LIVING FAITHS
and
ULTIMATE GOALS

Salvation and World Religions

Edited by S. J. Samartha
WHAT DOES SALVATION MEAN TO CHRISTIANS TODAY?

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To be human is the gift of God. If we reflect on what this sentence can mean about the origin of being human, the process of being human and the end of being human, then we shall find in it a pointer to what Christians mean by salvation today. Among themselves Christians seem to mean many different things by ‘salvation’, or to be unclear what they do or should mean, or to give a meaning to salvation which other Christians say should not or cannot be given. None the less I believe that the claim, the faith, the hope implied in the statement that to be human is the gift of God can be shown to unite all Christians. In one way or another this is what Jesus Christ enables us to believe and offers us the chance to practise — that being human has a source, a potentiality and a fulfilment which is given by God, offered by God and secured by God. Therefore being human is not solely at the mercy of time, circumstances and death. We can be saved and fulfilled.

Further, this understanding of being human as the gift of God refers not only to what Christians do mean by salvation today. It is also in accordance with what Christians ought to mean by salvation today. This is so because it can be shown that the Bible in its main themes, and in the major stories and pictures which give shape to its message, not only supports but actually puts forward this understanding of the gift of God to men so that they might be all that they might be. The main traditional understandings developed in the Christian churches also likewise reflect, in differing ways and despite their distortions in practice, this conviction that man depends upon God for being man and that therefore he can have the highest possible hopes of his humanity. This biblical and this traditional understanding has both its focus and its climax in Jesus who is believed to be the reality of God existing as the reality of man and the reality of that which is human united to the reality of God.

I shall attempt to outline something of what is implied in this understanding of the gift of God to men and especially to see how this relates salvation to the life of men in history and the life of men in community.

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But first, it is necessary to consider further the connection referred to above between what Christians do mean by salvation and what they ought to mean, a connection effected through the Bible and Christian tradition.

The Christian knowledge that to be human is the gift of God is, in the Christian understanding, itself a gift. That men have this high calling and these divine potentialities is not a deduction but a revelation. (What we do mean by salvation must always be related to what we have been shown we ought to mean.) That is to say that the Christian does not deduce the basic answer to the question "What is man?" nor to the question "What is salvation?" These answers are given to him. As I shall attempt to show, this giving, for its fulfilment, lies not only in the past but also in the present and in the future. The first and fundamental point lies, however, in the giving, discovered in history, renewed in history and to be fulfilled beyond history. This giving is believed to be God at work or, better still, in this giving God is known. We may even say that to know the giving is to know God.

Now, I do not know how this can best be expressed in other languages. But I would like to try and explain a little further. For my hope is that this contribution towards the discussion of salvation today will be read by many whose mother tongue is not English and so absorbed into a far richer discussion than is possible in one language. For I believe that the glory of God (which is the measureless measure of the fullness and, therefore, of the salvation of man) will shine more brightly for us as we help one another to go beyond the limitations of our mother-tongues by sharing their respective and differing riches. Thus, I do not write 'to know the gift is to know God'; I write 'to know the giving is to know God'. I do not want a pure object or thing word which refers to the result of an activity or the detachable effect of an action. I require a word which expresses action itself, which conveys the notion of the presence of energy and which cannot be separated from whoever or whatever is acting, is energizing, is present. This choice of words is called for because God is not deduced from His gifts. He is known in His giving. (As I shall try to show below this is of fundamental importance with regard to the Christian understanding of, and sharing in, the present struggles to be human, that is, to achieve freedom from oppression, from physical degradation and from being overwhelmed in an environment seemingly out of control.)
It must clearly be left for further discussion how far and in what way the idea that I am expressing in the form ‘God is known in His giving’ could be expressed in Malayalam or Chinese or in an African idiom, let alone in French, German and Spanish or in Russian and Greek. It is necessary, however, to record a sensitivity to the partiality and limitations of language in a discussion of the meaning of salvation for Christians. For while the meanings are ours (we have to do the speaking, seek the understanding and take responsibility for proclamation and sharing) the salvation is of God. This is the basis behind all meanings which alone gives them power, so it is believed. Further, since salvation is indeed of God, it is addressed to, and concerned with, all men, past, present and future and absolutely without exception. For God is the ultimate reality who embraces all reality absolutely without exception. Yet the universality of the salvation cannot be matched by a corresponding universality in the meanings apprehended, expressed or commended. For meanings have to be expressed in language which is of a particular time, place and culture and meanings have to be apprehended in the lives of men lived out in a particular time, place and culture. But this very problem and paradox of the meaning of salvation for Christians points also to the unique reality and power of salvation as Christians believe it to be offered. For Christians believe that salvation is, ultimately, the giving of God Himself to men so that their humanity is infinitely filled and fulfilled. (‘To be human is the gift of God.’) But the uniquely Christian understanding of this giving of God is that provided by Jesus Christ, himself seen, received and understood against the stories of God’s dealings with men reflected in the Old Testament scriptures. Thus there is no contradiction between the universality, infinitude and absoluteness of God and His giving Himself in, through and to historical particularities. Jesus Christ is the decisive evidence offered to the faith of Christians and for the faith of Christians. He confirms to us that the activity of God Himself ensures that particular moments, historical processes and embodied persons are the places where God is met, known, received and responded to. This activity of God is His universal and all-embracing work of bringing about salvation, i.e. union with Him and with all fulfilled things and persons in Him.

For all human beings, who must live here and now and in particular, the ultimate enjoyment of all this fullness of His salvation lies always in the future but it is likewise always in each human here and now that
God's giving of Himself is to be received and known. There is no other human place for receiving the gift of salvation than where we now are. How could there be? For we have nowhere else to be and to become human than where we now are, whether for us being human is a tragedy, a joy, a nonsense, a bore or a routine. Thus in the Christian understanding of salvation, whatever particular meanings are found or expressed, there is no necessary contradiction between the universality of salvation (the gift of God Himself to enable men to be human) and the limitations of particular meanings and expressions about salvation. Rather there is, potentially, richness. For, firstly, this particularity is the way God gives Himself to men; it is in this particularity that men live and develop (or are distorted) as men. Secondly, God's commitment to these particularities of history shows that it is in and through history that He is building up the ultimate richness of what it is to be human. However, there can be contradiction and obstacles to growth rather than contributions to richness if Christians absolutize the temporary and partial meanings which they have been led to give to salvation and forget that being saved is basically living from, by and to God and not meaning, or believing, or doing, any particular set of things. Because God has committed Himself to history in the particularities in which men are and become human there always will be particular things to believe, mean and do. But salvation is none of these things, for salvation is God giving Himself to men so that they may be human. Thus salvation is always beyond words and meanings. None the less it is sometimes below or behind words and meanings. That is to say words and meanings can be provoked by the saving presence of God and can point towards Him. For how else could Christians ever be in a position to say such things as I have been saying, such as that to be human is the gift of God and that this statement itself points not to a deduction but to a revelation?

Here we return explicitly to the connection between what Christians do mean and what they ought to mean when speaking of salvation. Christians hold that in this steady work of giving himself to men God has built up in history a people who have come to know Him in this work and to know Him as the One who does this work. The record of this building up of a people who receive the knowledge of God and develop this knowledge in a continued dealing with God is reflected in the writings of the Old Testament. Here a series of patterns and pictures and stories is offered to us. People discover who they are and how their history
makes sense and how they are to make sense of their history (what they can be and what they must do) through encounters with Him who offers identity, sense and purpose in the midst of events. Abraham, Moses and the prophets discover themselves, their God and the role and possibilities of their people together in the demands and offers of events and circumstances. Similarly the people discover themselves, their God and their future together in circumstances such as those that lie behind the story of the Exodus. The continuing thread in history is the people, with their traditions and understandings building up out of their history. But the people themselves (or prophetic and gifted men working in and through the life of the people) discover that the continuing thread is a continuing and faithful reality and activity who is at work among them, through them and for them. But there can be no question of this creative and saving activity and reality being identified with them or confined to them. He is not at their disposal or under their control. Rather they depend for their identity and their future on Him. As their history develops so they learn that ‘He’ who is in the midst of them is also over against them in disturbance, overthrow and judgement in order to reshape them and renew them for their future and their fulfilment. Likewise they come to recognize ‘Him’ as at work quite as much in the history from which they suffer (e.g. Cyrus is ‘His anointed’ Is. 45:1) as in the history to which they contribute. It is necessary to refer to this continuing and faithful reality and activity as ‘He’ and as ‘God’ in order to be able to speak at all. But it is also necessary to remember that who ‘He’ is and therefore what the word ‘God’ refers to is not something that we mean or intend but always something that He reveals. The Old Testament never offers a firm grasp on the identity of God (we do not know who He is in Himself, we are not able to know His name) nor is there clear knowledge in advance of precisely what He will do (He is discovered in and by means of troubling and unexpected events in and after their happening). But what the Old Testament does bear witness to is a steadily built up assurance that He always will be, and that He will always act consistently with Himself in His Work of saving and fulfilling His people. There is, therefore, sustained faith in Him and an established expectation of Him. Christians are constituted by the discovery that it is Jesus who embodies this faithful expectation. Therefore what Christians do mean by salvation must always be related to what Christians ought to mean by salva-
tion in the light of the records of the discovery of the saving God reflected in the Old Testament; and in the light of the witness to the embodiment of this saving God in Jesus which is contained in the New Testament. There is no valid or powerful meaning which can be given to salvation which is independent of and out of touch with these records. Salvation depends upon God and we are dependent upon God for our saving knowledge of his saving work. It is to the discovery of this work that these records point. But what Christians can and do mean by salvation is not settled by these records. The meaning of salvation cannot be finally settled until it is fully and finally enjoyed. That is to say until men are fulfilled in their being human through receiving the fullness of the life of God in unimpeded relations with Him and with one another. We do not know what this will mean, i.e. what it will be like, what sort of experience it will be. Meanwhile, however, we are concerned with meanings and actions in our present particularities, struggles and hopes. Here we have the opportunity of receiving in our turn and for our times the discovery of who we are and how we are to be and become human. This involved discovering how our history makes sense and how we are to act to make sense of our history through encounters with Him who offers identity, sense and purpose in the midst of events. We have our opportunities of learning and practising how being human is the gift of God. These opportunities arise as we seek to be the Church, i.e. the people who acknowledge the saving God, in the midst of the world and in grappling with this world. Such attempts to be the Church can arise only because God has already established, and does Himself maintain, His Church, i.e. the people whom he has brought to acknowledge him in and through Jesus Christ. The basis, as always, is what God gives and His continued giving. But being the Church involves also engaging in the present as members of a community which discovers its identity, purpose and hope out of this present engagement in the light of both a backward reference and a forward reference. It is in this sense that the Church (whatever the possible multiplicity of its manifestations) is a community essentially related to salvation. There would be no meaning to and no meaning for salvation available in the world and in history unless there were a community (expressed in many communities) constituted by the experience of the saving God as He has revealed Himself in history and embodied Himself in Jesus. This community is also committed to discovering the development and fulfilment of this experience. But much harm has been done
by ever describing this community (or any of these communities) as
the saving community. Saving is the work of God and God's concern
is with men, with the fulfilling of what it is to be human. The Church
is where this God is known and known to be the saving God. But the
Church is neither the saving community nor the community of the saved.
Rather she is the community of those who for the time being know (who
at present embody the knowledge of) God the Saving one who is the
Father of Jesus Christ. Thus the Church has the task (partly performed
by her very existence) of maintaining and kindling the effective and
practical knowledge and hope that to be human is for all men the gift
of God, i.e. that salvation is a reality, a real offer and a real experience.
This task will be found (and has been found) to require and to offer a
variety of ways of engaging in the present life of men. These ways will
be worked out in accordance with what has already been discovered
about the giving of God to men in history for the sake of their being
human (the backward reference) and in relation to the sure and certain
hope that the gift of being human will be fulfilled in history, through
history and beyond history (the forward reference).

The meanings which salvation and the hope of salvation have to take
will be produced by the interplay within the Church of the pressures
of the backward reference, the forward reference and the opportunities
for, and obstacles to, being human as they are at present experienced.
This means that salvation will be understood and experienced differently
in different parts of the world, in different parts of the Church, under
different circumstances and at different times. (The point about this
multiplicity of understanding and experience which is to be noted for
final discussion in this essay is that all such understandings and experi-
ences are without exception both real and insufficient in relation to
God's saving.) I am taking up here the point I made earlier that God
gives us the answer to the questions 'What is man?' and 'What is salva-
tion?' and that these questions are answered from the past through
the present into the future. The answer is received in the process of
God's giving Himself to man for human fulfilment. The form this de-
development answer takes depends on where men are in their struggle for
being human. That is why, as I also said earlier, the apprehension that
God is known in His giving is of fundamental importance with regard
to the Christian understanding of, and sharing in, the present struggles
to be human.
For the place where God is known and His offer of salvation received is always some place where men either know that their humanity is threatened, distorted, oppressed or some place where they become aware of the offer of a greater humanity than they yet enjoy. Indeed, the knowledge of salvation is precisely the knowledge that there is energy at work (the power of the love of God) to make these two places one and the same. That is to say we are able to become aware that wherever and whenever our being human is threatened, limited, being forced into nothing there is also power at work to liberate our being human for something greater, more free, more human. What we do not know is the precise state and fulfilment of that 'something'. It does not yet appear what, as fulfilled human beings, we shall be (cf. I John 3:2). But we discover the promise of this fulfilment in the hopeful possibilities of the present.

Thus the knowledge that there is this God who saves us and that therefore there are these infinite possibilities in being human can come whenever men discover themselves to be set free in the face of some experienced obstacle to their being human and when they know themselves to be set free in a way which promises them a future which is for them but which is not dependent upon them although they have a part to play in attaining it.

Three areas in which this knowledge, which is at once of God, of salvation and of being human as a gift, can be enjoyed are, for example, those of receiving the sacraments, enjoying Pentecostal experience and taking part in a revolutionary struggle for freedom. In all of these experiences it is possible to know both in community and in the name of Jesus Christ that one is offered a human identity and purpose which goes beyond present limitations, which is being built up by a power from beyond oneself and one's group and which points to a future, which will embrace more and more human beings in more and more freedom and mutual enjoyment. By the receiving of the sacrament, by the speaking with tongues, by the involvement in the revolutionary activity one knows that one has an identity, meaning and purpose. One knows that it is good to be human and worth striving to be human despite all the present threats and limitations and, indeed, precisely in and through these obstacles, sufferings and deaths. The power and the gift of God is known in the midst of life as it is now and life as it is now is thereby offered as a gift for discovering human identity and community both now and with all its promise for the future.
At present Christians very often divide themselves from one another as they insist on identifying the place where salvation is to be found as either in the sacraments or in the experience of the Spirit or in revolutionary commitment or whatever. They also clearly abuse and deny their own chosen locus of salvation in dehumanizing and therefore ungodly ways. Thus Pentecostalists can (but need not) neglect the needs and effects of society and rest with selfish exclusivism on their experiences, sacramentalists can (but need not) press transcendentalism and the sheer givenness of God’s gifts to the point where they are not merely indifferent to but positively support the status quo even where it is manifestly oppressive, revolutionaries can (but need not) make idols out of the revolutionary process and ideals and so wholly identify themselves with, say, Marxist allies that they share the Marxist inability to love their (class) enemies and exclude bourgeois and other non-revolutionary sinners from all hope of the salvation of God.

But these, and so many other, unhappy possibilities, may and should be seen as thrusting us all back upon what Jesus Christ has to show us and give us of God. He shows us that God has done and will do all that is necessary to save men from all the ways in which they deny, distort and mistake their humanness. This includes saving them from the ways in which they pervert the very means of salvation by taking control of them and absolutizing them instead of receiving them as God’s gifts to be filled by God with the changing meaning and effects required by the changes of history.

Jesus Christ was fully committed to history and to particularity. He was a man. It is thus quite clear that men do not find their God-given humanness which is their divine salvation by holding back from commitment to history and in history. This is precisely because God does not hold back from a like commitment. Thus the sacraments of the Church are signs of God’s full presence where and when He is needed by men. Likewise many a Pentecostal experience is to be received as God’s dwelling with men. The fullness is His. It is the partiality which is ours. Similarly, it cannot be Christian to be half-hearted in the commitment to the revolutionary struggle for human freedom from degradation and oppression. God provides for his salvation to be fully present in all the ambiguities and particularities because He provides for Himself to be fully present. But He is not present in a fashion which does violence to present human incompleteness or to remove human responsibility.
Thus the sacraments can be grossly abused, Pentecostal experience can be an illusion and revolution can also be a tyranny. In any case our enjoyment or use of all these things remains incomplete quite apart from the errors we introduce in our responses. No one anywhere will achieve liberation (whatever it might properly be) in time for most of those living today to enjoy it. We are all strictly limited beings who cannot expect to have all our potentialities fulfilled and enjoyed within the scope of any state of earthly affairs that is remotely conceivable in our life time. Thus the salvation which is God’s gift of Himself to enable us to be fully human is a salvation which the Christian believes is offered within, through and beyond the limitations of human life in this world. The ways in which Christians see, receive and experience this offer are many and doubtless need to be more various. For who can rightly exhaust what the infinite God will do for, and show to, the men He is developing for their fulfilment in Himself and in one another?

Salvation therefore is always something to come in what can be described only as God’s own time and God’s own place. But it will come because it has come. God has identified Himself with man’s own times and man’s own places by being Jesus Christ. And all this can be known because salvation does come. Men and women are renewed in the whole range of human circumstances from joy and freedom to oppression and death. They are given the courage, the purpose and the hope to receive their lives as a gift with infinite potentialities for themselves in relation to the future of all humanity.

In closing I must revert to the limitations of language. Language is inadequate for expressing the meaning of salvation for Christians in at least two ways. Firstly, we are dealing with the whole process of the giving of God Himself to men so that the humanity of all men and women may be fulfilled. And this is clearly a process beyond any description or any experience yet available to any of us. Secondly, we speak different human languages and can convey to one another only fragments of our as yet fragmentary experience. As a slight recognition of this necessary limitation and lack of fulfilment in our knowing about and speaking of God and of the salvation which is God for us and in us, I suggest two bare verbal skeletons which may serve to point to what Christians have meant, do mean and will mean by salvation.

Firstly, God is.

He is as He is in Jesus.

Therefore there is hope of being human.
Secondly, Men have needs.

God is at work to meet these needs,

In and through Jesus.

The giving of living and saving flesh and blood to these or any other verbal skeletons arises in the life, language and circumstances of men and women in their particular communities as they discover that living and dying are gifts with a future for themselves and for their fellow human beings.