Redefining the Economy of Salvation

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My task in this paper is to redefine our understanding of the Economy of Salvation in the context of the phenomenon of religious pluralism. In a sense, the task is really the one of "rediscovering" the Christian understanding of the Economy of Salvation. This "rediscovery" is necessary because in contemporary English the word economy and its other forms like "economise" and "economical" have acquired such meanings as "using sparingly," "cutting down expenses." This modern understanding of the term "Economy" has shaped our understanding of salvation too. Quite naturally, we think that in working out His plan of salvation for men and women God has been economical in the sense that, instead of initiating many salvific processes, He ordered just one salvific process in Jesus confessed to be the Christ. This one process or one way we then characterise as the Economy of Salvation. What we forget in such an understanding of the Economy of Salvation is that it leaves with us the image or portrait of a God who is stingy and miserly and like Shakespeare's Shylock demands His "pound of flesh" if one wants to be saved. As a matter of fact, with such an understanding of the Economy of Salvation we impoverish our God and take away His sovereign freedom to accomplish His plan of salvation the way He likes.

Usually the Economy of Salvation is understood in terms of the "History of Salvation"—*Heilsgeschichte*, if you are impressed by that learned theological jargon. The history of salvation is a very particularistic concept in spite of all the artificial attempts to universalise it. That through Abraham all the families or nations of the earth are to be blessed is a universalistic imposition on a particular history. To use rather a crude metaphor, I call the so-called "History of Salvation" a "contract theory" of salvation. It gives the impression that God rather arbitrarily elected a particular individual or a nation, entered into a covenant relationship with him or it, made it the "realm of redemption" and asked all the other families or nations of the earth to enter into this so-called "realm of redemption" in order to be saved.

The "contract" of salvation was given to a particular man or a nation, the Old Israel or the New Israel. In spite of very noble inten-

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tions on our side to universalise the "History of Salvation," such an understanding of the Economy of Salvation gets us involved in all kinds of theological problems. In spite of my desire to join in a recitation of the Deuteronomic Creed, "A wandering Aramean was my father.....," I really cannot identify myself with that Creed. This because I know for certain—historically—that this wandering Aramean was not my father. My father or forefathers were Indian Shudras and not Arameans. If I, a Christian, find such a Creed difficult to affirm, you can well imagine how repugnant such an economy of salvation would seem to our non-Christian friends, The Economy of Salvation understood in narrow terms has to face the challenge not only of religious pluralism, but also of cultural and historical pluralism.

Fortunately, however, the word "economy" was not so narrowly understood in its original usage. Let us first remember that the word "economy" was not only used of God, but also had a well-recognised secular use. In its secular use the verb "to economise" meant to administer some group and such an administration was considered to be an ordered one, as distinct from chaos or *ad hoc* assemblage. When the early Church took over the word "economy" to expound its theology, its richness and potentialities became apparent through various writings of the Church Fathers. Let me quote extensively from G. L. Prestige so that the richness of the meanings of the word becomes apparent.

> *Oikonomeo* means primarily to administer or oversee an office, such as a bishopric or a civil community (hom. Clem. 3.60; Ath. c. Gent. 43). Then it covers the administration of property; canon 26 of the Council of Chalcedon directs every Church possessing a bishop to maintain also a treasurer, chosen from its own clergy, to "economise" or administer the ecclesiastical property in accordance with the bishop's instructions. In this last sense it appears absolutely, meaning "to be treasurer" (Chrysostom on *St John* 65:2: "Why indeed did He entrust to one who was a thief the treasury of the poor, or cause a covetous person to "economise'?") Next, it means to regulate or control in a general sense, as the natural forces of the body "economise" the functions of animal life (Bas. *de ieiunio* I.4), or as spiritual beings "economise" their life on selective and prudent principles (Greg. Nyss. *Macrin.*, Migne 46.84A). From this usage the word comes to be applied to the penitential system in particular, meaning in the active "administer penance" and in the passive "be subjected to penance" as in Greg. Nyss. *ep. can.* 4 (Migne 45.229B), where it is stated that the person *administering* ecclesiastical *discipline* may shorten the time in suitable cases, or Bas. *ep.* 217 *can.* 72, which directs that a person guilty of consulting diviners shall be disciplined for the same period as if for homicide. On the other hand it also means to "dis-

pense" alms to recipients (*apost. const.* 2.25.5), and to "supply" with the necessities of life: instead of, "Your heavenly Father feedeth them" (Matt. 6:26), the *Acts of Thomas* (28) paraphrases with "God economises them" and pseudo-Macarius remarks, *hom.* 12.14, "he was nourished by God and his body was economised with other celestial food." The prevailing ideas, so far, are those of administration and provision for need.

But administration implies method, and thus "economy" acquired the sense of plan and design....

And since design involves practical methods of execution, "economise" also means "arrange" or "dispose"....

A word with such a range of association was extremely apt for adoption as an expression of the providential order. It covers either such gifts as God sends and supplies in a providential manner, or such events as He designs and disposes....

Certain other important senses of the word "economise" occur; but for their bearing on the subject of providence it is only necessary to call attention to two. First, that of "accommodation" as in Chrysostom on *St. Matt.* 6:2, where the star of Bethlehem "when they ought to proceed, proceeded, when they ought to halt, halted, economising everything to circumstance;" or (*ib.* 6.3) you might see many similar matters which God economises, or adapts to circumstantial needs, such as the *employment of heathen prophets or the witch of Endor to convey a true message* (my italics)....

The proper use of alcohol is an economy to the author of the pseudo-Justin's *Letter to Zena and Serena* (12): the drunkard is like a craftsman who takes iron, and instead of fashioning it into a useful sickle or other agricultural tool, makes it into an offensive weapon, perverting the economy of God.[1]

It is obvious from the history of usages of the term "economy" that it has a rich diversity of meanings. Prestige lists further usages of the term in his book, but I think that we have sufficient evidence here to satisfy us that the word "economy" did not have the limitations that we impose on it when we speak in terms of the Economy of Salvation. In the light of the history of the usages of this word, I would like to raise the following questions regarding our theme for this conference. Is it possible for us to redefine our understanding of the Economy of Salvation and say that world religions too have their proper place in God's Economy of Salvation? That they too are God's gifts dispensed to mankind from His inexhaustibly rich treasury? That in His

[1] G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, SPCK, London, 1964, pp. 57-64.

Economy of Salvation God can employ "heathen prophets and witches to convey a true message"? That if God can "economise everything to circumstance," He has economised Salvation to the circumstance—new circumstance—posed by the phenomenon of religious pluralism? Religious, cultural and historical pluralisms are new phenomena that neither the Bible nor the early Christian Church had to face in the same way as we here in India have to face today. Ours is a new circumstance to which, we must hope, God will economise. Religious pluralism in India challenges us to ask some painful questions. In my review of *Faith in the Midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community*, I have asked the following questions:

> Very often our theological approaches to dialogue try to put the cart before the horse. We ask for an "adequate" theological basis for dialogue rather than re-examining our theological traditions and formulations in the light of specific dialogical experiences. We are preoccupied with our concern to safeguard the uniqueness of Jesus Christ or the finality of Jesus Christ or our total commitment to Jesus Christ before entering into a dialogue situation, rather than examining the adequacy of the doctrine of the uniqueness of Jesus or the nature of our commitment to him in the light of actual dialogue experience. We look for a biblical basis or warrant for inter-religious dialogue rather than ruthlessly examining the nature of the authority of the Bible in the light of our encounter with the claims of other faiths that their sacred scriptures too are authoritative. Within our own traditions we confess: "I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. . . . ," but never raise the painful question of whether such a confession of God as the Creator absolutely, implies that He is the Creator of other faiths and ideologies too. It may well be that in a dialogical situation, we will be forced to ask the question (along with Maurice Wiles): "Could there be a Christian theology which included no specific reference to Jesus?" (M. F. Wiles, "The Criteria for Christian Theology," *Theology, A Monthly Review*, SPCK, London, Vol. LXXVI, No. 642, Dec. 1973, p. 622.) A dialogical theology has this kind of far-reaching implication. The question is whether we as responsible Christians are willing to be vulnerable? A true dialogue would require a thoroughly revisionist model of Christian theology.[2]

Returning to our discussion of the Economy of Salvation, we must note that "economy" offers no straight analogy. As Ian Ramsey puts it:

[2] A. P. Nirmal, Review of *Faith in the Midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community* in *The International Review of Missions*, Vol. LXVII, No. 268, October, 1978, pp. 487 f.

"Economy" as a model offers no straight analogy, it must rather encourage a way of looking at the world, which leads in the way I have suggested to a cosmic disclosure; to a God who may disclose himself at some point as we developed a particular perspective on the universe.[3]

The important thing to note here is that the model of Economy is cosmic in nature and provides us with a particular world-perspective. The model of Economy cannot be understood narrowly in terms of a specific paradigm which controls us. Rather, it suggests that in the last analysis it is God who is in control of the Economy of Salvation.

Towards a New Understanding of the Economy of Salvation

It is not enough, however, to show that the word economy has a wider range of meanings than our usual understanding of the term. The implications of its wide range of meanings have to be worked out. It is with a view to offering a tentative solution to the problem of the Economy of Salvation in the context of religious pluralism that the following reconstruction is undertaken. For such a reconstruction, I will depend on some insights from the current debate in the philosophy of science.

Several writers in the philosophy of science see a new era in the world of science as regards the employment of models as cognitive tools. Here I am following Max Black. Black distinguishes between what he calls "scale models" and "analogue models." The scientists of the Nineteenth Century, says Black, were interested in scale models, whereas, in the new era, they were inclined to make use of analogue models.

A scale model is descriptive in character and it attempts to imitate and reproduce properties of the original. It has a functional value and it always serves as a means to an end. It rests on the assumption that we can describe something which either is or could be an observable fact at some future date or from a particular vantage point.

There are some six characteristics that go with any scale model. It is a model of something. It serves a purpose. It is a representation of something and is used to "read off" properties of the original. Some features of the model are irrelevant whereas others are essential. "There is no such thing as a perfectly faithful model; only by being unfaithful in *some* respects can a model represent its original."[4]

Black's main criticism of scale models is that a change of scale may cause a serious distortion and may introduce irrelevance. "Too small a model of a uranium bomb will fail to explode, too

[3] Ian Ramsey, *Models for Divine Activity*, SCM, London, 1973, p. 17.

[4] Max Black, "Models and Archetypes," *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*, Cornell Press, Ithaca, New York, 1962, p. 220.

large a reproduction of a housefly will never get off the ground, and the solar system cannot be expected to look like its 'planetarium model'."[5]

The present day scientists have realized that their models are not always scale models. Very often they do not have exact knowledge of the object of their investigation. They therefore employ what Black calls analogue models or theoretical models.

Analogue models do not claim to reproduce the properties of the original. They have a more modest and abstract aim of reproducing the "structure" of the original. "The analogue model shares with its original not a set of properties or an identical proportionality or magnitude but, more strictly, the same structure or pattern of relationships."[6]

As regards theoretical models, Black writes:

> Whether the fictitious or the existential interpretation be adopted, there is one crucial respect in which the sense of "model" here in question sharply diverges from those previously discussed in this paper. Scale models and analogue models must be actually put together: a merely "hypothetical" architect's model is nothing at all, and imaginary analogue models will never show us how things work in the large. But theoretical models (whether treated as real or fictitious) are not literally constructed; the heart of the method consists in talking in a certain way.[7]

Black says that a theoretical model provides us with a description of an imaginary but possible structure and facilitates scientific research.[8]

Among theologians Ian Ramsey, Ian Barbour and Fred Ferré have made use of the insights derived from discussions on models and paradigms in the philosophy of science.[9]

Barbour in particular has attempted to work out the implications of the debate on models for our attitude towards other faiths.[10] I intend to go here beyond Barbour in solving the problem the phenomenon of religious pluralism poses for the Economy of Salvation. Barbour regards each religion as a model seeking to understand the nature of reality. He reminds us that

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 221.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 223.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 229.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 239.
[9] See Ian Ramsey, *Models and Mystery*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964; Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language*, SCM, London, 1974 and Fred Ferré, "Mapping the Logic of Models in Science and Theology," in *New Essays on Religious Language*, ed. D. M. High, Oxford University Press, London, 1969, pp. 54 f.
[10] Ian Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-178.

models are not pictures or replicas of the reality they seek to understand. They do not have one-to-one correspondence with the reality they seek to represent. This, argues Barbour, should promote an attitude of mutual tolerance among the followers of different religions. This is well said, but we need to go further. Although the models are not pictures of the reality they represent, they do have and share some kind of structural similarity with the reality they represent. This has tremendous implications for our understanding of religious pluralism. This means that all authentic world religions in one way or another share some structural similarity with the Ultimate Reality. If this is true, religious pluralism has implications for our conception of God. We must take the problem of religious pluralism as the problem of Being Itself. The only logical conclusion that I am led to is that God—the being of God—has rich diversity within it. The implication of religious pluralism is that the One God has rich diversity and plurality within Him. He is indeterminate and inexhaustibly rich. He is capable of innumerable manifestations and can economise his plan of salvation in more than one way. Different world religions, then, are God's "Economic Gifts" to mankind.

Of course, as we have seen, all models are in some way at least unfaithful to the original. This creates the possibility of inter-religious dialogue in and through which different religions can mutually correct and enrich each other.

God, then, is not the stingy and miserly Economiser of salvation as sometimes we understand Him to be. Rather He is the Economiser of Salvation with unlimited and inexhaustible resources at His disposal. His own being is immensely rich.

All this does not mean that we give up our own commitments in any inter-religious dialogue. But it does become imperative that we understand the nature of our religious commitments properly. In an inter-religious dialogue we do not confront our partners with the so-called truth claims. Very often what we call "truth claims" are in fact "faith-affirmations" made from within a certain paradigmatic community. We must also understand the nature of our commitment language. When I say that my wife or a girl-friend is the most beautiful girl in the world, I do not always mean that at a beauty contest a panel of judges found her vital statistics to be 36-24-36. That language is an expression of my love and devotion for my wife. The language of commitment is of this nature. It is because God is so immensely rich that it is well nigh impossible to develop an inter-religious criteriology. Paradigm changes (conversions) are not easy because of our commitments to the paradigms that have created our faiths. They do occur sometimes, but such occasions are rare. What we can meaningfully aim at are paradigm shifts and *gestalt switches* which enable us to see our own faiths in a new light.

It is along these lines that I would like to redefine our understanding of the Economy of Salvation.