

NO OTHER NAME?

Julia CHING

There is *no other name* under heaven among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).¹

The Church does not apologize for the fact that it wants all men to know Jesus Christ and to follow it. Its very calling is to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Whether people have sublime ideals or a defective morality makes no fundamental difference in this respect. All must hear the Gospel: Greeks with their rich philosophical tradition; yes and even the Jews with whom the Christians have so much in common and to whom they owe so much (Visser't Hooft 1963, p. 116).

The three words "no other name," have fired zeal in generations of missionaries commissioned by the Christian churches to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the whole world. They were convinced, as were the religious denominations that sent them, first, that they were following a superior calling, in other words, responding to the word of God; and, secondly, that they were doing something of positive value, both for the communities they represented and for the communities to which they were sent, since the former were under command of obedience to spread the Gospel, and the latter needed to hear it before salvation could be granted them.

There are many reasons why we might want to reexamine the meaning of these three words, reasons springing from a new context that has developed in the world itself, as well as from a new

understanding of biblical hermeneutics. The world has indeed changed, even in the twenty years that distance us from the time Visser't Hooft published his vigorous defence of the uniqueness of the Christian message and the need to spread it everywhere under the title, *No Other Name*. We now have better knowledge of the *people* of other faiths, as well as of their belief systems. We have watched as our children abandon the faith in which we raised them to embrace the faiths of *others*, who have come among us seeking believers. We have come to wonder at times whether salvation should be restricted to those who hear and obey the Christian message. And at those times when we find ourselves wishing that our children had not "gone over to the other side," we have gained some vicarious sense of what the parents and elders of the young people *our* missionaries converted from the ways of *their forefathers* to our Christian faith must have felt. Is it fair to argue that our missionaries, invited or uninvited, did right in going to preach to other nations, at times with the aid of the sword, while the missionaries of other traditions deserve only to be cast out of our midst?

These are only a few of the questions that arise in people's minds regarding the problem of "mission." For those persuaded that our missionaries have reasons to convert that are superior to those given by missionaries of other religions, the three words "no other name," remain a source of authority and justification. One obvious difficulty is the problem of self-reference. *We* are applying *our* scriptures to those who do not hold them sacred—a sort of "enforced sharing." Even without trying to convert, we can impose our missionary presence on others, even as we refuse the missionaries of their traditions equal rights on our home ground. But, if the knowledge of their missionary presence in our midst can be annoying, albeit even slightly, then this is one reason why our Christian adage "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you" (Mat 7:12) might lead us to reexamine other Christian scriptural passages, including the reference to "no other name."

I am not discussing the problem of the failure or success of our entire mission history. Admittedly, this history has taken off from an alleged response to the word of God. I believe, however,

that we can only respond to any word, divine or human, according to our understanding of it, and must leave it to God to judge the results. Moreover, I am not even directly seeking an answer to the larger question of whether we, as Christians, should evangelize at all. I wish here only to look into the scriptural context of the phrase "no other name" in order to see whether they yield any other interpretation than that given them by centuries of Christian usage. On the one hand, I realize that this usage is consonant with the whole Lucan thrust of the Acts of the Apostles, which shows the missionary zeal of St. Paul and the early Christians. On the other hand, I believe it is no less legitimate to do an exercise in hermeneutics within the parameters of the story in which the phrase occurs, to enter into a more personal dialogue with the text, and to pay more attention to contextual references to other Scriptural passages, both from the Gospel of Luke and from the Psalms. Such an exercise falls, after all, within the tradition of the early Church Fathers, and is consistent with contemporary directions in Scriptural studies.² Moreover, I am particularly happy to be able to do so in the context of a collection of essays dedicated to the honor of Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J., whose decades of engagement in the study of Oriental religions and commitment to the work of interreligious dialogue have distinguished him as a courageous pioneer, a thoughtful partner, a great Christian, and a great scholar.

The words "no other name" do not appear in a formally dogmatic or even purely homiletic context. They emerge as part of a sequel to a story, the story of the first recorded miracle performed by an apostle *in the name of Jesus*. The miracle was Peter's cure of a lame man, a cripple from birth, who used to be carried every day to the Beautiful Gate of the temple in Jerusalem where he could beg. Even today in so-called third world countries—which make up a large part of Christianity's "mission territory"—it is a common sight to see the disabled near the sites of worship or prayer, begging a living. The Acts of the Apostles tell us that when this man saw Peter and John going to pray at the temple (one wonders whether these two, fishermen by trade, looked to be of sufficient means to have attracted the beggar's

attention), he also begged from them, perhaps routinely. The two looked straight at him and asked him to look back at them, which he did, expectantly. At that point Peter gave him the surprise of his life: "I have neither silver nor gold. (Here we might add: "Surely you can see that I am a poor fisherman!") But I will give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!" (3:6)

What Peter did have, astonishingly as it might be, was the power to bring about a miraculous cure in the name of *Jesus Christ the Nazarene*, even in the absence of any direct request, or of any explicit faith of the crippled man in that name. The Acts go on to tell us that the cripple's feet and ankles became instantly firm, that he jumped up, stood, and began to walk, and went with Peter and John into the temple, "walking and jumping and praising God" (3:8).

As a miracle story, this passage reminds us of the miracles worked by Jesus who said of his own work: "The blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor" (Lk 7:22). The difference, of course, is that while Jesus cured with a simple and direct command—for example, he tells a paralysed man whose sins he had just forgiven, "I order you: get up, and pick up your stretcher" (Lk 5:24), Peter had to invoke the name of *Jesus Christ the Nazarene*. In fact, it got him into trouble. The miracle attracted a large crowd to whom he preached a sermon, claiming that the miracle was a sign that "the God of their ancestors" had glorified his servant Jesus who had been crucified but had been raised from the dead. "And it is the name of Jesus, which, through *our faith* in it, has brought back the strength of this man" (3:16).

The temple officials intervened, arrested the two apostles, held them overnight, and interrogated them the next day in the presence of the high priest, the elders and the scribes. Their ground for grievance was not the miracle itself, but the question of *authority*. They asked: "By what power, and by whose name have you men done this?" Obviously the officials alone had the power to permit special events, such as the sermon to a large crowd, not to mention the miracle itself, to take place on the

temple grounds. Peter and John were uncommissioned preachers who may have attracted some two thousand people (i.e., five thousand minus three thousand, compare Acts 2:41 and 4:4) on the occasion.

In response to the interrogation, Peter gave the following answer: "I am glad to tell you all, and would indeed be glad to tell *the whole people of Israel*, that it was *by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene*, the one you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by this name and by *no other [name]* that this man is able to stand up perfectly healthy, here in your presence, today. This is the stone rejected by you the builders but which has proved to be the keystone (Ps.118:22). For of all the names in the world given to men, this is *the only one* by which we can be saved."

Peter's bold, well delivered speech astonished the entire Sanhedrin gathered there, who considered the two apostles "uneducated laymen" as well as "associates of Jesus" (4:11). Since the miracle could not be denied, the two were sent away with an order not to teach in the name of Jesus again, an order that they at once refused to obey (4:18-19). The miracle story therefore leads in to a story of confrontation with the institutional hierarchy, a bureaucracy endowed with power to expel individuals from the religious community, a bureaucracy that had used its power to drive the Romans to crucify Jesus, whom it did not acknowledge as "the Christ." The miracle itself did not change the heart of this religious establishment. As with the many miracles Jesus himself had worked, it only served to enrage the authorities, who were blind to such signs and whose only wish was clearly to assert their own legitimacy in the face of an open threat from wonder-workers. For the multitude who witnessed the miracle, however, it seemed that God was not on the side of the hierarchy but of Jesus and his apostles. Not that the apostles preached open rebellion; they were simply devoted to rehabilitating Jesus' name, the name of a crucified criminal, so that it might be held up as the name of the Risen One, a name that continues to work miracles, a name that deserves to be remembered and honored, a name—the *only* name—that saves.

We noted that, in the first instance, the cripple never requested a cure, unlike some of the sick whom Jesus himself had healed. It was not his faith but the faith of Peter that brought about the miracle, and that miracle, as had happened in the case of Jesus himself, became a *sign*, and an expression of revelation. It made possible the sermon that Peter preached proclaiming the name of the crucified and risen Jesus as Savior, and which in turn moved the hearts of a multitude to faith in and acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.

To understand the intended meaning of the three words "no other name," we have to take into account the dialectical context in which they appear: the defence of the good name of a victim of injustice, a name that is also proclaimed as the name of the expected One, the Savior.

The reference to Psalm 118:22, appropriate to the context of the sermon as it is, is interesting for two additional reasons. In the first place, the sentence quoted here by Peter is followed in the Psalm by the words: "This is Yahweh's doing, and it is wonderful to see. This is the day made memorable by Yahweh, what immense joy for us!" After this comes the importunate begging: "Please, Yahweh, please save us. Please, Yahweh, please give us prosperity;" and an outburst of joy: "Blessings on him who comes in the name of Yahweh!" The Psalm ends on a note of praise: "Give thanks to Yahweh, for he is good, *his love is everlasting!*"

The resonances the reference to this Psalm calls forth for us would have been all the more vivid for the Jews who heard Peter after having seen the miracle. We may assume that they had entered the temple to offer a prayer of thanksgiving very much in the spirit of the psalm, which is mainly a hymn of praise for the mercy God has shown *to the people of Israel*. But the psalm also includes a vindictive passage: "The pagans were swarming round me, in the name of Yahweh I cut them down (v.10)." In the light of the New Testament teachings, we can hardly draw on this verse to justify a militant anti-pagan stand. At any rate, while it gives the psalm an historical dimension, this verse hardly negates the validity of the essential thrust, which is that of praise and

thanksgiving for God's help in a time of need: "Yahweh is my strength and my song, he has been my savior" (v.14).

In the second place, according to Matt 21:42, Jesus himself quoted Psalm 118:22-23, when his authority for teaching in the temple had been questioned by the chief priests and the elders. They had asked him the same question: "What authority have you for acting like this? And who gave you this authority?" (Matt 21:23) He had refused to give them a direct answer. But the Gospel of Matthew goes on to present several parables, including that of the wicked husbandmen, aimed at the chief priests and elders for refusing to accept Jesus. In such a context, both verses 22 and 23 of this particular psalm are referred to, followed by the admonition: "I tell you then, that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (21:43).

Thus it was in a context of controversy over authority that Jesus is also recorded to have referred to the stone rejected by the builders that became the cornerstone for the edifice. I note the point here not to introduce any doctrine about the Christian religion replacing the Jewish religion. There is no need to read any such idea into the passages we have cited. The focus was rather on the question of authority, pitting Jesus against the Jewish hierarchy, as it would Peter and John at a later time. Seen in this perspective, the reference to the "pagans" might well have been an ironical device, referring to the enemies of the psalmist, and of Jesus himself, the religious establishment, rather than to anything outside the Jewish context.

But let us return to the miracle story of the Acts which gave rise to the passage regarding "no other name." The salvation (*salus*) referred to there applies to the whole person, a healing of body and soul which in this case begins with the body. Physically healed, the lame man could presumably work for his living and not have to depend on begging gold and silver from others any longer.

But does it also mean that "no other name" can save human beings, not the name of Moses, or Zoroaster, or Confucius, but only the name of Jesus? The text seems to say so, and the history

of Christian missions has assumed it to be so. But let us continue to ponder over the *language* of the text.

In an article entitled "Three Bible Studies," Krister Stendhal comments on this passage in Acts and emphasizes the fact that Peter was primarily pointing away from himself to Jesus, the real wonderworker. He reminds us that the context of the miracle is strictly Jewish:

Nowhere in these Chapters enter any questions about Gentile cults, or Gentile religion. . . . The setting is intra-Jewish and inter-Jewish. The "no other name" has no extra-Jewish referent, nor would I consider it proper to "smuggle in" such by supposing a flashback to the Shema (Deut.6), the confession that Yahweh [the Lord] is One (Anderson and Stransky 1981, p. 12).

Stendhal adds that Peter's self-defence in full court is recorded to have been accomplished with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, since he was making a confession of faith on an occasion that could have led to martyrdom and so resembles a martyr's witness. In Stendhal's view, such a confession implies a special kind of religious language that allows for enthusiastic, exaggerated expressions. It was not meant to be "objective" language from which some *dogma* could be drawn regarding the uniqueness of Christian salvation.

It therefore appears that we would be forcing a meaning on the text if we were to interpret it as saying that only Christians could be saved, since Peter seems only to be referring to a kind of "wholeness," physical and spiritual, to which the miracle pointed. While it is true that he spoke a great deal about faith in the risen Jesus, he did not thereby proclaim that such faith, explicit or implicit, is necessary for *salvation*. The *doctrine* of salvation is a theological development which came much later than the writing of the Acts.

But let us reflect a moment on the name of Jesus itself. Is it not indeed possible that Peter was merely *spelling out* the meaning of the saying: "Yahweh saves?" Do we not have in Mat 1:21 the

passage: "She will give birth to a son and you must *name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins?*" Peter would have been in deep trouble had he worked a miracle in the name of some strange authority. His confession points to God as the source of the healing power, the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who makes possible the miracle worked in the name of Jesus. And this name in turn points to the inherent power of "Yahweh saves!"

After all, did not Peter and John, and the lame man cured by the miracle, go into the temple to praise God, Yahweh? If Jesus pointed to God while using his own name, the apostles point here to God by invoking Jesus' name. They appear careful to insist that they worship "no other" God, but the God of their fathers, the common ancestors of the Jews, while also insisting on associating Jesus' name with the power of God's salvation.

No other name: not the name of Peter or John, or John the Baptist, or that of the high priest, had the inherent meaning of salvation. Along with that meaning, the particular name of "this man" Jesus also had the power to save. Jesus had the power to forgive sins, to work miracles of healing. Jesus did not attempt to save himself from the cross, but was an expression of God's healing and saving power.

As Stendhal stresses, the passage is essentially meaningful in an intra-Jewish context. The confession occurred before the Christians had separated themselves, as a group, from the Jews. At the time Peter could not have intended a Christian evangelization of the entire world. He was simply concerned with the acknowledgement, by the Jews, of Jesus as Savior, that is, as their awaited Anointed One.

Indeed, if the God of Abraham was able to heal the lame man even before he believed in Jesus, even without his asking to be cured, could he not also save all people, including non-believers? The story in the Acts is not one that favors believers in God, since the Sanhedrin also represents such faith, but one that inspires trust in God's power and compassion.

"No other name" appears to belong to a text aimed at glorifying God's power and mercy as it is revealed in Jesus. It is part

of a credal assertion made by the apostle Peter on an occasion of triumph as well as trial. It does not appear to have been intended as an absolute *command* to preach the Gospel to every creature, although Peter did indicate the *readiness* to do so to the whole people of Israel. Its usage by Christian tradition in an "exclusivist" sense to imply "no salvation outside of faith in Jesus" appears to be somewhat forced when the passage is seen in its context. Even in an intra-Jewish setting, this context highlights the power of the name and the mercy of God, rather than the possible damnation of those who do not accept Jesus as Messiah.

All of this does not necessarily imply the absence of any intention on the part of Luke, the author of the Acts, to lead his readers gradually to recognize a shift of attention on the part of those who preached the name of Jesus from the Jews to the Gentiles. He would do so later. But even where this is the case, particularly when Paul enters the scene, we have no scriptural grounds for limiting salvation strictly to those who believe in Jesus, and certainly not in the passage we have been considering here.

NOTES

1. Except for this opening quotation, all scriptural references are taken from the Jerusalem Bible. The italics are my own.
2. The methodology of this article has been discussed in general fashion with Werner H. Kelber, Professor of New Testament at Rice University (Houston, Texas), to whom I should like to express a word of thanks.

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