

Also by James Alison

Faith Beyond Resentment

Knowing Jesus

Raising Abel

The Joy of Being Wrong

on being liked



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leaves us demanding an apology which is unlikely to come until those concerned have been forgiven. I also hope that it is by analogy clear that the same possibilities of re-imagining salvation as forgiveness leading to reconciliation apply in quite other fields than the one in which it has been given to me to try to spell it out.

If this is true, then we find ourselves embarked on a dangerous adventure of allowing ourselves to become forgiveness in imitation of the one who gave himself for us, long before we knew we needed forgiving. And this is not an adoption of a moral high ground, because, far from any sort of separation from those in violence, it involves sticking with them, inhabiting their universe, being in their world but not of it, being as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove, but always, by not being afraid to lose anything, being prepared to be sacrificed rather than collude in violence. Thus the one forgiving comes to occupy the place which is most feared by the violence, and if it can be lived without fear, it will destabilise the violence completely, and enable those wielding it to be set free from fear, with the result that we together, who do not really know what we are, or what being right really looks like, may come to discover what really is, for that is what we are invited to become, together.

And this, of course, leads us straight into the question of what 'creation' really means, which we will look at in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

creation in Christ

introduction

The order in which the great panorama of Christian salvation is traditionally unfolded is the order which I call the order of logic. We begin with creation and the fall, we move on to salvation, and from there to heaven. As the last two chapters have shown, I am unsatisfied with this paradigm, since I consider that it leads to a series of distortions. I would like with you to try to reconfigure the panorama in the light of what I call the order of discovery. That is to say, I consider that what is first in the order of our knowledge is an intuition of salvation, first worked out and elaborated over many centuries of ups and downs by the Jewish people, which issues forth into a very special refinement of this Jewish discovery in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is starting from this intuition of salvation that a critical understanding of creation was worked out, and not the other way round. Furthermore this relationship between salvation and creation can be detected not only among the apostolic witnesses, but the same relationship can be found even in the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures prior to the first century.

The reason for insisting on this is as follows: if we consider salvation as 'fitting in' to a story which starts with creation, then we remain stuck at the mercy of an a priori view of creation by imagining that we have some independent way of knowing what happened 'in the beginning'. An independent way of knowing which does not pass through the always contemporary here and now of our interpretative capacity. That is to say, we fall into the same mistake of imagining that we have some prior access to what

creation is as we saw when we looked at the substitutionary theory of the atonement. That theory imagines that we have a prior and independent access to what sin is. That prior knowledge of sin is necessary for our Lord's death to have made a real difference by wiping it clean. 'The world is a mess, Jesus is the answer' only works if we know in advance what sort of mess it is that Jesus is supposed to be the answer to.

What in fact happens following this logic is that we set up a scenario whereby up to a point we are disposed to learn, to receive, something new, a divine revelation. And then, at a certain point we say: 'No, now I must make an extraordinary mental leap. Now I must jump outside this process of reception which allows me to understand and interpret things, and I must become like God, an external viewer of the whole process, and from this outside position I can dictate the sure norms which must regulate the Universe whose rules I can understand.' That is to say, I erect something sacred. And there, where I erect something sacred, very soon I discover enemies who are undermining the sacred, seeking to knock it down so as to install their perverse and heterodox ideas. And of course, I completely lose sight of the fact that I am as much inside the process of learning now as I was before, though imagining myself outside of it. But now my way of being inside the process of learning takes the form of a dramatic fight with those who are as much inside a process of interpretation as I am, but whom I have wanted to deprive of legitimacy by my insistence on a non-negotiable sacredness. That is to say, I've managed to create a scandal. And being in every way as modern as my opponents, I convince myself that I am speaking from an invulnerable pedigree. I call as witnesses to this process the debates concerning Darwin in the nineteenth century, or the current struggle of the so-called 'creationists' against those who believe in some form of evolution in certain states of the United States and other places.

Well, no. It seems to me very important that we go back to considering the doctrine of creation starting from an understanding of salvation, which is where it comes from. I am going to do this by means of a series of points, still not yet very well linked among

themselves, since this is for me a study still in process, which is opening up horizons that will lead I do not know where. For that reason it is a privilege to be sharing with you in what I hope will be a way for all of us to advance in our understanding. So, I am going to proceed by sketching out a series of theses.

we always start from where we are

My first thesis is that we always start from where we are. When Catholics say that God created the universe, we are not making a claim about a 'religious' way of describing how things came into existence. We are not making any sort of claim about a process of *how* things came into existence. We are saying something about our contemporary wonder at the fact that they came into existence at all. We are in fact saying something about our relationship of being brought into being and held in being by God. We are expressing amazement at the gratuity of it all.

This expression of amazement at the gratuity of it all is not an alternative scientific explanation of anything. It is, on the contrary, a condition of possibility for us not to be frightened of advancing as far as we possibly can in our understanding of how things came to be. Being able to trust the goodness, the 'not out to get us' nature of what we will discover is no less important than the intelligence used in asking the right questions about how things came to be, but the two are not conflicting areas of research. The ability to perceive the innocent indifference of what *is* as just that: innocently indifferent, is an extraordinary breakthrough from our normal understanding of power and, more specifically, our understanding of that which is more powerful than us. For our normal understanding of power relations easily detects the play of rivalrous and contradictory desires in our societies, and is inclined to make us think that we need to protect ourselves, or 'they' will get us, or 'there won't be enough' or 'it's all running down'.

So we make a real mistake if we consider creation to be something which very specially has to do with the remote past. The

gratuitous nature of there being anything at all is an entirely contemporary perception for us, just as it would have been entirely contemporary with whatever we discover to have been the story of the process of our origins as humans and as universe. Our access to creation is present, as is our access to the past. In other words (and forgive me the obviousness of the point), the only access we have to the past is the access for which our present understanding equips us. We have no access to our origins which is independent of our current interpretative capability.

Let us imagine that someone had filmed the origin of everything, from outside. Well it's self-evident that if someone filmed it, the capacity to film would have been prior to the 'origin' and we'd have the problem of working out where the capacity to film had come from. What is worse, we'd only be able to understand the film in the light of what we can understand now. In the same way, our understanding of meteorites and astronomy is an absolutely contemporary understanding, and one which depends on a whole series of things: investigative institutes, societies which are willing to spend a huge amount of money on the search for such an understanding, and societies which regularly reject the possibility that the discovery of things yet to be imagined could be a crime against something sacred. But it also depends on the refusal to believe that capricious gods, or angels, or djinns, are somehow involved in introducing freak elements into what we discover, such that no rational understanding is possible.

Both the contemporary holding on to a sense of wonder or mystery that there is anything at all, and the contemporary refusal to accept specifically 'religious' accounts of how things came to be are central to what we are talking about when we talk about creation. And of course, the ability to do those things, to hold on to that mystery, and to refuse religious shortcuts, let alone the ability to do both of those together, are abilities which have been acquired over a long time, and have a history.

our growing understanding of the perception that we have been created has always been dependent on the overcoming of violence and death

My second point is as follows: the fact that we speak of creation at all is not something self-evident. The question 'Where did all this come from?' is, without doubt, a very ancient question. But it has always been asked and answered within the scheme of power and order which was in force at the time. And it couldn't have been otherwise. There is no thinker, however brilliant, who is not a child of their own era in at least very many of the things which they take for granted, and from within which they work out their change of perspective.

Yet we imagine, somewhat obstinately, that the most ancient accounts of the origins enjoy a superiority concerning what they describe compared to our own, because of having been closer to the original events. As if they were witnesses to a murder. Of course those who are present at a murder scene are witnesses in a way in which people from later generations will never be, leaving on one side the complexities of interpretation which arise immediately, for of course it is possible that two eyewitnesses can differ enormously in what they describe, and that a later interpretation made, for instance, by a lawyer during the trial of an alleged murderer, is more authentic in its description of the truth than what the witnesses affirm. But there are no witnesses to the happenings of the origins. By their very nature, the ancient texts are witnesses to an extremely advanced stage of the process of what has happened, above all if we remember the millions of years during which the dinosaurs, who left nothing written, dominated the earth! And there is no reason at all to think that our understanding, because it is slightly later than those texts, is more limited than that of our ancestors.

But here, indeed, something rather interesting happens. The ancient accounts of creation are normally accounts of a certain sort of salvation. That is to say, they describe how things came to be what they are now, and this takes the form of describing how the current order of things was installed. Normally they begin with a

battle among the gods, and starting from the victory of one of the gods, the earth is established. The victory, it should be said, normally takes the form of a murder, a lynching or a dismemberment. And starting from this, the created order comes into being. This can be seen in particularly luminous form in the epic of Gilgamesh, with the death of Tiamat, but also, for example, in the Rig Veda (10.90) where the dismemberment of a man and the distribution of his members is the creation both of what is and of the Hindu social order.

None of this should surprise us. The only thing that it means is that the answer to the question 'Where do we come from?' is narrated from within the schemes of power and social order which are in force. And the answer tends to maintain and shore up this order. That is why creation is described as a victory over chaos. That is to say, the description of the origins comes from an understanding of social 'salvation' which was already in evidence within the group in question. The description of what things 'are' is strictly dependent on what they now 'ought' to be.

Well, I would like to suggest that the Jewish notion of creation, on which we are dependent, introduces some notable ruptures within this scheme. If I understand it aright, what we see in the case of the Jewish tradition is what I would call an anti-idolatry movement which only at a very late stage starts to ask itself about the question of creation. As I understand it, the accounts of the origins at the beginning of Genesis are much later than a significant number of the stories in the same book, for example, those of Abraham. And according to the experts, these accounts are from the period of the exile or its aftermath, containing many elements which are critical allusions to Babylonian myths of origin. For example, there is the garden where not the king and the nobles, but merely man and woman have their dwelling. Or indeed the insistence that the first thing created is light, which means that the whole of creation will be luminous, in itself a demythifying move and, keeping things in their due proportion, a secularising one. At the same time it has been noted that the account of creation, although luminous and limpid in comparison with the murders and bloodletting which appear in the Babylonian texts, is

still not entirely free from the notion of creation as the establishment of order in the midst of chaos. That is to say, the famous '*tohu wa bohu*' of Genesis 1:2 suggests a 'something' out of which God organised things, and it could be that it contains traces of a reference to the killing of a sea monster. And starting from that slain monster everything was created.¹

However, there is no doubt that we are in the presence of an anti-idolatry movement which aims at the un-throning of the gods and all their various and complicated relationships with the social order, heading for there being one God. In just the same way as God cannot be involved in a slaughter among the gods, so also God has to be related to everything that *is* in a different way. And it seems as though it was the exile, and because of it the loss of real power over the social order which Yahweh had seemed to have while he was linked to a monarchy and a Temple, which led to the new perception: the perception that if we are talking about God, affirming that God is not among the gods, then there must be a radical separation between God and the order and establishment of this world. That is to say, one part of an anti-idolatrous movement is that it is, and has to be, a self-critical movement concerning the way in which the perception of God is tied to the social world. Now, it is very easy to say that. But I know very well from my own experience that going through the experience of losing the bond between God and the customary order without losing the notion of God and falling into just one more reaction is an immensely slow, painful and unpredictable experience. Be that as it may, it was the impossibility of keeping alive the belief in God as one of the gods, through their defeat, that led the Jewish interpreters to one of two alternatives: either Yahweh is a minor deity who has lost out to more powerful neighbouring deities, or Yahweh is on a totally different level from the gods, not even being comparable with them. And that means that any account which is given of the relationship between God and all that is will be markedly different.

If this was already visible in the book of Genesis, how much

¹ There are also hints of this in, for instance, Psalm 89:10.

more is it not visible in Second Isaiah! This book, and above all its chapters 45—48 which were probably written not so many years distant from the accounts of the origins in Genesis, is of a phenomenal exuberance. On reading it I have the impression of being in the presence of texts which are eyewitness descriptions of an extraordinary discovery which had not been understood before, and which now allows more sense to be made of everything. And indeed they are texts of an extraordinary discovery, since they mark the definitive move from monolatry to pure monotheism, and at the same time to an absolutely clean description of creation. Now what I would like to point out is that these two discoveries — that of the oneness of God and that of the cleanliness, lippidity of creation — go together and imply each other. Let us take for example Isaiah 45:18–19:

For thus says the LORD who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in chaos.’ I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right.”

The oneness of God has as an immediate consequence that there were no secret deals, bloodlettings, or a chaos, prior to creation, but that God formed the earth in order to be inhabited. That is to say, the relationship between God and everything that is is clean, not hidden, and has a benevolent purpose. And all of this is independent of social order and power.

A further step in this process we see only in the second book of Maccabees (7:28–9) where the mother of seven sons implores a son of hers to accept death rather than break the Law in the following terms:

“I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy

of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God’s mercy I may get you back again with your brothers.”

Now what it is interesting to underline here is the fact that, in the space of a couple of verses, two things go together: creation, now indeed conceived for the first time as something out of nothing — *ex nihilo* — and belief in the resurrection. I would like to point out that it is a question not of two different doctrines, but of two implications of the single discovery that God has nothing to do with the current social order, which includes of course the way that that social order is inflected by death. That is to say, here we see that the discovery of creation *ex nihilo* and the discovery of the resurrection are the same discovery, and form part of the discovery that God is so alive and exuberant that he has nothing to do with death or the social order, and that his creative energy has other purposes, such that it is a light matter to die rather than to cross those purposes.

Well, this whirlwind tour through some ancient texts concerning creation has as its purpose to reinforce the impression which I want to get over to you: that we are dealing with a process, and a process where what is being discovered is a very peculiar account of the relationship between everything that is and God. And this discovery was made in the midst of an anti-idolatry movement in the degree to which a whole series of radical separations came to be made, principally the separation between God and the order of this world, and that between God and death. These discoveries were made in the midst of defeat and persecution and are thus organically linked to the growing understanding that God has nothing to do with human violence.

the Christian doctrine of creation is a definitive refinement of this process and must be considered within it

What I would like to emphasise now is that when we talk about creation we are talking about a process of discovering the relationship between everything that is and God, a discovery which is

always contemporary, and which has immediate consequences for the perception of the world which surrounds us. Among these consequences is the necessary desacralisation of all that is around us, so that we find ourselves empowered to resist bowing before its supposed forces, empowered, in fact, to live as if those forces did not exist. That is to say, part of the process of the discovery of creation is the discovery of an astonishing freedom with respect to what *is*, since what is seen and perceived, and what *is* are different things. When we see and perceive, we do so still partially from within a world formed by our systems of order, of security, of identity, guaranteed in the last resort by death. And what *is* is not strictly attainable from within a mentality formed in this way. However, in the degree to which we cease to have our mind and heart formed by death, we cease having our mind formed by the perception that the social 'other' which surrounds us and precedes us is hostile, ambivalent, capricious and two-faced, and before which we have to behave dishonestly so as to survive, alleging that we just have to be that way, because things just are that way. This forms part of the discovery that the 'other' which surrounds us and precedes us, is at a totally different level from the customary social 'other': benevolent, limpid, without ambivalence and without ambiguity. That is to say, the relationship between God and everything that *is*, is gratuitous and trustworthy. And if it is to be trusted, then we need not fear discovering the truth about what *is*, however little convenient that might seem in its social repercussions.

Now it seems that this is the position of those who believe in Christ. The discovery which was handed on to us by the apostolic witnesses is the definitive discovery, so to speak, of the resurrection, not merely as a final sorting out of accounts, which is to say, as part of a moralistic vision of things, but of something that is present, and able to be lived in the here and now. Thus we can understand something of the refinement which Jesus introduced into the perception of the creation.

If I've understood this aright, what the apostolic group perceived is that when Jesus rose from the dead he revealed in a humanly accessible form not only that God has nothing to do

with death, thus putting into question all sacred mechanisms of protection by the expulsion of victims. He revealed more than that. He revealed that the giving of himself to our mechanism of death had been the way in which the Creator himself, who knows not death, has wanted us to form part of creation. That is to say, the relation between God and what *is* took on a clearer and previously unimagined form. The relation is one of a deliberate love which includes us in, and which takes the form of participating with us in the experience of being created so that we might participate with him in the divine life, by being created. This means that the Creator himself wanted to undo the knots of futility in which we found ourselves bound, undo them from within, and, starting from his acting out in our midst, empower us to be personally involved in discovering and bringing into being what *is*.

Thus do I understand the undeniable fact that the apostolic group understood Jesus as in some way involved in bringing creation to its resplendence. For this reason they speak of Jesus as the one through whom all things were created. In a vision tied to the substitutionary theory of the atonement, Jesus is imagined as (in some way) present 'in the beginning', and then, various millennia later, having got into the bath whose taps he had (in some way) helped to turn on earlier. But in the vision which I am trying to recover, we see creation as forever contemporary in a human activity in our midst precisely in the overcoming of problems which are of a cultural, not a biological nature. That is to say, it is by humanly detoxifying death that Jesus opens for us, who did not know it, not only the true sense of creation, but also the capacity to come to be created children of God by putting into practice ourselves the same overcoming of our culture shot through by death, trusting in a generosity which does not know death, and which will take care of us. Thus do the Scriptures say of him that he is the first born of all creation (Col. 1:15) and at the same time the author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2).

by the gift of the Holy Spirit the Creator himself participates humanly with us in the process of discovering what it is to bring creation to its fullness

Here I would like to make a brief observation concerning the meaning of the gift of the Holy Spirit. If we read the famous chapters 14—16 of John's Gospel, something will be noted which is very similar to the account which I am proposing to you. We see God himself, as a human being, giving his creating Spirit to human beings as a consequence of his going to death so that we be led into all truth. That is to say, the role of the counsel for the defence, the Paraclete, and the role of opener up of all truth by means of the overcoming of victimary processes, and the role of making us participants in bringing creation into being on the same level as Jesus, are the same role. And I notice something here which leaves me astounded. In the model of creation as something fitting into the substitutionary theory of salvation there is a moment when we have to step outside the process of learning, in order to lay hold of a 'divine' viewpoint — that is to say, make a mental leap outside the process so as to be able to 'impose' the supposed divine vision on what surrounds us. However, here the matter is very different. In the model which I am sketching out, and which I hope is in harmony with the Johannine witness, we don't get to receive the divine 'eye' or 'insight', so as to speak, by an intellectual leap outside the human process of discovery. Rather it is from within the process of the forgiving overcoming of group violence that we are carried to discovering all truth. Which is to say, that through the gift of the Holy Spirit we get to participate actively as conscious and knowing beings within God's own creative act.

there is an objective element in our understanding of creation

If everything said so far is on the right track, that is, if it is death and not in the first place sin which is the problem, and salvation is the culmination of the process by which the Saviour empowers

us to live as if death were not, confident that death is only the circumscription which is proper to being created contingently, and that being created contingently with our participation will last for ever thanks to the goodness of the One whose project it is; if all this is true, then there is an objective element which follows on as a consequence of the doctrine of creation. But it is not an affirmation concerning a knowledge of our origins which is supposedly epistemologically independent. It is rather an affirmation with respect to the relation between everything that is and God, in such a way that it allows us to know that our access to what really is, and because of that, our living in reality, opens up for us in the degree to which we overcome the violence of our relationships among ourselves. That is to say: the access to what really is consists, in all our cases, in an access which we reach collectively in the degree in which we do not live according to the gods, but rather from the forgiving victim. Or, said in another way: forgiveness is our access to creation. And I'm not saying this only in some 'religious' or mystical way, but in a sense which has anthropological and sociological consequences. To put this synthetically: in the degree in which we move on from relationships of violence among ourselves, and relationships whose violence is guaranteed 'sacredly', in that degree we come to be able to understand what is and to find ourselves within it.

I'll give some all too obvious examples. Some scientific or intellectual research just cannot be carried out while it implies going against sacred structures, which might well be those of a church, or those of a group of imams, or those of the officials of some government ministry. While things are that way, we never come to understand what is, but rather remain trapped in futility. For truth doesn't get to be discovered except in the degree to which someone doesn't fear reprisals. This freedom from fear comes either because the social group has already learned not to be frightened of the consequences of new discoveries which apparently cause a great shake-up. Or because the researcher doesn't fear death, and believes in the underlying goodness of what they are in the process of discovering, and so are ready to run the risk of going ahead, suffering the consequences, because they desire the

good of those who for the moment don't understand, but who in the long run will benefit from the discovery of the truth, difficult though it be to believe so now, to judge by their attitudes. In other words, I am talking about the anthropological conditions of possibility which allow the development of science, of knowledge.

What is key here is that the discovery of the truth about what *is* depends absolutely on a social interaction that is in the process of overcoming a collective delusion. Which is to say, it is forgiveness and the forgiving mentality which is capable of acceding to the truth, because it is the forgiving mentality which is ready to put up with attacks, marginalisation, time-wasting and loss of reputation, leaving these things behind as things of little import, so as to be able to make the truth to shine, truth understood as something for the benefit of all, including those who currently want to know nothing about it.

And there is progress in this in the degree to which we manage to desacralise our world, so as to understand its underlying goodness and trustability; and this not only with relation to the 'gods' of primitive religions, but in the midst of the 'gods' with a partially secular face which throb in our world and which help configure our violent relationships. That is to say, the consequence of the discovery of creation is increasing human responsibility for everything that is, including our way of managing our social relationships which allow us to be related to what is, and without which there is no access to anything. And this growing human responsibility is not the consequence of some 'disenchantment' of the world, or of God's having withdrawn to the margins, but the very exact consequence of the fact that God himself has given us the key to discover and inhabit with God the ordinary and good 'secularity' of everything that is.

The objective dimension of the relationship between salvation and creation turns out to be the fact that the form which salvation takes is the opening out for us of the possibility of participating with ever greater freedom in creation, and that it was an astounding act on the part of God himself to have given us the confidence to be able to do this. This giving us confidence was the revealing of all the dimensions of God's benevolent project

through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus was not a god who was inaugurating a salvation cult by means of a sacrificial trick, very much in the mode of the gods, but God himself, Creator of all things, then salvation is not independent of the necessary opening up of doors towards the bringing creation to its fullness.

from these considerations a beneficent understanding of natural law is born

Shortly before Easter 2002, the Holy Father, in an allocution to the members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, called on Catholic philosophers and scientists to formulate better arguments in favour of natural law, above all in the field of bioethics. In response to this I would like to make a small contribution by underlining some of the consequences of what I am discovering about creation. What I would like to say is the following: that natural law is in the first place an indispensable element of the Christian doctrine of creation precisely because it is the indispensable link between creation and salvation. That is to say, it is our way of insisting that there is not an absolute rupture between that which we see here and now and that which is the divine plan for the fullness of creation. What is now, and what will be, have an organic relationship between themselves, and in principle we can learn from what is now something about its definitive plenitude. In other words, there is a trustable continuity between that which is in need of salvation and that which will appear once saved. This is the consequent way of saying that any attempt to speak about salvation as if it were the abolition of something disastrous and the inauguration of something totally new does not keep alive the necessary unity between our Creator and our Saviour. For that reason, one of the firmest consequences of the insistence on natural law is the denial of the arbitrary or capricious nature of divine commandments. This is evident traditionally in the rejection of the voluntarist and nominalist positions with respect to morals. If God forbids us something it is because doing it does us no good. Which is to say, the holiness of the commandment is in the fact that it is for our good, and it

is not the case that our good is to be found in following commandments independently of their consequences for us, just because they are commandments.

Well then, if this is valid, we can see that natural law is, in the first place, and before any of its possibly polemical use in the world of non-believers, a very powerful instrument of self-criticism with respect to our own moral teaching. If it is used correctly, the first consequence of the use of this instrument would be having confidence that we can change our own understanding of morality in the light of our growing appreciation of what is. And this appreciation of what is grows precisely in the degree to which we learn not to base our moral teaching on the inherited opinions of our group with respect to what is 'good' and what is 'bad', but rather to overcome the tendency to cast out the weak whose existence is inconvenient to us, and thus to find ourselves discovering what really is. That is to say; leaving behind a world made in the image and likeness of our group, which closes us into sacred certainties, so as to discover what *is*, is something different from what we imagined, and for that reason we have to undergo the restructuring of our group. To put it another way: natural law would thus be a very powerful bulwark against the group tendency to constitute itself into the ghetto of the saved, making of its beliefs something independent of a process of discovery. In this sense natural law is the instrument of demythification par excellence. By insisting on it we keep alive the possibility of being a universal Church, and by losing it we begin to make of ourselves an exclusive sect.

Now please notice that this is a two-edged sword. On the one hand it can serve as a critical instrument with relation to practices which are socially and economically 'convenient' with respect to the weak and the vulnerable, in the case of abortion, euthanasia, the rights of immigrants, of racial minorities and so on. That is to say, it allows the discovery of values which will in fact change the composition of the group which has a tendency to reject the possibility that such vulnerable people should be an intrinsic and constitutive part of it. On the other hand it serves as an internal critique of ecclesiastical doctrines which start from aprioristic principles and which do not correspond to the discovery of what is,

but rather refuse to participate in that discovery, like for instance the critique, made by the sixteenth-century Spaniards who defended the Indians, of the intellectual structure which allowed the inhabitants of the New World to be treated as slaves; or, closer to home, of the current teaching of the Vatican congregations with relation to gay people.

In any case, I am seeking to demonstrate that within the relationship between salvation and creation which I have been sketching out, there lies the possibility of an understanding of natural law which is much less open to the real criticism which is made of it. The criticism is that it is a subtle *a priori* defence of doctrinal positions which are never submitted to the possibility that in the light of what is discovered as the world is progressively demystified, these same doctrinal positions might be revealed to be the enemies of the very natural law which they espouse, by being sacred bulwarks erected against enemies, which are necessary to a certain group self-understanding.

Natural law will convince much more when it is not an instrument of ecclesiastical battle, but a process of self-critical discovery, which brings into the light consequences for all, believers and non-believers at the same time.

all this has consequences for how we see ourselves

If everything which I have said so far is true, then it is worthwhile emphasising a consequence in that objective part of our life which is our subjectivity. It means that there is no need to stress ourselves about feeling something 'more' about ourselves when we say that we are created. Understanding ourselves as created is not the application to ourselves of a description deduced from an *a priori* vision of 'how things came to be', but the growing recognition of ourselves as peripheral recipients on the way towards being brought into existence by a bounteous strength which is massively prior to us, and whose intentions we have no reason to suspect. That is to say, the discovery of the creation towards which we are on the way to being saved reaches us as a profound relaxation and peace. Not the relaxation and peace of those who need

to rest, but the relaxation and peace which come together with the sensation of being vivified, quickened, in the degree to which we discover ourselves welcome participants in a stupendous adventure of open horizons and of much greater dimensions than we could be accustomed to think.

conclusion

I hope that it is now possible to see where we have been going in this 'salvation' triptych. I have been attempting to encourage a shift in perception whereby we leave behind a 'theory' which we 'know' and 'hold fast to', as a necessary condition for being on the inside of the group of the saved, who are being saved 'from' the world. I think that that account of salvation sets us up to turn Christianity into a form of ineffectual moral bullying. Instead, I have been trying to give hints of what it might look like to see salvation as a process of induction, opened up for us by Jesus' giving himself into death at our hands, and leading to our finding ourselves empowered to be on the inside of God's creative act. And the meaning and the sense of this creative act are always opening up before us. It is my hope that such a shift in perception will help us develop a fuller and richer sense of the life of worship, prayer, preaching, and the building of community than the impoverished notions to which we have become accustomed. For fruit of this latter sort is the only real test.

*confessions of a former
marginaholic*

I want to cast a sceptical eye at one of the most common forms of discourse which abounds in religious circles and indeed in circles which would probably be horrified to be thought of as religious. This is a way of talking about, and from, the experience of alienation and marginalisation in which these experiences are taken to be something particularly sacred or holy. I am going to do this by attempting to question some of my own experiences 'out loud'. My experience, or rather my attempted temporary enfolding into discourse of a number of different experiences, is that in my case at least, talk of marginalisation and alienation has often enough been an excuse to talk bunk, and pernicious bunk at that.

I am not making this claim as someone who has always been above such things, or who has not indeed been strongly driven by the considerable moral force which goes along with the thought patterns and feelings which kick in when talk turns to marginalisation, estrangement, alienation and so on. *Au contraire*. It has been a considerable part of my lot and portion over the last twenty years or so to have danced more or less feverishly to these tunes. My claim is that of the recovering marginaholic.

Let me try and fill in what I mean. Some fifteen years ago I went to live in Brazil to do my theological studies. It was the height of the boom in liberation theology, and my way of dealing with my own sense of marginalisation as a gay man who was unable to fit in with any of the recognised power structures in my country, that is to say, to belong to anything at all, was to get out of my country, to go into exile. It is, after all, much easier to be