

## UNDERSTANDING HISTORY: EMERGING CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Until the dawn of the Age of Reason a dual conception of history, which had gradually been evolving since the early Middle Ages, was the universally accepted way in which Christendom regarded the past. It is implicit in the eighteenth-century phrase, *history sacred and profane*. Accordingly, the total of human historical knowledge could be divided into two quite distinct types, differing on account of the disparate sources from which they came. Sacred history was the history of the world as it was divinely and therefore without any error disclosed in the Bible. This history was complete and superior in itself not only for all its past since the creation of the world, but also for all its future until its consummation in the Last Judgment. This sacred history was also known as the salvation history, meaning thereby that it was necessary to be included in this sacred history if humans wanted to arrive at salvation in the next life. There was no choice possible. Until the final disintegration of the medieval worldview in the eighteenth century, world history, also known as profane history, had to be fitted into the periphery of this sacred history of the Bible, as it had been since the time of Orosius in the early fifth century CE.<sup>1</sup> This conception of sacred history, supposed to be derived from the infallible teaching of the Bible, and supplying the framework into which all other histories had to be somehow accommodated, survived among the Christians until after the close of the Age of Reason. Profane<sup>2</sup> history or

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<sup>1</sup>Augustine had commissioned his scholarly researcher, Orosius, to write a more orderly complement to his own discursive *De Civitate Dei*.

<sup>2</sup>The adjective 'profane' is derived from the Latin *profanes*, which literally meant "before the temple," i.e., 'non-sacred', 'unconsecrated', 'secular'.

world history, as contrasted with this sacred history or salvation history, was purely a human enterprise which had no goal and no meaning. There was, therefore, an absolute qualitative difference between sacred and profane history. Everything except the sacred history was secondary, a marginal reality. Hence, many Christian theologians held world history, as a whole, in low esteem.<sup>3</sup>

It is this dichotomic approach to history, as sacred and profane, that has prevailed in Christian thinking till very recent times. The history of the world, the history of other world religions, and political histories were all seen as not related to salvation history and they only served as the framework and the matrix within which the sacred history took place, and this sacred history was identified with the biblical revelation. But a real change has taken place in our times with the emergence of what we may call a process of secularisation. In fact, the world of today has become very much secular, and it would appear that the process is by no means over yet. Secular thinking is the keynote of contemporary philosophical, scientific and theological thinking. As a result, the trend in various areas of human reflection is to underline the secular dimension of human life and human history. This universal secularity challenges the faith of millions of people and they are faced with the question as to what their attitude to secularity should be. It could happen that faith would try to ignore the acuteness of the situation and simply hammer away behind locked doors at its customary practices in theology and piety, as though there had been no worthwhile issue, and, therefore, there is no need to understand and answer the challenges of the ever-changing times. A faith that is unhistorical is not likely to feel itself threatened. It can go on talking with extraordinary superiority about God and the world. But it lacks urgency and a taste of reality. Some would see this whole situation as a denial of the sacred, while others see it as the sign of an ushering in of a complementary approach in human thinking, where the natural and the supernatural, the this-worldly and the other-worldly, the sacred and the secular have their respective roles to play. It is also related to the dynamics of a theocentric and anthropocentric approach, where both the divine and the human are to be seen in complementary dimensions, enriching each other and not opposed to each other. The very approach to the Bible as the Word of God

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<sup>3</sup>See Alan Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane*, London: SCM Press, 1964, 23-26.

in human language, which has inaugurated the scientific study of the Bible towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was an affirmation of the complementary dimension of the sacred as associated with salvation and the secular or the so-called profane. Thereby a new understanding of history and a new approach to the action of God in history have also emerged.

### **1. Salvation History within World History**

When Christian thinkers developed the concept of a linear understanding of history as the unique contribution of the Old and New Testaments within the larger framework of a cyclic and circular approach to history, there grew up a tendency to consider the history of Israel and the history of the Christian movement as an ongoing process of salvation history, starting with the creation and the call of Abraham and reaching its goal and realization in the Christ Event, from where the salvation history moves forward in the history of the Christian movement in ever-widening dimensions till it reaches its consummation in the second coming of Christ. Hence, the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis were understood as the stage of world history, while from Genesis chapter twelve onwards there is the inauguration of the salvation history with the call of Abraham which is later focused on the history of Israel. This history underwent many vicissitudes until in a unique figure of Messianic expectation the whole history of salvation was concentrated. In Jesus of Nazareth this Messianic hope of salvation was realized and from him onwards the salvation history took new dimensions, inviting people to join this mainstream of salvation. Accordingly, it was maintained that the Church, to which the work of salvation is entrusted, has to bring in as many people as possible so that they can also come out of the realm of world history and belong to the history of salvation. Here, according to many, lies the meaning of mission and evangelization as well as the whole meaning of the ministry of the Church in the world.

Thus, Cullmann made a conscious and consistent effort to see the Christ Event as constituting the middle of time through his work published in German in 1946 under the title *Christus und die Zeit* and translated into English as *Christ and Time* in 1951. He wrote: "In Christ time has reached its mid-point, and at the same time the moment has reached in which this is preached to men (and women), so that with the establishment of the

division of time, they are able to believe in it and in this faith to understand time in a Christian way, that is taking Christ as the Centre."<sup>4</sup> In his efforts to explain the unique characteristics of the theology of Luke, Hans Conzelmann also tried to understand the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as the "Centre of Time," which is preceded by the history of Israel and is followed by the period since the ascension of Christ, which is the period of the Church. The German edition, *Die Mitte der Zeit*, was published in 1953 and its English translation came out in 1960 as *Theology of Luke*. Around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this approach to biblical theology and time was a standard in theological writings.<sup>5</sup>

Though it was a fascinating idea for all theologians to evaluate history in this manner during those years, when Western theologians were supposed to have the right to say the last word about anything theological and biblical, now theologians and exegetes in general are not all happy with this approach to the Christian understanding of history. This is not to deny the importance of the Christ Event in history nor somehow to relativize the role of Christ in salvation history taken as a whole, a fear that is being expressed again and again in the documents of the Church. More important for us is to understand God as guiding the entire historical process within which we have to see and understand the person of Christ and his redemptive mission. The salient perspectives of God's involvement in the history of Israel and of the early Church are mainly faith articulations of Israel and the early Church. We must respect their commitment to their faith, with which they responded to God's revelation. But it is not correct to make these faith expressions as applicable to all humans and also to apply this approach as a criterion for evaluating all events in the world history.

The fact that this assumption of Christian theologians was not questioned in the past is not a justification for the contemporary academic world to continue using it during these changed times in a pluralistic culture like ours. What we can say is that in this exercise of superiority complex the Christians were following a kind of Constantine syndrome,

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<sup>4</sup>Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1951, 93.

<sup>5</sup>See Neal M. Flanagan, *Salvation History: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964.

which started in the fourth century of the Common Era and which later on was revived during the time of the Crusades, and after the 14<sup>th</sup> century through the colonialism organized from the Christian West with its military and missionary power trying to conquer the whole world. This questionable programme of the conquest of the world was based on two major assumptions: One, that Christianity is the only true religion and that all other religions are false. Again, there were specifications. Only the Roman Catholic Church is the true Church and all other Christians were separated brethren. The second assumption was that earthly life was only a preparation for the life after death. Salvation of the soul was the main agenda of Christian mission.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the most challenging theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has affirmed, our world is a world "come of age." The world has grown into maturity. As a result, some of the unhealthy assumptions and uncritical approaches to reality prevailing among Christians have been willingly given up without anybody questioning them or fighting for them. Theologians all over the world started looking at the world and history through new eyes. They have begun to see that there is only one God and one human community, and consequently there is only one history with many dimensions. Ethnic, social, cultural and political events are all part of this history that was guided by the same God. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, there are no two histories, one profane and one sacred, juxtaposed, or closely linked. Rather there is only one human history and one human destiny. The historical destiny of humanity must be placed definitively in the salvific horizon. Only thus will its true dimensions emerge and its deepest meaning be obvious. It seems, however, that contemporary theology has not yet furnished the categories, which would allow us to think through and express adequately this unified approach to history.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Holistic Understanding of Salvation History**

A new humanism is on the rise, and, accordingly, a new approach to human life is also seen as a unified whole. Moreover, salvation is understood as embracing the human life taken as a whole. An awareness of

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<sup>6</sup>See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, London: SCM Press, 1974, 153.

selfhood, a search for purpose in history, and a yearning for new forms of community are the characteristics of the new humanism that is gradually evolving all over the world. This phenomenon is found in all religions. Secular and religious movements are bearers of this new humanism. The ultimate goal of all this process is humanization and this is the new name for salvation in its broadest sense. Humanization means the process through which humans are rendered authentic and integrated. Humanization means the process through which humans are enabled to live in dignity as God's children. Humanization means the destruction of all structures of sin, whether social, cultural, religious or even political. Humanization affirms that life here on earth is equally meaningful and relevant as life after death. Humanization means that the whole humankind has a right to enjoy the good things of this world, and the unfortunate division of the humankind into 'haves' and 'have-nots' is unjustified, with 20% of the world population enjoying 80% of the resources of the earth and 80% of the world population constrained to live with the remaining 20% of such resources. Humanization means the eradication of all oppressive structures whether they belong to the old colonialism or the new forms of colonialism coming under the label of globalisation.

In fact, what we find in the Old and New Testaments are attempts at seeing God entering into human history understood as a whole, and engaged in accomplishing the holistic humanization of the entire humankind. The entire Bible is about a God who creates and acts, a God who is continually involved in the history of humankind. Though the first impression we get about Israel is that it was a community selected from among the nations in order to live in isolation, several writers of the Old Testament are bold enough to articulate the universal and pluralistic background of Israel and their task of being an open community. Thus, we have the Elohist tradition introducing the call of Abraham as God's definitive step to bless all the families of the earth, insofar as Abraham represents the ideal person who commits himself to God and to his saving plans. Abraham is, therefore, more a paradigm than a particular person, more a parable than an individualized one (Gen 12:1-3). Prophet Ezekiel wrote to the Israelites: "Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite" (Ez 16:3). So also Amos spoke to Israel: "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,

and Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (Am 9:7). All what we find in the Old Testament under the guise of the election of Israel, the divine protection given to them, Israel's hatred towards the nations, and the holy wars Israel waged against the nations, are the creations of some specific theological traditions behind the Old Testament. There is a constant effort made by many other writers of the Old Testament to emphasize the universal dimensions of God's involvement in Israel's history as related to the larger history of humankind.

### 3. Israel Encountering God in the World History

The Bible has two detailed narratives about the creation of the world in the Priestly (Gen 1:1-2:4a) and the Yahwist (Gen 2:4b-25) traditions. In both these narratives the entire humankind is the focus of the creation, either as the climax of God's creative act insofar as men and women are created in God's image and likeness and are given the task of being the steward of the creation (Gen 1:26-31), or as the centre of a beautiful and idyllic garden where God created them and gave them a share in God's own life through the divine breath (Gen 2:7) and invited them to be creative and stewarding in the task entrusted to them (Gen 2:15). But this lofty picture of humankind is reversed through the symbolic story of the fall of the humankind (Gen 3:1-24). This is followed by several haggadic stories, the climax of which is in the story of the tower of Babel which is characterized by the presumption of humankind to safeguard its own future without any recourse to the assistance of God, an attempt that was defeated by God himself through the confusion of their language (Gen 11:1-9). The entire narrative in these chapters of Genesis has the theme of God creating the world and humankind through his goodness, while humans were not responding to this divine act of love through the misuse of their freedom. This theme is presented through various stories about the ascending power of sin and the growing separation of humankind from God, on the one hand, and the punishing, purifying and supporting hand of God, on the other.<sup>7</sup> Though we must respect the historical background of these stories, through his Encyclical *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII has clearly instructed the members of the Church that they should not look for the

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<sup>7</sup>See G. von Rad, *Genesis*, London: SCM Press, 1961, 148-153.

kind of modern history in these early chapters of Genesis.<sup>8</sup> The mistake in the past had been in taking all these stories as if they had happened the way they are narrated. If we closely analyse these chapters, it becomes clear that the main purpose of these stories is to highlight the origin of everything from God and also to theologically establish the reason why God had recourse to a new beginning with the call of Abraham. Hence, we read about the ultimate purpose of the call of Abraham as God's plan to bless all families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3).

Although the book of Genesis begins with the story of the creation of the whole universe, thereby preparing the larger background for the history of Israel, it is the considered view of Old Testament scholars that the basic and central story of the Old Testament is the narrative of the exodus from Egypt and the many events related to this primordial event. Here we encounter a God entering into the heart of human history with a definite plan about it. Though it is the story of the God of Israel getting involved in the destiny of a particular people, the story is to be understood also as a paradigm and pattern of how God is concerned about all humans and how he wants to liberate the oppressed and the exploited wherever and whenever it happens in the course of history. Hence, the prologue to the central story of the Old Testament is God speaking to Moses from the burning bush: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I know their sufferings. And I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me, and I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Ex 3: 7-10). It is this stirring historical drama that is unfolded in the book of Exodus. The protagonist is Israel's God, who intervenes on behalf of a helpless band of slaves. The plot, developed through a succession of suspense-filled episodes, is God's contest against the Egyptian Pharaoh, the mightiest emperor of the day. The denouement comes when, in the nick of time, Israel's pursuers are swallowed up in the

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<sup>8</sup>See J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1996, 109-110.



waters of the Sea of Reeds. The leading theme of the drama is the action and triumph of God over human malice.

From the Egyptian point of view, the exodus was just a marginal political event: the liberation of a band of slaves from the yoke of Pharaoh with no political consequence. That was all its public meaning. In that sense it can be viewed and compared with similar political events in the lives of other peoples. But to Israel the exodus was an event with a divine purpose and plan. What happened to them was God's redemption of his people, not just their liberation from political servitude. The exodus was an act of God and it was a sign of his loving presence in the midst of the people. Therefore, the story of the exodus deals with history on a different plane on which much of our history is usually written and studied today. No external historical study can demonstrate that the exodus was an act of God; it was politically an insignificant event. But to Israel this political event was the medium through which God's presence among the Israelites and his purpose about them were disclosed. God's revelation to Israel did not come like a bolt from the blue; it came through the crises of a divine dimension of meaning. The general public was unaware of the whole thing. For Israel, it was full of meaning, both for them and for their future. For the Hebrew writers, to write history was to narrate these mighty acts of God.

In this context it is very useful to reflect on the very revelation of the divine name 'Yahweh' made to Moses on mount Sinai, through which God wanted to identify himself as different from all other gods. In Hebraic thought it was believed that any name is filled with a mysterious power and significance, for the name represents the innermost identity of a person. In the exodus story we come to one of the most cryptic passages in the Old Testament. When Moses asked God for his name, he answered Moses: "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be" (Ex 3:14). He further said: "Thus you shall say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'." In Ex 3:15 God continues: "YHWH, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, has sent me to you": This is my name forever; and this is my title for all generations."<sup>9</sup> YHWH,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>In the Old Testament period Hebrew language was written only with consonants; vowels were not added until the early Christian era, when Hebrew was no longer a living language. It is now accepted that the original pronunciation of the

technically known as the tetragrammaton, is most probably the third person rendering of the first person YHYH. As we reflect on the meaning of this name of God, it is important that we understand this name not in the abstract, but as closely related to his involvement and action in the ongoing developments of the history of Israel. Hence, the context of this revelation of the divine name is very important. Though God was addressed through several other names, such as El Shaddai, El Elyon, it was to Moses on Mount Sinai that the official name of God as Yahweh was first of all revealed (Ex 3:14).

The Hebrew etymology of this divine name 'Yahweh' is a disputed one among biblical scholars. The LXX rendered it as "I am who I am" (*ego eimi ho on*), the emphasis here being on God's changeless essence and being, that is, he is the God who eternally is, who is not affected by the flux and flow of time. The ancient Greeks, who struggled philosophically with the problem of the changing and the changeless, would have favoured such a view. But in Israel's faith the emphasis is upon divine activity. Just as persons disclose themselves to others through their words and deeds, so also God reveals himself by what he does. There is general agreement among biblical scholars that the name 'Yahweh' is derived from the archaic form of the verb *to be* (*hawah*). The Hebrew verb *to be* has a dynamic meaning that cannot be rendered by the English verb *to be*. There are other etymologies also proposed. W. F. Albright has interpreted the name as derived from the causative form of the verb *to be* and proposes that Yahweh is only the first word of the entire name *yahweh aser yihweh*, translated as "He brings into being whatever comes to being". The name, therefore, designates God as one who acts and gets involved in human history.<sup>10</sup> The most concrete form of God's involvement in history was the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. It is within the context of God's activity in the history of Israel that he was revealed, and, hence, this name stands for his dynamic presence with the people of Israel. God reveals

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Hebrew YHWH was *Yahweh*. But because of the holy aspect of this name, it was withdrawn from ordinary speech after the exile and the substitute Hebrew ADONAI (Lord) was introduced. The still prevailing pronunciation *Jehovah* is the result of an erroneous combination of the consonants of YHWH with the vowels of ADONAI, added to it during the Christian times.

<sup>10</sup>See W. F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957, 15-18, 259-272.

himself as a force in the future of the people and not as an abstract being separated from history. According to another hypothesis, Yahweh was formerly the mountain god of Kenites, a clan of the Midianites, and Moses was initiated into the Yahweh cult through his marriage to the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian. It was while Moses was tending Jethro's flocks in the Midianite territory that he received a revelation from Yahweh. But the significant point here is not where the name came from, or even what its literal meaning could be. Rather, the important issue is what the name stood for in the history of Israel from the time of Moses onwards. The Israelites knew and worshiped Yahweh as the one who had heard the cry of their oppression, who had graciously intervened on their behalf, and who had led them toward a future full of promise. In Israel's experience, as interpreted by Moses, the name 'Yahweh' had only one meaning: "I am Yahweh who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. The Sacred and the Secular in the New Testament

It is interesting to find that in the Christmas narrative of Luke's Gospel the scene opens in the royal palace of Caesar Augustus in Rome, where the emperor orders a census of his *oikoumene*<sup>12</sup> to be undertaken. From Rome it moves to Syria where the Roman governor Quirinius proceeds to implement the imperial command. Accordingly, a young couple began to travel all the way from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem of Judah where their child was to be born (Lk 2:1-7). Through this description Luke is trying to show the secular and worldly dimensions of the birth of Christ. Again, the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus opens with a description of its political and historical landscape in Rome, around Palestine and in Jerusalem itself (Lk 3:1-2). It goes to the credit of Luke, the great theological historian of the New Testament, who could relate the sacred events of Christian origins to the secular events of the days of King Herod (Lk 1:5), Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius (Lk 2:1-3), as well as to Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pontius Pilate, Herod the ruler of Galilee, Philip the ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis and Lysanias the rulers of Abilene (Lk 3:1-2). What Jesus of Nazareth did was not an isolated

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<sup>11</sup>See B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1957, 36-37.

<sup>12</sup>*Oikoumene* in Greek means the "inhabited earth," and during the early centuries it was identified with the Roman Empire.

exercise of his projects and plans. It takes the dimensions of the Roman Empire, the *oikoumene* of the then known world. As Paul said in one of his discourses, the Christ event did not happen in some dark corner (Acts 26:26) that nobody knew about; rather it was a public event known to all.

All the Gospels try to explain how through his ministry Jesus continued to be the dynamic presence of God in history. John has articulated this conviction through his very bold statement about the Word, which was with God in the beginning, becoming flesh and dwelling among humans (Jn 1:1-14). Mathew takes care to confirm his first statement about the Emmanuel – God with us – in 1.23 through two further statements about the continued presence of Christ in the community of his disciples, firstly, in the central part of his Gospel (Mt 18:20) with his promise of presence where two or three are gathered in his name, and later on as the conclusion of the Gospel in 28:20, where he declares: "I am with you till the end of the age." Hence, the last statement of Mathew is not about the ascension of the risen Jesus, but rather about his continued presence and action till the end of the historical process. Through this new assurance the eschatological expectations of Judaism were, once again, revised and a new awareness of God's presence in history was confirmed and guaranteed.

Some would argue from these reflections that what Jesus did and what he promised were aspects of a spiritual salvation that was inaugurated by him. It is precisely here that we have to reflect on the earthly and this-worldly understanding of salvation history in the preaching of Jesus. What Jesus brought with his ministry is the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Starting with the first beatitude "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," Christian tradition has a vitiated history of understanding the kingdom of God as an otherworldly reality, to possess which all were asked to be poor in this world. But Jesus meant something entirely different when he brought the concept of the kingdom of God as the focus and controlling factor of his preaching. Taking a concept from its Old Testament background and its multifaceted understanding in Judaism, Jesus made the kingdom of God the central reality of his preaching, teaching and actions. According to Norman Perrin, the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus was a "tensive symbol," through which Perrin meant that it was a concept full of dynamism and vibrations. It was more a symbol than a specific

concept which had only its own limited meaning. It means that this concept can take on meanings which can accrue to it from the context, in which it is being realized. The focus of this concept is not on its static subsistence; rather its ability to assume new and contextualized meaning. On the whole, its dynamic meaning is that it is a situation of vertical and horizontal relationship in which God is revealed as the *abba*, the Father and Mother, of the entire cosmos, and the entire humankind is presented as a community of the children of God, within which they are all sisters and brothers. What this dynamic situation demands is not decided upon *a priori*; rather it is to be analysed and articulated in each historical, social, economic and cultural context. The kingdom of God is not to be understood spatially and geographically, but operationally as a new situation and as a quality of existence. It is to be understood as a realm of God's continued presence and operation in history. It is a deep symbol which summarizes the entire history of God's presence in the history of humankind, now continued in a much more universal perspective. In fact, Israel's entire history is the framework within which we have to situate the concept of the kingdom of God. Jesus consciously decided to make this symbol of God's kingdom the central theme of his ministry and message. He understood this concept in terms of the definitive coming of God into the history of the whole humankind.

The goal of this new approach of Jesus to God-human relationship was the building up of a new society characterized by equality, harmony and peace. Jesus tried to bring into this new situation all categories of people, many of whom were barred from the traditional Jewish concept of the covenant community. Hence, Jesus associated himself with the socially outcast, with the sinners and the tax collectors. He related himself freely with the Samaritans, with the Gentiles and thereby proved that the kingdom of God is a situation open to all categories of persons. Luke, in particular, takes extra care to show how Jesus was concerned about the poor and the outcast, and he is at the same time very critical of the rich and riches. Writing within the wider context of the Roman Empire, Luke found it necessary to broaden the horizons of God's presence in history beyond the Palestinian context. Living as we are in a world much larger than the Roman Empire, we have to understand the whole cosmos and its concerns as belonging to the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God is destined to gradually embrace the entire human history, both political, cultural and

religious, and also the whole cosmic and ecological order: It is this one and the same history, that Christians are expected to respect and promote as the salvation history embracing the whole humankind and the entire cosmos, in which they have to play a vital role in order to keep it attuned to God's guidance and control. The kingdom of God comes in not to destroy the human kingdom but to transform it and elevate it to new and noble dimensions.

This approach to the concerns of the kingdom of God and its relation to world history means that all issues in this history are part of the concerns of the kingdom of God, such as the history of all world religions, political history, ideological history, secular movements, ecological movements as well as liberation movements. Any effort to discard some of them as outside the concerns of the kingdom of God is not correct. All these movements work as God's agents and they all help the Church to have a clearer perception of God who is active in the history of the whole humankind and the whole cosmos. This is to say that world history is the same as salvation history and it is in this broad perspective that we have to understand salvation history and its operation in world history. The teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* is very relevant: "While we are warned that it profits a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose himself, the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age to come. Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God."<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Spirit of God Active in the World of Matter

The convergence of the sacred and the secular in the understanding of the historical process is given a new and challenging formulation in the theology of Paul when he wrote to the Romans about the final transformation of the material creation through the ongoing activity of the Spirit of the risen Christ (Rom 8:18-25). What we find here is how the entire material creation is included in the plan of God and is destined to the

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<sup>13</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, art. 39.

glory of a final transformation together with the children of God. What is significant about this approach to the secular is the conviction Paul had that the entire material cosmos is destined to participate in the fruits of the resurrection of Christ through which it has been proleptically incorporated into the salvation process. Paul introduces this idea about the final transformation of the cosmos not from a scientific perspective, but rather from a theological point of view about human suffering and its ultimate meaning in the death and resurrection of Christ. In Rom 8:17 Paul had introduced the idea that the full inheritance of the believers in the Spirit can be had only through a life of intense suffering with Christ. Glory through suffering, life through death, this is the hallmark of Christian life, according to Paul. It is the necessary pathway and it is unavoidable in view of what the world is. In order to explain the meaning of suffering in view of glory Paul brings in the picture of the general condition of the material creation. The human situation of suffering has something in common with the suffering of the world. In fact, all suffering, all imperfections and all unsatisfied aspirations and longings, of which the traces are so abundant in the external nature as well as within us, point forward to a time when all sufferings shall come to an end, all imperfections are removed and the frustrated aspirations, at last, shall be crowned and satisfied.

In this process humans and creation have to encourage each other. The creation encourages humankind insofar as it unfolds itself before them as something into which God has instilled hope, a hope that it will be set free from the bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God (v. 21). Humans give courage and hope to the creation because in them the creation is privileged to see the beginning of a transformation and glorification, inasmuch as they have the first fruits (*aparche*) of the Spirit, a guarantee of the inheritance that is to come (v. 23). Paul sees in the marks of imperfection on the face of the nature, in the signs at once of high capacities and poor achievement, the visible expression of a sense of something wanting, but which will be slowly overcome. It is with this hope of consummation that creation undergoes its subjection to futility and decay. But this consummation will not come by any automatic process of development; it comes through God's own mighty action with universal meaning and cosmic dimensions.

In the midst of this high expectation Paul sees the creation engaged in a chorus of groaning. Before the final glory is revealed the creation

suffers like a woman in travail. The image suggests the preparation for a great joy, for the emergence of something altogether new through the crisis of acute and liberating suffering. But faith alone can discern in these phenomena the secret movement which is directing things toward a transcendent goal. If our modern knowledge of the material world yields a very different framework of thought regarding the future of the world, it matters little, provided the essential arguments of Paul are discerned and assimilated. It means that there is an organic relationship between the creation and the human species. Hence, the children also join the groaning of the creation inasmuch as they share the destiny of the creation as a whole. A state of patient expectancy is the present condition of the humans who live in the midst of a world of travail, where God also pursues his work with patience. The movement, which draws the humans and all creation towards their intrinsic ends, is gradually realizing the plan of God. No obstacle offered by history will be able to check the work of transformation undertaken by Christ and carried out through his Spirit. Neither the corruptibility of the world nor the inward weakness of the humans will prevent God from fulfilling his plans. It is God who is in active control of things. It is not that things will eventually straighten themselves out. God guides them, not with the object of assuring the petty happiness of some people who want to create a paradise on this planet earth, but with the objective of attaining that salvation and glorification which will be the crown of his work.

#### **6. Church as the Authentic Sign of God's Presence in History**

Our reflections on God's presence in history enlarging its horizons from the restricted dimensions of the Old Testament to the larger perspectives of human history, which was inaugurated through the ministry and preaching of Jesus, the Emmanuel, come to a critical point where we have to see the Church as founded by Christ having a mission to be the authentic sign of God's presence in human history. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church has very clearly formulated this idea when it calls the Church the "light of the nations" (*Lumen Gentium*). It is not a question of the Church substituting God's presence, but rather it is that the Church derives its vitality and dynamism from God and it carries on its mission in the world. Being visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly, this-worldly and other-worldly, the Church must empower herself to carry on this responsible task till the end of history. It is this Church that was rediscovered during the



Vatican Council II, a Church as the servant of the kingdom of God and also the servant of world where she has to be a dynamic presence of the risen Christ, transforming the world through the values of the gospel and the power of the kingdom of God.

Looking back into the history of the Church through the centuries, this mission and task of the Church were not always carried out in fidelity to the mind of Christ and to his gospel. It was not so much God's presence and power that were revealed in her actions and attitudes, but rather her own power and prestige. The Crusades waged by armed pilgrimages and military expeditions, sponsored by the medieval Church from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, was a clear proof of the negative attitude of the Church towards other religions. It was a special form of the idea of the just and holy war, which loomed large in the history of the Western piety and thought for many centuries. The Crusades marked a new phase of the barbarian invasions and colonial occupation as well as a spontaneous outburst of pent-up religious ideas. Pope Urban II went to the extent of setting up the Crusades as a definite institution within the history of the Church with indulgences attached to it for those who took part in it. It was associated with the Papal will to power and also it was a special form of missionary zeal to dominate the whole world. Implied in it was also the effort of the Church to work out a Christian ethics of war. Consequently, the Crusades established a turning point in religion and spirituality and they always remain a black mark in the history of the Church.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of colonial expansions and occupation of extra-European territory by what are called the "colonial powers" of Europe, which began with the geographical discoveries of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it followed very different courses in respect of politics, economics, religion and sociology. It is all based on the economic, military, and, to a great extent, cultural superiority of Europe associated with a certain amount of arrogance that was inherited from the Greco-Roman and the early success of Christian civilization. The colonial powers were fully convinced that they were specially chosen by God to dominate the world. Indigenous cultures were, thus, underestimated. Colonialism and missionary propaganda went hand in hand. Mission was understood as the expansion of Christianity sponsored and controlled from the West. Christianity assumed an attitude that there was nothing beyond it, that it could control everything, and that it can be the judge of all issues

in the world. This phenomenon was, to a great extent, the result of Christianity understood as identified with the Western powers, which continued to control the whole world through their colonial expansion and the accumulation of wealth from the colonized countries. To this were added the large-scale missionary expansion work of converting peoples to various Churches with a certain amount of competitive spirit. It is gratifying to see that Pope John Paul II has taken a lead to confess these and similar unholy exercises of the Church in history, for which he apologized to the whole world on March 12, 2000. It is the sincere hope of well-meaning members of the Church that this exemplary step taken by the Pope will characterize the future of the Church in her attitude to the world and to other religions. "The Church is always in need of a reformation" was a heretical doctrine till recently; but it is now understood as a necessary recognition of the truth about the Church that exists and operates in history. This renewal and inner reformation have to take place through an ongoing *metanoia*, and this is a demanding task and it is part of the costly discipleship and costly grace about which D. Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Cost of Discipleship*.

The ushering in of a new millennium constitutes a new challenge and a salubrious chance for the Church to re-define her role in the world and in history in terms of her important task of being the sign and sacrament of God's presence. The Church at various levels has to analyse and see where she has failed in the past, even as she offers gratitude to God for the great achievements she has made in various areas of her mission in the world. If the Church has to continue her mission as a continuation of the ministry of Christ, she has to re-dedicate herself to the dynamics of service and sacrifice. The Church has to create a new image of her real self and initiate a new thrust to prove that she is faithful to the mission entrusted to her by Christ. She has to assume the role of the little flock that has the assurance from Christ that the Father has been pleased to entrust the kingdom of God to her (Lk 12:32). In order to make this mission effective and meaningful in human history the Church and her members at various levels of their ministry have to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5:13-16). Moreover, the Church has to look and evaluate issues from wider perspectives and relate all things to her transcendent and eschatological goal.

*The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* has devoted a chapter to "The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Her Union with the Heavenly Church."<sup>14</sup> It refers to the future of the Church and history in terms of the restoration and re-establishment of all things in Christ. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* also dwells on the question of history and eschatology in a very realistic perspective. Christ through his life, death and resurrection sums up the meaning of history and he is now at work in the world through the energy of his Spirit, enabling people to look to the future with hope and at the same time animating people to work in the here and now towards that inaugurated future. Hence, we understand the importance of human efforts to build a better world and the struggle for justice within the overall eschatological plan of God. This teaching of Vatican Council II, on human development and earthly progress is very important for the way it succeeds in removing the traditional separation of individual and social eschatology, in linking the present with the future and in affirming a unity between the earthly and the heavenly realities. Any interpretation of eschatology that falls short of the requirements of our responsibility toward this world is not a truly Christian understanding of history and eschatology.<sup>15</sup>

## 7. God and the Fulfilment of History

Any historical process rooted in time is bound to have its consummation and fulfilment. This is also the biblical approach to history. Deriving inspiration from Trito-Isaiah, the author of the book of Revelation speaks about the end of history through the imagery of a new heaven and a new earth which God would establish at the end of everything, an event that has tremendous significance for the entire historical process which started with the creation of the world. In the language of Trito-Isaiah it was about an apocalyptic event through which the former things would pass away and a

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<sup>14</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, art. 48-51.

<sup>15</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 39, 43: "The Council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the gospel spirit. They are mistaken, who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come (Hb 13:14), think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more than ever obliged to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation (2 Thes 3:6-13; Eph 4:28).

new era of prosperity would ensue. It would be like the restoring of the original paradise (Gen 2:9; Rev 22: 2,14; Is 11:6-9). The entire scene was centred on the restored Jerusalem (Is 65:9). It would be a restored universe and all would have happiness and there would be no suffering and pain (Is 65: 19b; 25:8). It would be a community of people living in harmony and peace, not only among themselves (Is 65: 21-24) but also with the animal world and the creation at large (Is 65:25).

Confronted by the ongoing persecution by the Roman Empire and threatened by the political situations prevailing in his own times, the author of the book of Revelation also gave articulation to his hope and encouragement to the persecuted Christians of his time through his consoling and assuring words: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and first earth had vanished, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice proclaim from the throne: 'Now, at last, God has his dwelling among humans! He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away!' Then he who sat on the throne said, 'Behold! I am making all things new!'" (Rev 21:1-5). The expression "heaven and the earth" corresponds to the entirety of things and events. Here again it is a scene of prosperity and joy embracing the whole humankind and the whole world.

The most striking aspect of this vision of the eschatological fulfilment of human history as effected through God is the inauguration of a cosmic covenant in which God makes his dwelling place in the human community, taken as a whole: "Now at last God has his dwelling among humans!" It is to be clearly seen that God is not uniting himself with any particular religion, even with the Church; but rather with the whole of humanity. Religions are only means and at the end of history all religions shall have fulfilled their historical roles. God's ultimate concerns are about the whole humankind irrespective of caste, colour and creed. The expression "They shall be his people and God himself will be with them" is a covenant formula derived from the Old Testament. God established, first of all, a cosmic covenant with Noah promising him that he would never again destroy the earth through a flood and giving him the sign of

the "bow in the clouds" which is the sign of universality and wholeness (Gen 9:8-17). Once again, this concluding promise of a cosmic covenant in the book of Revelation at the end of all historical process brings together the whole of humanity, to which God promises his continued presence and to which God gives his blessings by making it one community of the children of God. It was this universal blessing that God had promised in the beginning when he called Abraham and told him: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

It is the task and privilege of all humans, living in these critical and blessed times of history to develop a new awareness of God as active in history. At a time when people begin to feel that they are all members of a larger human family and are belonging to a global village, where an unwanted and unwarranted terminology referring to the so-called First, Second and Third Worlds is being gradually avoided because of its bad taste, where religions are trying to transcend their doctrinal and ethical differences in a spirit of appreciation and mutual recognition, it is important that all become responsible to the world and to its historical and ecological processes. There is only one history and in it the sacred and the secular, the religious and political, the spiritual and material have their respective roles to play. By creating this cosmos as an intentional expression of his own inner dynamism, God has inaugurated the historical process, a realistic understanding and articulation of which we have in the Bible. This assumption does not mean at all that it is an exclusive understanding of history superior to all other articulations; rather it is a paradigmatic approach with a message for all. The beauty of this understanding of history will be enhanced through its readiness to accept similar approaches to and articulations of history in the religious books of other living and dynamic religions.