

The Johannine Understanding of Salvation and the World Religions

LUCIUS NEREPARAMPIL*

In the Johannine writings we do not find any explicit mention of the world religions or their role in the salvation of mankind. Nevertheless, if we analyse the Johannine concept of salvation, we may come across some openings through which the world religions could be viewed at a distance.

The Concept of Salvation

According to John, salvation has two aspects: one negative and the other positive. In the negative aspect salvation is a liberation of the whole man from the slavery of sin, darkness, world, death and Satan.¹ In the positive aspect it is the possession of eternal life. In both the aspects Christ is the source and medium of salvation. As regards the negative aspect, John wrote in his first letter that the blood of Christ who died on the cross cleanses us from our sins; he is the propitiation for our sins and for those of the whole world (1 Jn. 1:7; 2:2; 4:10). The Gospel also emphasizes the vital role of Jesus as redeemer: "If the Son makes you free, then you will be really free" (Jn. 8:36). This implies that mankind as a whole is in the grip of sin, which separates him from God (Jn. 8:42, 45, 47). It was to liberate man from sin that the Son of God came into this world. He came as the sacrificial "Lamb of God" who takes away the whole burden of the sin of humanity (Jn. 1:29). As the servant of Yahweh he suffered and died for our sins (Isa. 53). As the Paschal Lamb he immolated himself on the cross for the remission of our sins (Jn. 19:33, 36, 37). After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples to continue his work of redemption by absolving men's sins (Jn. 20:23). Hence salvation is primarily a liberation from sin.

Salvation is a liberation also from darkness. Darkness is the wilful ignorance of man, the evil tendency that makes him stand against Jesus Christ the revelation of God, and God Himself who

* Fr Nereparampil CMI is Professor of Sacred Scripture at Dharmaram College, Bangalore.

¹ Cf. my article, "Liberation as Salvation: A Johannine Interpretation," in *Journal of Dharma* 2 (1977), p. 72.

is the light (1 Jn. 1:5). This darkness is something intrinsic to man.³ The incarnate Word came into this world as its light (Jn. 18:12). The whole life of Jesus, according to John, was a constant fight against darkness in order that he might liberate man from its grip. It is a sad fact that many still remain slaves of darkness because they prefer darkness to light (Jn. 3:19). In the Indian tradition too ignorance is the cause of evil and if it is removed *mukti* can be attained.

Salvation, according to John, is also a victory over the world. By world John means the world of men who stand in opposition to the revelation of God that came down in Jesus Christ. Being aloof from God, it develops in it an attitude of hostility to God.³ It is closely related to darkness towards which man marches on (Jn. 13:30). Jesus has conquered this world (16:33). Now each man has to participate in this victory of Christ by sharing the suffering and death of Christ and thus attain salvation.

Salvation indicates a liberation from Satan, the evil power. He tries to make men inauthentic, making them his sons filled with his own evil nature (8:44). Being allied with the world, he always stands in opposition to Jesus, the light and truth. But Jesus by his death and resurrection has judged the world, and has overthrown Satan, the prince of the world (12:31). Salvation is, therefore, a radical exorcism.⁴ In order to have salvation, each man has to participate in the archetypal victory of Jesus over Satan by sharing in Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection.

Salvation also means a liberation from eternal death. It was to liberate man from the grip of death that God sent His only begotten Son into the world (3:16). If one believes in Jesus he will be liberated from the grip of death (5:24-29; 11:25).

Thus salvation in its negative aspect is a liberation from sin, darkness, world, Satan and death. In the world religions too salvation is understood as a liberation. But John emphasizes more the unique role of Jesus Christ in liberating man.

In its positive aspect, salvation is the possession of eternal life. It is the very life of God, possessed by the Son and shared with men (5:36; 1 Jn. 4:9). This is accomplished through a communion with Christ and God, for which Jesus prayed: "...that they also may be in us;...that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and Thou in me, that they may become perfectly one ... (17:21-23). This union is not an impersonal absorption into the divine, nor is it an ecstatic possession by a divine inspiration, but it is a

³ Cf. R.H. Lightfoot, *St John's Gospel: A Commentary*, Oxford, 1956, p. 80.

³ Cf. J.H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St John*, Edinburgh, 1928, vol. I, p. 133.

⁴ Cf. D. Mollat, "Jean l'évangéliste," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. VIII, 1972, p. 200.

community of being by a dynamic sharing of the very life of God in love.⁵

This involves an integration with Christ. According to John, salvation is a bringing together of all men into one body in Jesus Christ (Jn. 11.52). Jesus called himself "Son of Man" in the sense that he is the inclusive representative of the ideal humanity. Each man becomes part of that redeemed humanity insofar as he is united with the ideal man Jesus. In the allegory of the vine and the branches Jesus insists on the necessity of being united with him for the possession of salvation (15:1-10). Apart from this christological dimension, the idea of salvation in the positive aspect also may resemble that in the world religions.

The Concept of Revelation

Even in the christological vision of salvation, if we go further to analyse the Johannine theology of the Logos, we can come across some openings, through which one can peep into and see the role of the world religions in revelation and salvation.

John sees Jesus as the Saviour of the world. He is God's love and concern for man concretized. He has come down from heaven as the light of the world. Now, as regards man's response to this supreme revelation, the whole world of men is divided into two groups: one consists of those who respond positively to this revelation, and the other of those who respond negatively. This division is not based on any distinction of religions, but on the basic attitude of man to revelation.

In Jn. 1:10 it is said: "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not." This seems to imply that the Word of God as the light of men was already present in the world even before the Incarnation; but the world at large had rejected him. The world was created through the Logos, and therefore, the world was supposed to know him. This is in line with the general NT thought. For Paul says: "For what can be known about God is plain to them; because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:19-20). The Word of God, therefore, came to every man through natural revelation. Seeing the creation man is supposed to know the Logos. For "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). Along this line John says: "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn. 1:3). And the Word was in the world (1:10) in many and multifarious ways (Heb. 1:1). To the Israelites the Word of God came through Moses and the prophets. Their

⁵ Cf. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1953, p. 197.

Torah manifested the Word of God. In a similar way, to the non-Israelites God's Word came through their sacred writings, laws and regulations of their communities. Above all, the Word of God came to every man through the law written in his conscience. Thus the Word was in the world and in all religions.

This thought that the Logos as light or revelation was in all the world, is in full harmony with the general Jewish thought.⁶ The Psalmist thinks that the created world proclaims God's glory through word: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are their words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Ps. 19:1-4). According to some Rabbinic traditions, when the Torah was given on Sinai, the voice of God sounded all over the world in all the languages of the nations.⁷ John's statement, therefore, that the Logos was in the world (1:10) could be understood also as referring to the presence of the pre-incarnate Logos in the whole world, including the world religions. Thus if the Logos is in some way present in the world religions, we have to conclude that they also should naturally contribute to the salvation of mankind.

John, however, finds the Word of God focussed on Jesus of Nazareth. He, therefore, speaks of salvation only in terms of one's relation to Jesus. He does not say a word negatively or positively about the role of the world religions for the salvation of mankind. His whole attention is focussed on Jesus of Nazareth who is the Word become flesh and the source of salvation. John, however, presents a universalistic outlook on salvation. Jesus, for him, is the "lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (1:29). Jesus' mission embraces all mankind. He is sent by the Father to all men. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (3:16). He is Saviour precisely as the Son sent by the Father to all men.⁸ "He who has the Son has life" (1 Jn. 5:12). Hence in order to have salvation one should be united with the Son who is the Logos. The distinctive Johannine idea of salvation is that it is precisely a change of nature by the infusion of "life" through union with Christ.⁹ Jesus came that men may have life, life in abundance (Jn. 10:10). He is the fountain of

⁶ Cf. C.H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

⁷ Cf. H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 1922-28, vol. II, pp. 604-5.

⁸ Cf. William Grossouw, *Revelation and Redemption: An Introduction to the Theology of St John*, London, 1966, p. 81.

⁹ Cf. Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology*, Philadelphia, 1946, p. 186.

“living water,” to which all men are invited (Jn. 4:10, 14; 7:37-39).

This universalistic outlook on salvation becomes clearer to us when we analyse the attitude of Jesus to different groups of people. In his mission to the Samaritans, Jesus broke all the man-made boundaries and took the initiative to talk with the Samaritan woman (4:7ff.). He was ready to accept water from her. He invited her in return to receive the “living water” from him. He revealed to her the nature of true worship. He said to her: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father . . . but the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:21,23,24). Here Jesus seems to say that man must transcend all the man-made boundaries of particularism to worship God properly. In this narrative, John seems to provide us with a great opening to approach the world religions with a broad mind. Man has to rise above the Jewish particularism of Jerusalem as well as the Samaritan particularism of Mount Gerizim to worship properly the transcendent God.

Jesus had a sympathetic attitude towards men of other faiths. Just as he had concern for the Samaritans, so he showed his love and concern also to the Roman centurion (Jn. 4:43-54). In the parable of the Good Shepherd Jesus expresses his concern for all men of the Gentile world: “And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd” (10:16). The salvific purpose of Jesus’ death was not confined to the Jewish nation, but was wide open to all people. So John speaks about the prophecy of Caiaphas: “He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (11:51-52). The purpose of Jesus’ death, therefore, was not only to save the Jewish nation, but also to bring together into one body all the scattered children of God who are in the world. This presupposes the existence of God’s children beyond the limits of the Jewish nation.

The Johannine universalistic outlook on salvation can be seen also in the saying of Jesus, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (12:32). The crucified Lord, by his death, will draw all men to himself and will unify them in himself. He came to save the whole world. He said: “I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world” (12:47). He was fully conscious of his mission of being the Saviour of the world when he prayed to the Father: “Thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all

whom thou hast given him" (17:2). When some Greeks came to see him, Jesus realized that his hour to become the Saviour of the world through his suffering, death and resurrection, had already come. The coming of the Greeks symbolized the coming of the nations in search of the Saviour. So Jesus said: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23).

Thus in John we find a universalistic vision of salvation, but one which always emphasises the central role of Jesus in the process of salvation. Hence, on the one hand, the Johannine concept of salvation stresses the centrality of Jesus' person for salvation as the Word become flesh, and, on the other, it seems to admit the possibility of some openings to the world religions, when Jesus' aspect of being the sole Word, transcending his being incarnate in the particularism of the historical man Jesus of Nazareth, is considered. In the latter aspect, the world religions have to be seen as having their specific role to play for the salvation of mankind through the Word of God, who is the Light and Life of men (Jn. 1:4).