

## SECULAR PERSPECTIVE OF SALVATION

Jay Longacre ■

There is an 'inextinguishable yearning' in every human being to unite with that which is infinite, eternal, absolute, permanent, even a loving Father, that is to say, God in order to defeat death in all its forms including despair, meaninglessness, and abandonment. Only God can and does offer human persons salvation which enables them to surmount death. God came to earth a wholly finite, temporal, impermanent, transitory human person in order to open up humanity's finiteness, to draw human persons out of the futility of temporal, human existence, in order to lead them to the breadth and depth of His infiniteness, His absoluteness,<sup>1</sup> His love if a person does not choose to accept the response of the one who transcends human life, then he can only seek a response within the parameters of human life. Whatever the choice, whether it be God's redemption, his own response, or that of another, he can only choose during his lifetime.

That for which human persons yearn they designate *salvation*, *immortality*, sometimes *liberation*, or by another word, depending on what they are attempting to convey, but all designations contain *calling*, *redemption*, *conversion* *justification*, *sanctification* and other factors. Whatever term a person uses is influenced by one common observation above all others: a person experiences the world as one which often does not correspond to the creation of a loving God. All kinds of poverty, oppression, injustice, domination, and imaginable and unimaginable human suffering constitute signs not only of

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today," *Origins*, 26: no. 20 (October 31, 1996), pp. 310, 311-317.

contemporary times but of all times. No matter how rich, no matter how powerful a person is, everyone suffers. No one can completely isolate himself, nor gain complete immunity from human suffering; nor can anyone be completely satisfied with his life.

Human persons must choose God's or others' promises of salvation. Until death, a person can choose and choose as often as he wants. All religions, including pseudo-sacred, *de facto* religions, promise people opportunities to transform themselves in this life and in whatever life exists beyond.

### **Secularity and Human Salvation**

Human persons cannot avoid the temporal, impermanent, relativity of the very world in which they live. Sacred and the profane, spiritual and secular, designate the difference between this world and the supernatural. *Secularization* ordinarily refers to socio-cultural processes that enlarge areas of life - material, institutional, and intellectual - in which the role of the sacred is progressively limited. *Secularity* is the resultant state of social being. *Secularism* is the ideology that argues historical inevitability and progressive nature of secularization everywhere. Contemporary secularists consider the three concepts as harmoniously integrated in a global world view. Some contemporary Christian scholars, however, consider secularization God's will, but declare secularism ungodly.

Through out the Bible, notions of time and history, contrasted with timeless myth, are pervasive. God's act of creation requires six days to complete. Abraham's departure from Mesopotamia and Mose's from Egypt, are events in space and time. Jesus moves in time with his people towards his Kingdom.

In addition to notions of history, the Bible introduces early in Genesis the idea of the world as divine creation. Because it is created, the earth and all things on it are separated from divinity and made

subject to human mastery.<sup>2</sup> That is, they are secularized. The seeds of secularization were sown in Hebrew Scripture in the form of "God who stands *outside* of the cosmos, which is his creation, but which he confronts and does not permeate."<sup>3</sup> This opens the way for 'historization', man's self-creating activity. The transcendentalization of God together with "the disenchantment of the world" created space for history as the arena of both divine and human actions.<sup>4</sup> A third related motif is an ethical rationalization, in the sense of imposing rationality on life.<sup>5</sup>

St. Paul further elaborates the significance of human action.<sup>6</sup> He points out the importance of god sending forth his son, born of a woman under Jewish Law; that those subject to the law may be redeemed, and guided to graduate from being little different than slaves to sons by adoption. To attain such adoption, a person must assume responsibility of an heir. Perhaps the Christian root of secularization is found in this notion of unity in human nature of receptivity and creativity. The human person has become open to someone other than men (God) and to the mystery of his being in the world (heir to creation). Equally, a person has the ability to respond as one who can give or withhold himself. Here is laid the basis for human lordship over the world and its powers.

## The Domains of Good and Evil

For a thousand years, ancient Hebrews and their predecessors struggled with the dualism of good and evil domains. The Babylonian myth of Marduk and Timat had influenced Hebrew thinking, followed by the ancient Persian dualism of the good God and a prince of darkness. In the creation myth, Chaos, the adversary of the Creator of

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<sup>2</sup> Gn 1:28.

<sup>3</sup> Peter L. Berger. *The Social Reality of Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Gal 4: 1-4, 8-10, 21-31.

heaven and earth, played an important role. Adam and Eve encountered Satan, the tempter, who appeared as a serpent, reminiscent of the primeval dragon. Satan challenged God and severely tested Job. Even Jesus while in the desert for forty days was tempted three times by Satan.

The Judeo-Christian tradition focused on the presence of evil along side God:

I have set before you life and prosperity, death and doom. If you obey the commandments of... God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and... God will bless you ... If... you turn away your hearts and will not listen, but are led astray and adore and serve other gods, I tell you now that you will certainly perish.

The underlying reality of two domains of action is emphasized in Christian Scripture. Thus, Christian Scripture speaks about God's things and Caesar's things,<sup>7</sup> and about two swords.<sup>8</sup> Jesus is said to have acknowledged to Pontius Pilate that he was a king, but clarified that his kingdom was not of this world.<sup>9</sup> These two worlds were brought together publicly, politically by Emperor Constantine after he became a Christian. The Judeo-Christian tradition had by then turned the concept on its head.

But the unique achievement of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that it turned the God-Satan dualism into a dialectic. The Spirit of God broods over the primeval chaos and makes it the womb from which a well ordered creation emerges. Satan was not able to destroy the first parents in their Fall, but only leads to the most generous redemptive plan for the whole creation on the part of God. In the story of Job, the trials caused by Satan only test and confirm the fidelity of the true believer. Jesus' firm response to the threefold temptation of pleasure, pride and power only serve to

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<sup>7</sup> Lk 20:25

<sup>8</sup> Lk 22:38.

<sup>9</sup> Jn 18:36; Mt 26:64. Cf. Jn 8:47 "Whoever belongs to God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not listen, because you do not belong to God." The sheep recognize the shepherd's voice and follow only it.

reaffirm the threefold Deuteronomic law (Deut.6:5) that one had to love God with one's whole heart, whole soul and whole strength.

The unique corner-stone of Christian civilization provided by Jesus is that he transformed the divine dialectic into a framework of personal relationships that forms the foundation of all human relationships and of a comprehensive world order.

Popes, claiming a mandate from Peter, considered earthly government an instrument subordinate to the 'City of God'. St. Augustine's characterized this dichotomy as two cities having been "formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self."<sup>10</sup> Opposition conveyed in this declaration reflects the negative, early Christian judgment of the secular world brought under the power of Satan. St. Augustine did not condemn civil authority, but considered the need for it a departure from the ideal of human affairs. At the end of the fifth century, Pope Gelasius clarified the relationship of the two domains by designating priestly power as much more important than royal power because it must account for kings of human persons at the final, divine tribunal.<sup>11</sup>

After Gelasius and through the Middle Ages (700-1550), popes increasingly assumed the role of temporal governors of Rome and surrounding areas. The Church in Rome created a successor empire in alliance with Frankish kings, and became identified with the whole of organized society. Kings sought and received sanctification from bishops; governments came to depend upon the supernatural for legitimation. Even notions of human worthlessness and impotence generated a reaction as the Roman Church, not only the papacy, became more involved in secular matters. Sacred kings turned out to be fragile. As R. W. Southern points out:

The growing complexity of society... called for organized government rather than ritual for the solution of its problems... In the long run this discovery helped to enlarge the area of

<sup>10</sup> St. Augustine. *The City of God*, 2 vols. (New York: Hafner, 1948), p. xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Tierney. *The Crisis of Church and State* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 13.

secular action pointed forward to a purely secular state... Moreover, with the secularization of the lay ruler, that whole broad spectrum of society which he particularly represented - the laity - suffered a corresponding demotion.<sup>12</sup>

The Roman Church strengthened its hold over government through the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries by providing specialized knowledge via growing numbers of secular clergy: The ecclesiastical hierarchy, inevitably, came into conflict with civil hierarchies, as the development of local secular governments and even of nation-states accelerated. Each hierarchy typically tried to establish an ordered Christian society, but from its own perspective, in which the religious and secular could be combined. By the fourteenth century, papal doctrine denied kings a clerical character. Secular authorities regularly questioned clerical supremacy and even papal secular pretensions. The collapse of the uneasy relationship of ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies signaled the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup>

Salvation is a central theological theme which refers to fulfillment of human yearning for ultimate truth and goodness in freedom and love; it is the completion in God of man's destiny. This is achieved in history through an act of God that redeems, frees, and rescues. In the most profound sense, salvation is God's presence among human beings, the fulfillment of their transcendence, by which they as spiritual-personal creatures are referred to their author and the objective of goodness. An integral part of salvation is the categorical structure of human relationships in a personal world of history and nature. To state it negatively, salvation is the absence of abandonment by God and the absence of hate, destruction, doubt, exploitation, hunger, distress, sickness, and death.

Salvation, as an all-encompassing point of view, impacts all theological themes. The exact interpretation of salvation, consequently - what is it? how is it realized and acquired? - impacts on every

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<sup>12</sup> R. W. Southern. *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-49.

theological project. In the East, salvation is understood as divinization of humankind in grace; God became a human person so that human persons could become God. Through the long process of salvation of the history, God educates, transforms, and renders human beings like unto God.

In the West, beginning with Augustine's struggle against Pelagianism, salvation is regarded as forgiveness of sins. Due to the influence of the Reformation, the dialectic of salvation and human action is considered in terms of an alternative: (1) salvation by God's hand *or* by deeds of free self-realization; (2) salvation as pure transcendence *or* as manifested in immanence; (3) salvation of the transcendent soul *or* good fortune understood materially. The Enlightenment and the critique of religion by L. Feuerbach, K. Marx, F. Nietzsche, and S. Freud emphasize the second alternative. The basis for this is the objection that the doctrine of supernatural of religion is an empty promise to those who are exploited and who therefore are incapable of self-liberation.

Salvation is key to the Church's teaching. According to Vatican II, the Church universal itself is understood as the sacrament of salvation in the world.<sup>14</sup> It exercises its service of salvation in preaching and the sacraments.<sup>15</sup> Of particular significance for salvation are baptism and baptism of desire,<sup>16</sup> or the sacrament of desire of penance on the part of those who have fallen after baptism.<sup>17</sup> Although salvation comes only from God's grace, human beings are empowered to cooperate, since grace sets in motion a new morality.<sup>18</sup>

Since there is grace outside the Church universal,<sup>19</sup> salvation is possible for innocent atheists and adherents of other religions who do not know Christ.<sup>20</sup> The basis for salvation's universality is the

<sup>14</sup> LG 1, 9, 48, 59; see SC 5, 26; AG 1, 5; GS 42, 45.

<sup>15</sup> DS 1604-8; 2536; LG 11.

<sup>16</sup> DS 1529, 1604, 1618.

<sup>17</sup> DS 1672, 1706, 1579.

<sup>18</sup> DS 225-30, 373-97, 1520-83.

<sup>19</sup> DS 2429.

<sup>20</sup> LG 16; GS 22.

Incarnation: according to the creed, "He came down from heaven for us and for our salvation."<sup>21</sup>

Present theological ideas of salvation are largely determined by the effort to respond critically to the Marxist objection. Thus the salvation proclaimed by Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God that sets man free must be understood as overcoming structural injustice and power. This has been the project of political theology and liberation theology. By utilizing observations and findings of psychology and sociology for pastoral care, human persons have become more aware of salvation's medical, social, cultural, and political dimensions. Salvation is also sanctification and so must take place in the areas of experience of self and interpersonal relations. Instead of a purely religious and interior view of salvation, Vatican II points to the Church universal's duty to serve the world,<sup>22</sup> although the relationship between salvation and the world is not always clear. Salvation's theological dimension, nevertheless, should not be understood as a play of opposites. A human person's relationship to God is universal. God in Christ is humankind's salvation. Human beings are individual persons, not only a network of relationships. Thus the theological definition of salvation is transcendental in character. Human persons are related to God in the dialogal events of sacramental life in the Church universal as community and in prayer. While eternal life is now hidden from human persons, it really is present. In death it will be revealed fully, when they are raised up to God.

Salvation, however, is also experienced in the relationships that constitute everyday existence. Thus part and parcel of the service of both lay Christians and the institutional church is to work for changes in anything within the political or social orders that is mere pretense and not conducive to being human (this might involve, e.g., service, charity, support of certain social legislation, and political involvement to bring about a democratic and constitutional government). The conditions of human living, however, can never be changed to the

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<sup>21</sup> DS 125.

<sup>22</sup> GS 36.



point at which there could be a definitive 'paradise on earth'. Suffering and death do remain.

Biblical faith is not at all concerned with asking in what salvation consists or in recommending techniques, whether mystical or ethical, by which salvation may be attained. It is concerned rather with the proclamation of the fact of salvation, and thus it differs from all 'religions' by being kerygmatic in character. The Bible is concerned with the fact that God actually has in concrete historical fact saved His people from destruction; and it proclaims: historical salvation thus attested is but the foreshadowing or 'type' of the salvation that is to come. This is the theme of both Hebrew and Christian Scripture. God is God of salvation: this is the Gospel of both Jewish and Christian faith. God has saved His people and He will save them. In the Bible, salvation is both a historical and an eschatological reality. The Son of God was named Jesus which means 'savior'. Salvation is the central theme of the entire Bible and as such is related to every other biblical theme.

In Hebrew Scripture, the determinative experience of Yahweh's salvation was the deliverance from Egyptian bondage, the miracle of the Red Sea, and the subsequent experience of God's fatherly care in the wilderness.

### **Salvation as an Eschatological Conception**

By considering salvation as an eschatological event intends more than that it is a future event or reality. An eschatological reality is one which is even now real, present, and active, and at the same time is not yet fully realized, made visible (except to faith), or consummated. Humankind lives in an intermediate state, 'between the times', when by faith people know already the salvation which is theirs, although they have not fully appropriated or finally apprehended it. In Hebrew Scripture, Israel's salvation is already assured, for it was achieved at the exodus from Egypt and ratified by the everlasting covenant which God made with Moses on Mt. Sinai. According to the

teaching of the prophets, God's salvific act at the Red Sea was active in Israel's history. It was a continuing redemption, delivering God's people from Assyrian invasion or Babylonian exile; and it would be consummated in the final redemption of God's people at the end of the age, the day of creation of new heavens, and a new earth. It is especially in the prophecy of Deutero-Isaiah that this doctrine is most fully developed and clearly expressed.

There is no divorce or contradiction between the historical and the eschatological, because the former, by becoming active in the present and no mere past-and-gone event, is the matrix and type of the latter. The eschatological salvation, even now active in the present, is the final realization beyond history of that which the historical redemption foreshadowed and promised. Past, present, and future constitute, not three deliverances, but one deliverance. To consider the biblical view of time as linear is misleading if it obscures this truth.

### **Salvation as Historical Deliverance**

In Christian Scripture, as in Hebrew Scripture, salvation is accomplished by God's action in human history. Man is not saved by wisdom or correct knowledge,<sup>23</sup> nor by merit or right actions,<sup>24</sup> nor yet by mystical absorption into deity,<sup>25</sup> but by God's actions in the composite birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Man is saved by the entire life of Christ from conception to ascension. Accordingly, the Christian message is not a philosophy, nor an ethical code, nor yet a technique of mystical practice. Rather, it is kerygma, preaching, evangel in the Isaianic sense of proclaiming human liberation.<sup>26</sup>

In contemporary society, spiritual needs appear less immediate than material needs. Salvation as eternal life in the Kingdom Of God

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<sup>23</sup> Gnosticism.

<sup>24</sup> Judaism.

<sup>25</sup> Hellenistic mysticism.

<sup>26</sup> Is 40:9; 52:7; 61:1-2.

has broken into this world (though not fully realized) with the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The institutional church teaches Christians that union with God in the Kingdom will be fully realized at the final judgment at the time of the general resurrection. A common assumption among Western people and many Christians is that they have all they can do to deal with problems of daily living - monthly bills, children's education, medical insurance, taxes, and pension plans, etc. The 'hereafter' will have to wait.

If we understand salvation as eternal life in union with God and there is no present, past, or future in eternity, then such unity can begin here on earth. God came to humankind in this life in Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth. It is this union with the divine for which human persons have an inextinguishable yearning. In some way, people become more complete, more perfect in union with the divine. Salvation, therefore, signifies 'completeness' and 'human perfectibility',<sup>27</sup> a realization people receive when they accept Jesus Christ as Lord and God. What salvation appears to be in this life depends very much on a personal or societal point of view. The meaning of salvation can be considered contextual - dependent on a person's or a society's particular circumstances. Let us consider a recent example.

It was mentioned above that we experience a world that often does not correspond to a good God. Poverty, oppression, all kinds of unjust domination, and suffering of the just and innocent are signs of our times and all times. A particular theology, liberation theology, developed out of such circumstances in Latin America. Human beings, and Christians certainly, should not acquiesce in such an unjust situation. Liberation theologians deduced that the situation had become untenable and could be surmounted only by changing secular structures which are structures of sin and evil:

If sin exerts its powers over the structures and impoverishment is programmed before hand by them, then its overthrow cannot come about through individual conversions, but through the struggle against

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<sup>27</sup> This suggestion developed in a conversation with John Chethimattam.

the structures of injustice... This struggle ought to be political because the structures are consolidated and preserved through politics. Redemption thus became a political process... It was transformed into a task which people themselves could and even had to take into their own hands, and at the same time it became a totally practical hope: Faith, in theory, became praxis, concrete redeeming action, in the process of liberation.<sup>28</sup>

A formidable challenge facing the contemporary institutional church is finding ways to express its moral teachings in a time in which most people may not share some of the Church's moral presumptions such as: (1) there are moral absolutes; (2) suffering can be redemptive; (3) people should forego possession of material goods of this world in order to secure the good of the Kingdom of God; (4) freedom is liberation from sin and the right to do what is good, rather than doing whatever one desires.<sup>29</sup> The issues become quite complex because not all moral claims are absolutes nor are they so considered by fair-minded people. Certainly not all suffering is redemptive and human persons must distinguish among suffering caused by themselves, by others, and by 'acts of God'. Material goods can become obstacles to following Christ, but need not always be and in every circumstance remain obstacles. As many people may be misguided spiritually as are materially misguided.

## **Rights Language**

Whether there is or is not a common moral discourse in the world, there is one mode of moral discourse that seems to have a kind of universal currency - the language of *human rights*. Universal declarations of human rights provide a background against which cross

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<sup>28</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger, op. cit., p. 311.

<sup>29</sup> It is difficult if not impossible to know how many people or what percentage of people agree or disagree with the moral and other teachings of the institutional church. The communications media worldwide are controlled by people who are opposed to teachings and strictures of the institutional church, especially concerning morals.

cultural discussions of morality and politics can proceed. Since the final decade of the nineteenth century, since Pope Leo XIII, and very much during the last decades of the twentieth century, 'rights language' has played an almost dominant role in Papal encyclicals about moral and political matters.

There are three apparent reasons for this. First, since the American and French Revolutions, rights language has become central to moral discourse. To state the case for morality today, it is impossible to do so without recourse to rights language. Second, such language includes an absolute dimension that combats the most dangerous feature of the contemporary ethos - *relativism*. Included within purview of relativism, as an extreme of relativity, are several features considered by many people to be a part of any contemporary notion of salvation or liberation in this life.

Third, democratic governments, acceding to the demands of their citizenry, in many areas of the world and in many ways, have become progressively more responsible. Moral integrity is demanded of government officials or they can expect to receive negative publicity, be the butt of public demonstrations, indicted for crimes, sued for civil damages, or otherwise be discredited publicly. Sexual harassment violates a person's constitutional rights and even a President in office may be sued for violating such a right. A candidate for the top military post in the U. S. can be forced to withdraw his candidacy because of confessed adultery committed several years earlier when he and his wife were separated. Elected officials who have run afoul of the law are encouraged to resign. Populism does not pay in the long run.

The institutional church's use of rights language is compatible with the Catholic natural law tradition. Yet, use of this language is not without problems. Rights language grew out of Enlightenment political thought of thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke whose views of the *nature of a human person* and God were considerably at odds with views of the Catholic Church.

There is confusion of what a *right* is, but no more so than of what *salvation* is. Some rights are considered 'negative' because they

describe a zone of noninterference - the *right to life* and the *right to privacy* come to mind. There are few justifications for taking the life of another person or violating his right to privacy. Other, 'positive' rights make claims on other people to provide something - food, shelter, clothing, education, for example. The difference is not always clear. Is the right to a *job* or to *medical care* positive or negative? Who has the obligation to provide them?

The shift from abstract moral ideas of the Platonists and Stoics to the language of rights is a most significant phenomenon of the modern age. It is a reversal of the rank individualism promoted by the Protestant Reformation. "The naked face of my neighbor has become the supreme law of my life."<sup>30</sup> There are no rights without God who is both human persons' ultimate goal and the key to relationships them.

Rights talk sometimes eclipses talk of responsibility. It seems as if human persons (and not only young people) can recite a litany of rights but cannot recite corresponding obligations and responsibilities which as citizens they might have. Part of this springs from a sense of compassion and concern for other people.

Contemporary rights talk considers liberty foremost. As long as people do not directly harm other people, they believe they have the unfettered liberty to pursue their own concept of the good. In *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, The U. S. Supreme Court declared: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."<sup>31</sup> Although the ability of any person to determine these concepts independently may be questioned, the relative meaning of these concepts in and applicability to daily life in all likelihood will have to be determined by the person. Certainly a person can choose to make such determination independently or to 'shop' for the determination most amenable to him.. This argument has been made in behalf of both abortion and euthanasia.

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<sup>30</sup> Emmanuel Levinas.

<sup>31</sup> 112 S. Ct. 2807 (1992).

Such rights language can reduce moral claims to claims of justice. Other areas of moral discourse are ignored. People no longer, for example, speak in terms of virtue or of doing God's will, or of duty, or of natural law, or of keeping the Ten Commandments. And what about a moral obligation to take care of a person's health? Health is something people owe others, but it is not considered a personal obligation or responsibility. A person can smoke for many years knowing the physical consequences, expect society to find and to finance a transplant, and then either he or his estate will want to sue tobacco companies for destroying his health. Hold on! Does he not have a right to kill himself?

The moral vision of the institutional Roman Catholic Church can be expressed without reference to rights. Rights language focuses on a narrow range of ethical concerns - just interactions between human persons or among human persons and the state. The Catholic moral vision, in addition, encompasses human dignity, natural law, virtue, grace, love, charity, the commandments, prayer, sacraments, conscience, passions, obligations to others and to God, sin and eternal destiny of human beings. These are all themes of the *Catechism*. Such concerns can easily be lost in a moral vision governed only by rights.

Perhaps the difference between a moral vision governed by rights language and that of the institutional church can best be understood by contrasting what it means to be a creature bearing rights and a creature bearing duties. Our society is slow to recognize duties and responsibilities. It finds in them negative connotations, which suggest curtailment of freedom. Rights, on the other hand, smack of freedom. A human person bearing rights is full of needs and demands that often seem in conflict with those of other people. A human person bearing duties is interconnected with others as a person who must actively seek the good of other people, and who, in doing so, is also achieving goods for himself, if only the important good of performing his duties.

The Catholic moral vision considers a human person as indebted from the moment of conception and throughout his lifetime. He owes God and his parents for his birth and life. He owes countless

others for making possible his life and enjoyment of it. Every human person is indebted to God and other people. He is obliged to live a life of self-giving, if only to offer a token repayment for what he has received. His focus should not be on himself - his needs, demands, and rights - but on doing good for other people. Those persons who perform their duties achieve true freedom, freedom from selfishness and evil. While rights language can serve the important function of protecting human dignity from assaults against it, the language of duty advances the nobility of the human person and his true freedom.

Christians understand rights to be grounded in human dignity in the nature of the human person, which encompasses more than a human person's status as a free creature. Such a grounding is important because it prevents irresponsible proliferation of rights grounded only in human needs and desires. The following is a clear statement of the foundation of rights:

Human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin<sup>32</sup>

Here rights are linked to human nature and to the Creator who formed that nature. The *Catechism* links rights talk not only to human dignity but also to the commandments and to natural law as well:

The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men. It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties.<sup>33</sup>

The Ten Commandments belong to God's revelation. At the same time, they teach us true humanity of man. They bring to light essential duties and, therefore, indirectly, the fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Donum Vitae*, Sec. III; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2273.

<sup>33</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 1956.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 2070.



## Conclusion

What can Christian theology generally and Catholic theology specifically contribute to the salvation of human beings in the twenty-first century? Can the coordinates of theological notions embedded in and drawn from the daily experience of human persons, who are not all professed Christians, be organized in the form of an outline of a public theology that may have broad application to human life in most, if not all, religious contexts?

From the daily lives of people emerge, at least in part, key aspects of religion. Their personal and collective experience plays a key role in the development and practice of their spiritual lives. Their ritual expressions of worship, sacrifices, sacraments, and other acts of adoration and devotion are informed by their culture which emanates from their daily lives. Ethics, moral codes, and guides to behavior are all produced by the daily interactions of people, at the root of which is an inborn sense of right and wrong. Myths and other stories which encapsulate fundamental beliefs of families, neighborhoods, communities, and societies were originally drawn from the varied ways in which the people and their ancestors lived. Often religion is the glue which binds the people in a society together. Even their individual prayer life has a communitarian aspect. Everybody prays in one way or another and rarely, if ever, does a person pray only for himself.

Human persons, as they approach the twenty-first century, are not asked to discover truth that has never been discovered before. In Christian and other religious traditions, "truth has been expressed in religious terms, a language which has become well-nigh incomprehensible to the majority of modern men."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Schumacher, E. F. *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 296.