understands repentance traditionally as a conversion to the law from a lawless life. But what Jesus himself lives and proposes is not a religious law, but a limitless love as the norm of life under the reign of God. The conversion he demands means a conversion to the love of God; it means that human beings love each other as God has loved them.

The love demanded by Jesus should not be understood as a severe law. It was not another law he was preaching but good news to the people, especially to the poor. The love that saves is superior to other laws. Laws have a general function of keeping order, of creating the possibility of harmony and comprehension among people. And the justice of laws consists in each receiving one's due. Love knows no limits; it can be realized only in giving oneself to others and putting oneself at the service of others.

Jesus does not preach any system of legal justice that might legitimate a social status quo with its distinctions and discriminations. He announces a fundamental equality of all human beings. For Jesus, all persons are worthy of love. All are brother and sisters because all are children of the same God.

The command to love one's enemies expresses the radical approach of Jesus' demand. Love of one's enemy authenticates conversion, since the enemy is the most extreme embodiment of other people. The norms of universal love presuppose a new human person: "If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). According to Jesus' words about final judgment, the primary object of this love is anyone in need or what he calls the least of his brothers (Mt 25:35-38). Such persons are the poor and powerless people who make up the greater part of the human race, especially in the Third World. The love demanded by Jesus therefore demands justice in this alienated world.

It is a well-known fact that justice stands at the center place in Jesus' life.<sup>21</sup> His ideal is not a society of affluence, or of poverty, but a society of justice and brotherhood. Therefore he criticizes all powers that exercise dominion over others as not befitting the kingdom of God. In a sense,

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20 See my Korean articles: "Modern understanding of Christ," 155-57; "Reconciliation and repentance as gift and duty," in: *Christ and Salvation II*, 249-64; cf. also L. Boff *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 286-88; J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 55-61.

21 See my following works: *Glaube und Heil*, 250-55; "Christ and Salvation," 171-81; "The Concept of God Yesterday and Today," in *Christ and Salvation II*, 15-77; cf. L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 75-79, 285-86; J. Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 90-94.

Jesus seeks to establish a new community of genuine brotherhood where all human beings live freely and equally beyond any difference inherent in human society.

At the same time, Jesus does not make political power his aim. The main reason for his rejection of any political power lies in the nature of God's kingdom. It can be established in the world not by forced imposition, but rather by human freedom as conversion. Human beings should prepare for this kingdom but they cannot induce it.

The coming kingdom of God appears as the power of love. It is not a power seeking to hold sway over the freedom of others. It is rather an invitation to freedom and to the work of freedom which is love. Indeed, the kingdom of God does not come unless human beings accept it and enter into the whole process of conversion and liberation. Leonardo Boff notes correctly:

The total liberation proposed by God must take the pathway of partial liberations. While the former is not simply the sum of the latter, the latter do anticipate and pave the way for the former. Human beings are never mere spectators, and God is not simply a donor.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus opposes the use of power to impose the will of God, since that would exempt human beings from their task. They would no longer be active subjects of personal and social transformation but mere beneficiaries of God's work. Jesus chooses to die rather than to implant the kingdom of God by violence. The latter course would not produce the kingdom of God, but a kingdom grounded on human power, domination, and an absence of true freedom.

#### LIBERATIVE ELEMENTS IN JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Jesus himself is the kingdom of God in person. He seeks to realize fully this kingdom by being faithful to his mission to the end. Jesus' death has basically to do with his whole life. His preaching and works have provoked the conflict with the religious and political authorities. Jesus himself did not seek death.<sup>23</sup> It is imposed on him from outside. But his death is not the end of his existence. His resurrection is to be seen as

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22 L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 287.

23 See my Korean articles: "The Modern Understanding of Christ," 157-59; "Christ and Salvation," 173-74; see also following works about Jesus' death: J. Moltmann, *Dergekreuzigte Gott: Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1972); H. Schurmann, *Gottes Reich – Jesu Geschick* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983).

the full realization of liberation of life from all forms of alienation. The liberative elements of his death and resurrection can be seen in the following ways:

1. It may be assumed that two motives led Jesus to a violent death. For us, both have something to do with the religious and political structures of his time.<sup>24</sup>

First, Jesus was condemned for blasphemy by the Sanhedrin assemblies (Mk 14:64). He presents a different God from the God of the religious authority. Jesus was a nonconformist and liberal from the viewpoint of the Jewish religious law. On the one hand, he makes rigorous ethical demands and calls for total detachment from everything commonly regarded as good. Thus he demands of his followers that they give up their families, possessions, and other things (Mk 1:16-20). On the other hand, he relativizes the absolute demands of the Jewish law. Jesus' liberal position on the sabbath constitutes a typical cause for scandal among the Jews (Mk 2:23-28; Jn 5:9ff).

Jesus seeks to unmask a way of manipulating the mystery of God that oppresses human beings and justifies the oppression by injecting interpretations of the law into the law of God (Mk 7:1-8). Such a religious scheme, for Jesus, offers a kind of immunization against the deity since it clearly defines and circumscribes God's demand, and at the same time leaves room for casuistry designed to justify oppressive situations.

Jesus himself offers people a God who differs completely from the God of Jewish religious leaders. For him, the privileged locale for access to God is not the temple but the people themselves, more specifically, the poor. The Jewish religious mentality sees the poor, the sinner, and the enemy as completely estranged from God, but Jesus makes it clear that they are the authentic medium through which one draws near to God (Lk 10:25-37, Mt 25:31-46). For him, the kingdom of God is approaching as grace, not as a matter of justice related to peoples' good works. The approach of the kingdom is a wholly gratuitous action of God, which can only make religious persons feel insecure in the face of such a God. Thus Jesus is judged by the legitimate defenders of his people's religion and condemned to death for blasphemy (Mk 14:63-64).

Secondly, his attitude is eminently liberative. The political authorities accuse him of being a political agitator and execute him for that cause

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<sup>24</sup> See L. Boff *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 100-13; J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 201-17.

(Mk 15:1-27). The kingdom of God he preached contains a radical liberation from all alienations that oppress human beings. As we know, Jesus' preaching and works accompany harsh denunciations of social injustice. Although he does not seek to establish the kingdom of God by using any political power, his universal love could be regarded as a political love, insofar as it seeks to be real and effective in a given concrete situation.

It should be noted that Jesus' universal love takes different forms for different situations:

He manifests his love for the oppressed by being with them, by offering them something that might restore their dignity and make them truly human. He manifests his love for the oppressors by being against them, by trying to strip away all that is making them less than human. In short, Jesus' love is political because it is situated in the concrete.<sup>25</sup>

And such a political love leads him to the cross.

We must not overlook the actual historical causes that led to Jesus' condemnation. The cross is not the result of some divine decision independent of the historical situation. It is the outcome of Jesus' historical path in an alienated situation in which sin holds power and takes a form of religious and political oppression. Jesus has to choose between evading all that or facing up to it. He chooses the latter course.

Jesus' death does not come abruptly into his life. Rather, a violent death is implied in his attempt to realize the kingdom of God in this alienated world. Jesus seems to know that any attempt to change the alienated situation for the better and to liberate people will exact the price of death. He knows that the prophets died a violent death (Lk 11:47-51, 13:34; Mk 12:2); and he knows of the tragic death of the last and greatest of the prophets, John the Baptist (Mk 9:13). At a certain moment, he seems to take into account the real possibility of his own violent death. The Last Supper can be understood as an anticipation of the kingdom of God that Jesus wishes to celebrate with his disciples before the decisive breakthrough of the new world (Mk 14:12-26; Jn 13:26-30).

Jesus is conscious of being the final preacher and realizer of the kingdom of God. Thus he remains faithful to his mission. He accepts the violent death inflicted by people's hatred as the final will of God. His acc-

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25 J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 214.

eptance of death can be seen as an expression of his freedom and fidelity to the cause of the kingdom. Jesus lives the human life as God wants. He lives as a liberated and liberating being to the end, experiencing the depths of despair and death. In spite of the total disaster, he sustains his human being to the end. Through Jesus' free acceptance of this violent death, he shows a concrete way of embodying the reality of the kingdom of God.

Jesus opens up a new possibility for human existence which is an existence of faith with absolute meaning, even when confronted with the absurdities caused by hatred for one who only loves other human beings. The cross demonstrates the conflict-ridden nature of a process of liberation in this historical world where structural injustice is dominant. Under such conditions liberation can only come about through martyrdom and sacrifice on behalf of others and for God's cause in the world.

2. Jesus' resurrection is a fundamental event of the Christian faith.<sup>26</sup> Faith in the resurrection is the result of the impact that the appearances of the living Lord had on Jesus' disciples, which went beyond their ability to comprehend. Without this faith, they would never have preached the crucified Jesus as Lord. Thus the resurrection is the decisive liberative event not only for Jesus himself but also for all human beings.

In the first Christian preaching, the resurrection is presented as following: "This man, who was put into your power by the deliberate intention and foreknowledge of God, you took and had crucified by men outside the Law. You killed him, but God raised him to life" (Acts 2:23-24, 3:13-15, 4:10, 5:30, 10:39, 13:28-30). The person who has been raised is none other than Jesus of Nazareth. The resurrection of the crucified is to be understood as God's response to the unjust action of human beings. The resurrection, therefore, shows the triumph of God's justice over human injustice. It is the triumph not simply of God's omnipotence, but also of God's justice, although justice is made manifest through an act of power. The resurrection belongs to good news of God's kingdom.

We can comprehend God's power- in the resurrection only through the cross, where God appears powerless. This impotence of God is to be

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26 See my Korean articles: "The Modern Understanding of Christ," 158-61; "Christ and Salvation," 174-76; "Jesus' Resurrection: The Basis of Hope for Salvation," in *Christ and Salvation II*, 180-84; see also J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 236-72; L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 12 1-38.

regarded as an expression of God's absolute nearness to human beings, especially to the poor, sharing their lot to the end. God's nearness to human beings is now consummated on the cross. The cross shows that nothing in history has set limits to God's nearness to human beings.

Without God's nearness on the cross, his power in the resurrection would remain pure otherness and therefore ambiguous – and for the crucified, threatening. But with this nearness, it becomes clear that God's power is love, that he immerses himself in nothingness and death on the cross. Through the cross, we might say, God has passed the test of love and let us know his power in love. Truly, without the resurrection love would not be authentic power; without the cross this power would not be love.

Jesus' resurrection is also intimately related to the whole of his existence. Thus his resurrection is to be regarded as the realization and fulfillment of his being and mission in eschatological form. Because it was rejected by those of his time, the kingdom of God could not be realized in its universal and cosmic dimension. But here it is realized in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. God realizes His kingdom in Jesus' human person. In this sense, Jesus is to be called the kingdom of God in person.<sup>27</sup>

Jesus' resurrection is the liberation of life from all its obstacles and conflicts in this historical world. Human beings in this world live essentially on the road to their fulfillment.<sup>28</sup> They seek to realize their being fully on all dimensions of life. But this desire is constantly impeded by metaphysical, natural, and historical alienation. The principle of hope that belongs to human nature has led human beings continuously to elaborate various forms of utopia.<sup>29</sup> Every human being longs for the situation where "there will be no death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone" (Rev 21:4). Jesus' resurrection is to be seen as the utopia already realized within this world. With his resurrection as total transfiguration of human reality, the possibility of annihilation of all alienating elements in the world is realized, at least in one human being.

Jesus' resurrection reveals God's ultimate intention for human beings and for the world. "It connotes full liberation as something that is com-

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27 L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 290.

28 See my works: *Glaube und Heil*, 235-57; "Christ and Salvation," 165-71; *Man: An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, 18-56, 156-84.

29 See my work, "The View Transcendence in the Anthropocentric Thought," in *The Korean Church and Theology*, 439-31.

pletely a grace from God. The resurrection points to the goal and fulfillment sought by every liberation process: arrival at complete freedom.<sup>30</sup> We see in his resurrection the possibility of a transfiguration and a total realization of the possibilities of this present world, and also a transformation of human life into eternal life.

3. Furthermore, Jesus' resurrection presents us not only with the problem of how to deal with our own death but also with the death of others.<sup>31</sup> It is the tragedy of human beings not only that they themselves must die but also that they can put other human beings to death. Hope in one's own resurrection has to do also with seeking after the realization of justice in the alienated world. For the hope of one's own resurrection, Jesus' remark is valid: Anyone who loses his life for the sake of the gospel, will save it (Mk 8:35). Such a hope for others, preferentially for the poor and the oppressed, is to be understood as the true mediation for maintaining hope in one's own resurrection.

Therefore Jesus' resurrection is to be seen as the first and foremost hope for the crucified. The risen Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead. Because we recognize him as our elder brother (Rom 8:29), we can hope for our own resurrection and can engage ourselves in working for others. Many men and women really die, crucified, murdered, tortured to death, or "disappear" for justice's sake. And many other millions die a slow crucifixion brought about by structural injustice. In such conditions, Jesus' resurrection can be the hope of every human being.<sup>32</sup> It can be understood as the anticipation of the universal resurrection. His resurrection can be transformed into a universal symbol of hope to the extent that all men and women share in some form of crucifixion. It means that every human being's death has the quality of crucifixion. One needs to accept the crucifixion in order to have the hope of resurrection.

After Jesus' resurrection, human beings await fulfillment in a world to come (I Cor 15:13; Rom 8:11; I Pet 1:3). Jesus' resurrection inaugurates the liberative world. His disciples are aware that they are not simply

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30 L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 290f.

31 See J. Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, 190f. L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 291; also Shim, *Glaube und Heil*, 252ff.

32 See my Korean works: "Hope as a Principle of the Christian Faith," in *Christ and Salvation I*, 93-118; "Human Being in the Horizon of Hope," in *Christ and Salvation II*, 185-204; Man, 292-313. See also L. Boff *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 134-38.



spectators, but witnesses of this event, who have to give testimony on behalf of their experiences with the risen Jesus. His resurrection initiates praxis for the realization of the promise that the resurrection embodies for the world. Like Jesus, his disciples have to serve the cause of establishing a new creation, by engaging in active participation for the transformation of the still alienated world.

We need to keep our hope and love alive and effective if Jesus' resurrection is to be grasped not only as a past event that happened to him alone but as the decisive promise that all human beings will find their fulfillment at the end of history. As Christians, we believe that the seed of the resurrection is deposited within the reality of the human being by following Christ. We say with Paul: "All who are clothed with Christ were new creatures" (Gal 3:27; II Cor 5:17). This being-in-Christ is the beginning of the resurrected living and death (Phil 1:23; II Cor 5:8; IThes 5:10). It is our hope that all human beings be transformed into the likeness of Christ (Phil 3:21).

We hope that the seed of the resurrection in every human being will reach its fulfillment in death.<sup>33</sup> Just as death is a passage to eternity where there are no limits, so, too, the fulfillment of every human being will be realized with the resurrection of the dead. The final liberation of all human beings and the world will reveal what has already been realized in Jesus and all liberated human beings.

### ***Summary and Interreligious Conclusions***

I would now like to lay out the conclusions of my study of liberative elements in Christian salvation and draw some inter-religious conclusions from our understanding of salvation as liberation.

#### LIBERATIVE ELEMENTS IN CHRISTIANITY

Liberative elements of human salvation are to be found in the kingdom of God preached and realized by Jesus of Nazareth who is believed to be Christ as well the Savior by Christians. Jesus proclaims salvation, which is liberation from everything that oppresses human beings, at the core of his good news. The realization of this liberative salvation began

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33 See G. Greshake, *Stärker als der Tod* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1976), 70-72; G. Lohfink, *Der Tod ist nicht das letzte Wort* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976); H. Vorgrimler, *Der Tod im Denken und Leben des Christen* (Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1978), 119-26.

already during his life, by preaching the coming of God's kingdom to the people, by showing a preferential love to the poor and to all alienated people, by healing the sick, by forgiving the sins of those who accept his message, and by demanding a total conversion from individual and collective egotism. This is accomplished definitively by his free acceptance of death for God and for other human beings, and also in the resurrection from the dead.

The approach of the kingdom of God is twofold. On the one hand Jesus makes it clear that the coming of God's kingdom as liberative salvation is offered to all human beings as a gift of God, that it is neither imposed on them forcefully, nor acquired through their own good works. On the other hand, the kingdom is realized in the process of embodying partially liberative salvation, and obviously demands that human beings should accept freely this offered gift of God, by loving others, even if it means giving up one's life for others. Jesus' entire life, death and resurrection clearly show us that the kingdom of God as liberative salvation can be truly realized in this earthly world, and that its complete fulfillment has not yet arrived.

The kingdom of God does not come to isolated individuals, but it comes to a community, in which all human beings should live freely, equally and peacefully. Here no one suffers under any poverty, sickness, oppression, or discrimination. Also, this kingdom consists of human beings as the people of God. Through his preaching and works, Jesus makes it clear that this kingdom is not ruled by oppressive and dominative power, but by the merciful power of love, which breaks down any forms of oppression and discrimination, which integrates different individuals into a community of genuine freedom and brotherhood.

Jesus' relationship to the religious and social realm of his time can also be described as liberative. He relativizes its value. In his view, human beings are more important than the sabbath and tradition. Jesus shifts the focus insofar as the criteria for salvation are concerned. He subjects religious and social laws and traditions to the criterion of love, thus liberating human practice from alienated structures. Hence, he also desacralizes the locus that provides access to God. The privileged locus of access to God is not cultic worship, scholarly knowledge, religious observance, or even prayer. While these are authentic mediations of access to God, in themselves they are ambiguous. Unambiguous and privileged mediation of access to God is the preferential love for the poor, in whom God is hidden.

The kingdom of God as liberative reality means a total liberation that consists in the realization of genuine freedom and brotherhood for God's people. This liberation cannot be simply an inward or spiritual liberation, which would mean only a liberation of soul from corporal and worldly enslavement. Rather, it must be an integrated liberation, a liberation of human beings from all metaphysical, natural, and historical alienations. This presupposes not only a spiritual but also a socio-political liberation in the world, and it integrates this into the eternal life in communion with God, other human beings, and the entire universe.

But the historical reality remains that the fulfillment of God's kingdom as liberative salvation is not yet realized. Human beings still suffer under various alienations and yearn for a total liberation. Here Jesus offers a way for the concrete embodiment of the kingdom. It is clear that such embodiments depend on the character of a given situation. What he offers by his example is a preferential option on behalf of the poor, a refusal of improper use of power, and a patience with imposed suffering.

#### INTERRELIGIOUS CONCLUSIONS

Some interreligious conclusions may be drawn, it seems to me, from insights into the liberative elements in the Christian salvation. Since the Christian faith stresses the universal meaning of the historical person, Jesus Christ, the content of the reality of God's kingdom as salvific liberation should be related to liberative elements in other religions. I restrict myself here to remarks of a general nature.

For us Christians, the concrete historical person, Jesus of Nazareth is the kingdom of God in person; his entire life, death and resurrection are the real symbols of the realization of God's kingdom that draws near as liberative salvation to human beings. In this sense, we regard the historical Jesus as the criterion for the evaluation of every liberative element that is to be found in the history of mankind.

It is our Christian conviction that salvation is the gift of God, who is universal love personified, and that his salvific will is universal.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the kingdom of God as liberative salvation is offered to all human beings from the beginning of human history, without any distinction of nation, culture, race, time, age, or condition.<sup>35</sup> It follows that the partial

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<sup>34</sup> See my *Glaube und Heil*, 8 1-85, 261-63.

<sup>35</sup> See Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in *AAS* 68/27 (1976); J. Neuner, J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (London: Collins, 1983), 143-98.

realization of God's kingdom is taking place always and everywhere in the world. One should not assume that this partial realization of God's kingdom can take place only in the history of Israel's people and of Christianity. Such a viewpoint would restrict the limitless love of God. And since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church acknowledges that God's kingdom can be realized also in the non-Christian world.<sup>36</sup>

Every genuine liberative action may be seen as a partial realization of God's kingdom, enabled by the God's self-giving gift as grace and performed by the transformed human person. Such liberative actions as helpful service to the poor and the sick, commitment to the realization for the justice in the world, forgiveness of other's faults and sins, and solidarity with persons of good will for the peace of the world, are to be regarded as real symbols for the coming God's kingdom. Such actions need not be on a grand scale or exceedingly profound. They can take place in the daily lives of small groups of people in the midst of the secular city.

Liberative action does not necessarily need to be religious in form, like religious worship or observance; it can take a purely profane forms, like social action for the poor. Since unconditional and preferential love for the poor gives privileged access to God, liberative action is not to be identified simply with a religious acts as such. But every action that transforms and changes the reality of the alienated world is to be regarded as liberative and therefore salvific; any action can be seen as a real symbol for the realization of God's kingdom, however ordinary and insignificant it is.

As was mentioned above, genuine religions are authentic mediations in access to God. This presupposes, of course, that liberative elements are to be found in all genuine religions, but that in themselves they are also ambiguous in this alienated world.<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, religions can lead service to the realization of God's kingdom; they can imply liberative elements in their doctrines, rituals, and ethical norms. On the other hand, religions can serve to bolster an unjust order and use their power to oppress the dignity of human beings.

Every religious activity, be it worship, prayer, or action, should be evaluated from the viewpoint of the coming kingdom of God, insofar as

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<sup>36</sup> See my *Glaube und Heil*, 144-58, 261-72; "The Understanding of the Church at the Turning Point," in *Christ and Salvation*, 189-256.

<sup>37</sup> See my *Glaube und Heil*, 263-67.

liberative salvation is concerned. A religious activity that strengthens or deepens a person's commitment to the transformation of the alienated reality is to be regarded as liberative. What is important here is not a theory that interprets the reality differently, but a praxis that transforms it into God's kingdom.

The other conclusion that could be drawn from our insights of the reality of God's kingdom, seems to be the need for a new evaluation of non-religious activities. It is the view of religious people in general – and Western Christianity in particular – that non-religious activities of a social, economical, or political nature have only temporal meaning without any salvific emphasis. Such a dualistic view of human activities should be overcome by an integrated view of the reality. Every human activity has not only temporal value but also salvific meaning. We must evaluate every non-religious activity that seeks to transform for the best the alienated situation into a liberative salvific action. Every religious people should learn to see the socio-political implications of their religious activities and the salvific meaning of non-religious activities.<sup>38</sup>

Our consideration of liberative elements in religions and non-religious activities is based on the Christian conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the Savior-as-Liberator, one who has not only preached the coming kingdom of God but also realized it through his personal presence. At the same time, we cannot forget the fact that God's kingdom has not been established on earth in any final form or unambiguous form, neither during the time of Jesus nor through the historical course of the Christian Churches.

This fact poses a great and humbling challenge to us Christians. We must not fail to take it seriously. We should have respect for those non-Christian religious people and non-religious who perform works of selfless love for the realization of justice, for they not only belong to God's people, but are also embodying the kingdom of God in their lives.

In our times, the main task of every Christian, to be a faithful witness for Jesus Christ, seems to take the form of trying to continue his liberative works through transforming, peacemaking, pardoning, and reconciling love. There is no doubt that all this is very demanding for the attitude of the Christian who wishes truly to serve the least of his brothers, the poor and the oppressed.

The present situation of human beings in the world is a challenge that *all* religions face in this rapidly changing world of ours. For all the fruitful interchange that has gone on among religions over the past sev

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38 See my "De-Westernized Character of the Third World's Theology," 95-96.

eral decades, theoretical disputes continue and effective cooperation for the realization of the free and just world is still a rarity. The evaluation of every religion seems to depend on what attitude it takes to this challenge of our times.