

Salvation as Oop Gesprek by Augustine Shutte, O.P.¹

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The logic of the word 'salvation' involves the idea of a person or situation *from* which the subject of salvation is saved. There are a variety of models used in the Bible for describing such a situation or person; I choose to use that of *slavery*. Apart from other considerations, this model is useful in that it connects the idea of situation to that of person: slavery is always slavery *to*. Salvation is thus the setting-free of someone from slavery to someone else. In the Bible the paradigm case of salvation is the setting-free of the Israelites from their slavery to Pharaoh. Ultimately, however, in the Gospel, salvation becomes the setting-free of man from his slavery to the devil.

So much by way of defining how I intend to use the word 'salvation'. I wish now to question our contemporary experience as to how far it contains anything which this model of salvation can help us to interpret. Do we experience a need which could be called the need for salvation? And if so, how does it show itself? What are the characteristic forms of the need for salvation today? Where, in our multi-storeyed modern society, does it show itself most clearly? To indicate at the outset the way in which I intend to deal with this question, let me say that it is in the sphere of language, or more generally that of communications, that I discern the clearest evidence of this need.

Consider the following. They are passages quoted in an article by W. A. de Klerk (a well-known Afrikaner novelist and playwright) in the recently published '*Beweging Uitwaarts*' ('The Movement Outward'), a collection of critical essays by de Klerk, Johan Degenaar and Martin Versfeld, that is at present causing quite a stir in Afrikaner cultural circles.²

'Our ultimate destiny demands of the leaders of the Volk a purposeful and effective fulfilment. Shoulder to shoulder we shall have to wage war against a tidal wave of liberalism, internationalism, Communism. There is a lurking danger and powers that are working against us. We must continually withdraw ourselves from influences that run counter to our cause. Our survival as white civilization must be assured. We are concerned here with the fulfilment of a commission: the urge to survival; to realize here a dispensation in

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²(BEWEGING UITWAARTS—W. A. de Klerk, Martin Versfeld, J. J. Degenaar. John Malherbe, Cape Town. Martin Versfeld is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town, J. J. Degenaar Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch.)

which, together with the peoples that surround us, we may live in peace and progress.' And finally: 'Let every one of us, man and mouse, now pledge ourselves to the Mother of the Volk, to support her through thick and thin for the realization of the destiny which is hers—and therefore also ours.' (My translation from the Afrikaans rather blunts, I am afraid, the rhetorical force of the original.)

The title of the article is 'Inflasie van die Woord'—inflation of the word. It is an analysis of the language of Nationalist politics, of which the above quotations are all examples. But the phenomenon of *lying* language is not peculiar to Afrikaner nationalism; the English-language newspapers are just as full of it. Nor is it peculiar to political speeches; you find it in sermons and in schools, in advertisements and in songs. Wherever you look in our media-manipulated society you will find yourself confronted by, and in fact responding to, the powerful presence of lies.

Isn't it significant how many of the excerpts—from separate sources in fact but too easily able to be strung together as above—are concerned with self-maintenance, the preservation of identity. The language of nationalism is full of such terms as 'voortbestaan', 'self-behoud' (self-maintenance), 'handhawing' (preservation) and 'volksidentiteit'. This idea of racial or 'volks' identity is the basic premise on which South African society is being built. And I am quite sure that it is no accident that the language in which this concern finds articulation is a fundamentally lying language. To establish the connection between the myth of identity and a language of lies, and to make it quite clear that it is not simply an accidental concomitant of White South African nationalism, let me quote here something else:

'If we are not to be deceived by the angel of darkness who is wont to "transform himself into an angel of light", our supreme standard must be to love the Bride of Christ such as Christ willed her to be, such as he purchased her with his own blood. Therefore we must love not only the Sacraments with which our loving Mother Church nourishes us; not only the solemn feast which she celebrates for our solace and joy, and the sacred canticles and liturgical functions with which she raises up our minds to heavenly things—but we must also hold dear the sacramentals and the various practices of piety by which she fills the hearts of the faithful with the Spirit of Christ and with consolation. Nor is our duty confined to reciprocating with filial devotion her motherly love towards us; we must also reverence her Christ-given authority which brings "into captivity every understanding into the obedience of Christ". We are therefore bound to obey. . . . ' And so on. (Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*.)

Here it is again; the same lying language, the same concern for self-maintenance and hence for unity, obedience above all. And here too the lying language both conceals and reveals the same myth,

that of identity: the one true Church, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail; infallibility that consists in pronouncements that are irreformable; tradition that enshrines unchanging truths; a philosophy that is perennial with which to understand them, and even a language that is immutable in which to express them. Surely the myth of identity has never found a more perfect embodiment.

In order to grasp the intrinsic connection between lying language and the myth of identity I propose to make use of a view of man which sees human existence primarily in terms of language, of expression and communication. This is a view which gives a definite primacy to the *word*, as the seminal characteristic of human reality. In the beginning is the word. That is to say, that man only comes to be in the utterance, the expression of himself. Human nature is the product, the creation, of men. It has its roots in biological nature but it grows and flowers in a cultural world, a world of products, art and institutions, a world above all of language. The individual can only become human by sharing in this common product, only find himself in words that are uttered and heard. Put another way: man defines himself in his word. Who he is, his identity, is determined by the word.

If this view is a true one—and it certainly has much in common with fundamental biblical notions—then the consequences that follow from it are important. For if it is true that man only comes to himself in his word, then it follows that the definition of himself can never be final or complete. For utterance is never complete; each new word adds to the definition. Hence the concept of a *final* word is simply contradictory. Because his existence is determined by his word, man is essentially open-ended, undefined. It is precisely this fundamental characteristic of human existence that is denied by the myth of identity and the concern for preservation and self-maintenance in which it finds expression. A word is torn loose from its historical setting and enthroned in finality and abstraction. In an absolute identification with this final word life loses contact with reality and wanders in a world of lies. In finding his identity in a final word man makes himself its slave.

Who is the devil? For the Bible there is no doubt about the answer to this question. He is '*the father of lies*'. As John describes him: 'he was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.' (John 8, 44.) And from the beginning his lie consists in the promise of power. Adam and Eve shall be 'as gods'. Again, he is 'the ruler of this world' and he offers all his power to Jesus if he will but worship him.

It is the 'father of lies', then, a fundamental lie, who has the world in his power, and to whom we are enslaved. It is thus from a

slavery of this kind that the saviour must set us free. Paul has, in Galatians, a formulation of the dynamics of salvation which I find particularly evocative: 'Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits whose slaves you want to be once more?' (Gal. 4, 8.) Here salvation is seen as a process of being set free from slavery to 'elemental spirits' who appeared as 'gods'. What spirits these were we can guess at, or we could look about us with a would-be discerning eye. Salvation from them involves a change in 'knowledge'. We come to know God—with a capital G, the true God. But this 'knowledge' is not simply a product of our own activity; it has a passive element as well. It is rather we who are 'known by God'. The 'knowledge' does not originate in us. For Paul it is the light of the proclamation of the Gospel that exposes the elemental spirits as weak and beggarly, and beings that by nature are no gods. For in the proclamation of the coming Kingdom, which is the Gospel's centre, the reign of the true God is characterized by its futurity and its reality over against the present and abstract character of the rule of the Devil and his powers. Thus it is the preaching of 'the eternal gospel' as such that effects salvation; in its moment of truth the slaves who served and worshipped the lying spirits are set free.

The salvation achieved for us by the saviour must correspond to the conditions of our slavery. And so if our fundamental enslavement is to the father of lies it is only the truth that can make us free. It is thus in the battleground of language that the war is to be fought. Eliot spoke of the true poet's concern to 'purify the language of the tribe'. What the saviour has to do must have something at least in common with this. It must also have something in common with another, distinct but related, literary activity, that of criticism. The new, original word of the saviour must judge the precious verbal structures we have erected, the ideologies we produce to justify our lives. So it is that Jesus comes as a Word, proclaiming a Gospel. He is the one 'Who spoke up as a witness for the truth in front of Pontius Pilate'. (1 Tim. 6, 13.) And in Luke he defines his work in terms of speech, of proclamation: 'to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour'. (Luke 4, 18.) To proclaim, to free. The proclamation of the gospel *is* salvation. With the word of truth the reign of lies is destroyed.

This is a way in which I find it possible to fill out my basic model of salvation, trying all the while to be true to the New Testament material. If it is acceptable then surely it is appropriate to the way in which I have outlined the problem of our need for salvation

today. Having made use of a view of human existence as essentially a matter of utterance and word, it is surely very useful to be able to conceive of salvation in terms of *proclamation* and of *truth*.

We have a need for some discipline by means of which we can guard ourselves against the insidious influence of the rule of lies in the communication systems in which we are involved. I want to suggest one possible way of achieving this. It is the way of the '*oop gesprek*'. I get both the idea and the phrase from Dr Degenaar's introduction to the collection of essays mentioned above. I use the Afrikaans expression (which, roughly translated, means 'open discussion') because it says more than any English expression I can think of. It is also the centre of a widely ranging debate between 'verligte' and 'verkrampste' elements in White South African society.

The '*oop gesprek*' connotes both 'dialogue' and 'free speech'. It can be seen as an on-going conversation with persons and opinions that tries to remain open to whatever person or opinion that might seek to enter it. As Dr Degenaar points out, an essential pre-condition for the '*oop gesprek*' is that no word or standpoint can be regarded as absolute or beyond all possibility of criticism. For words and meanings, and therefore truths, are relational through and through: 'The "*oop gesprek*" is "*oop gesprek*" precisely because in it the relational character of meanings, the provisionality of premises, the continual discussableness of standpoints hold pride of place.' (*Beweging Uitwaarts*, p. 10.) It is this attitude to truth that can make the '*oop gesprek*' an effective though demanding discipline for communication in an age when it is increasingly difficult to discriminate between the phoney and the true. For when truth is seen as a function of a conversation rather than a private possession, one is opened up to 'horizons of understanding' other than one's own. And it is precisely then that the creative exchange which has the power of making new possibilities can come about.

The sphere of our relation to ecclesiastical and dogmatic traditions is one which seems to me to demand the discipline of the '*oop gesprek*'. If we think of tradition as a sacred *objet d'art* which has to be handed on 'essentially undamaged' (Pope Paul's phrase) then it will be difficult if not impossible to live truly in it. Rather we should think of it as a dialogue with the past in which, as in a successful conversation, truth emerges in forms that are new and able to provide us with a critical and creative grasp of our contemporary situation. An example of '*oop gesprek*' already initiated within Christian circles is the dialogue between the Christian Faith and Communism. In South Africa two areas in which '*oop gesprek*' is to my mind sadly needed as far as we are concerned, are those of Afrikaner Calvinism and the as yet chiefly latent African Nationalism.

The effect of this attempt to come to grips with the question of

our need for salvation today has been, for me, to highlight the importance for a Christian believer of language and the whole sphere of words and their power. Christianity is a religion of the Word; the proclamation of the gospel *is* the process of salvation. We are lucky to live in an age when Catholic theology is seeing a real renewal of the theology of the word. Preaching, in all its forms, is beginning to be returned to its rightful place; the Christian priesthood is once again seen as essentially prophetic.

In view of this emphasis it might be felt that the sacraments will lose their importance in the Christian life. But this surely need not be so. In the light of personalist and existential philosophy we are able to see what the scholastic philosophy of nature tended to obscure: the Christian sacraments as a communications-system in which all of life receives its Christian interpretation. In this perspective we are able to make more sense of St Augustine's description of a sacrament as 'verbum visibile', a visible word. The Christian sacrament is nothing other than the definitive, and therefore effective, proclamation of the Word. It is this word of judgment and promise which, because it is God's word and not man's, is the only answer to the need for salvation today.

Aelred of Rievaulx

by G. W. S. Barrow

Aelred, or Ailred, Eilaf's son, of Hexham, whom we know as Aelred of Rievaulx, was a wholly remarkable man for several quite distinct reasons. In the first place, he was English, or perhaps, to be more precise, Anglo-Scandinavian. The number of outstanding figures in the history of twelfth-century England who were English in this sense, 'of fine old English stock' as his disciple and biographer Walter Daniel put it, was so small as to be almost insignificant. The world which Aelred knew was one where lordship, both as ownership of land and as control of government and administration, was in the hands, almost exclusively, of Normans, Flemings, Bretons, Lorrainers, Frenchmen, of almost any save Englishmen, in fact, and a member of the governing order (such as Aelred was from 1143 till his death in 1167) who was also a thoroughly native Englishman was a prime rarity. Secondly, Aelred was a man of the north country, a Northumbrian born and bred in an age when it might be said that Northumbria had lost a culture and had failed to find a role. Thirdly, Aelred was a profoundly religious man in a