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Gender and Metaphor in Feminist Theology

Grace M. Jantzen

I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, 
for my anger has turned from them. 
I will be as the dew to Israel; 
he shall blossom as the lily, 
he shall strike root as the poplar; 
his shoots shall spread out; 
his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. 
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, 
they shall flourish as a garden; 
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon (Hos. 14.3-7).

The promise of the love of God for Israel as it comes to Hosea the prophet is a promise of flourishing. God’s beneficence is not niggardly; Israel will ‘dwell beneath God’s shadow’ and will ‘flourish as a garden’. The same promise of flourishing is made repeatedly in the Wisdom literature: ‘The tent of the righteous shall flourish’ (Prov. 14.11); ‘The righteous flourish like the palm tree’ (Ps. 92.12) or ‘like a green leaf’ (Prov. 11.28). To be sure, the wicked also are said to flourish ‘like a green bay tree’ (Ps. 37.35); but their flourishing does not last: ‘I went by, and lo, he was gone: I sought him, but his place could nowhere be found’ (Ps. 37.36). By contrast, ‘the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children’ (Ps. 103.17). The prophet Zechariah, looking forward to a golden future, specifically includes both women and men in the expected flourishing:
On that day the Lord their God will save them for they are the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. Yea, how good and how fair it shall be! Grain shall make the young men flourish, and new wine the maidens (Zech. 9.16-17).

In New Testament writings the vocabulary of flourishing has all but disappeared. Nevertheless, parallel concepts can be found, as for instance in the ideas of fullness and abundance, which, though they are not exactly the same as the concept of flourishing, nevertheless express many similar ideas. The great prayer of the writer of Ephesians, for example, expresses the desire that ‘you... may be filled with all the fullness of God’, and continues with an exultation in God ‘who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think’ (Eph. 3.19-20). In 2 Corinthians, where the context is an exhortation to generous giving to the poor, the writer assures his readers that ‘God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work’ (9.8). Perhaps the most central of all the ‘abundance’ sayings is the one attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel in which he speaks of himself as the good shepherd of the sheep, in contrast to thieves and robbers: The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (Jn 10.10).

In spite of this biblical emphasis, Christian theology since the Reformation has paid relatively little attention to the ideas of flourishing and abundance, focusing far more on the concept of salvation. It would be a strange theological dictionary or encyclopedia that did not have substantial entries on ‘salvation’; whereas few carry more than a passing reference to ‘flourishing’. The same is true of major theological writers. Karl Barth, for example, devotes the whole five volumes of

1. For example, A. Richardson and J. Bowden (eds.), A New Dictionary of Christian Theology (London: SCM Press, 1983), devotes a relatively long article to ‘salvation’, but ‘flourishing’ does not appear at all.
Book IV of the *Church Dogmatics* to a discussion of the doctrine of reconciliation, within which the concept of salvation is central. ‘Flourishing’ or ‘abundance’ are not so much as mentioned in the index; and while it would be unfair to conclude from that that Barth had nothing to say about flourishing, it is obvious that its place in his thinking is far subsidiary to that of salvation. The significant exceptions to the emphasis on salvation rather than flourishing are the theologians of liberation, whether Latin American, Black, or feminist, all of whom see flourishing as far more central to the Christian message than do traditional Eurocentric theologians. In Christian theology in Western modernity, ‘salvation’ has been a key term; ‘flourishing’ has not.

Why not? My intention in this essay is not to trace out what theologians have to say about either salvation or flourishing, but rather to ask why it should be that one has received so much less attention than the other. I wish to examine some of the contrasting ingredients of the concepts of salvation and flourishing, and in so doing, point to some of the reasons why the former has been more congenial to theologians of modernity than the latter. My thesis is that the concept of salvation has been developed in a manner which marches in lockstep with the social and political projects of modernity, from colonialism to capitalism; whereas the concept of flourishing would challenge those projects. Furthermore, I will show that the contrast between salvation and flourishing is a gendered contrast; and that while I do not claim a one-to-one gender mapping, the emphasis on salvation rather than flourishing discloses and perpetuates the masculinist bias of Western theology.

As long ago as 1960, Valerie Saiving pointed to the gendered nature of theological reflection about sin and salvation. In an essay that proved to be a landmark for feminist theology, she showed that whereas theology had spoken of ‘the human situation’ in what we would now call a totalizing manner, gender differences need to be taken into account. In particular, the sins and temptations to which men are prone, especially pride and the will to power, are different from those which beset

women, who are much more likely to be tempted by inadequate self-esteem and underdevelopment. Subsequent feminist theologians have built on Saiving's work, pointing out that, as Daphne Hampson puts it, 'the conception which is held as to what constitutes salvation presumably relates to the conception which is held of sin'. Thus if women are more in need of self-esteem and learning to take ourselves seriously, Hampson suggests that a concept of salvation as healing may be more helpful than a concept of salvation as the breaking of overweening pride or shattering the sinful ego.

This recognition of the significance of salvation as healing (rather than, for example, as destruction of the ego) is of enormous importance; indeed, if carried to its logical conclusion, especially if it were seen in global as well as individualistic terms, I believe that it would subvert many of the unhelpful conceptualizations of salvation which I will outline below. It may be possible (and some of the feminist writings already cited go some way towards this) to reform the doctrine of salvation in such a way that it could become liberating. But it may also be useful to attempt another approach altogether, namely to see how things would be different if, instead of (or in addition to) a theology of salvation, we were to develop a theology of flourishing. How would that change our theological perspective, not least in relation to the gendered social and political context in which theology is done?

It is useful to begin with some definitions. The word 'flourish' is etymologically linked with flowers, with blossoming. It is related to the Middle English florir and the Latin florère, which mean 'to flower': perhaps it is not insignificant that the word 'flower' in Latin is in the feminine. As a noun form, a 'flourish' is the mass of flowers on a fruit tree, or the bloom of luxuriant, verdant growth. In the more common verb form, to flourish is to blossom, to thrive, to throw out leaves and shoots, growing

vigorously and luxuriantly. In the human sphere it denotes abundance, overflowing with vigour and energy and productiveness, prosperity, success and good health. The concept of flourishing is a strongly positive concept; one who flourishes is going from strength to strength.

‘Salvation’, on the other hand, is a term which denotes rescue. One is saved from something: from drowning, from calamity, from loss. These have negative connotations: it would be an odd turn of phrase to say that one had been saved from something desirable. To be saved means to be delivered from a situation which was problematic or even intolerable; there is a sense of crisis and of rescue from danger which is wholly absent from the notion of flourishing. It is only in an extended sense that one could speak of salvation in terms of healing, and it would necessitate seeing the ‘illness’ in terms of a crisis or an intolerable situation. ‘Salvation’ implies that there has been need of an urgent rescue, or calamity would befall.

Moreover, the concepts of flourishing and salvation respectively imply a different source or impetus. Salvation normally implies rescue by someone; there is a saviour. The remedy for the negative situation must come from outside the situation itself: the people who need to be saved cannot normally save themselves from drowning or disaster. By contrast, flourishing occurs from an inner dynamic of growth, with no need for interference from the outside. A plant left to itself in appropriate conditions will of its own nature grow and flower and bear fruit; in normal circumstances the idea of rescue would be inappropriate. There is a luxuriant self-sufficiency implied in the notion of flourishing, an inner impetus of natural energy and overflowing vigour. A movement or a person ‘in full flourish’ is vibrant and creative, blossoming and developing and coming to fruition. Although such flourishing of course draws upon external sources as a plant draws on the nutrients of the earth and air and water, this sort of continuing interdependence within the natural order is of an utterly different kind than the desperate need of someone in crisis for an external saviour or rescuer.

It is important to recognize that both ‘salvation’ and ‘flourishing’ are metaphors. Human beings are not literally plants which can thrive with luxuriant growth, and blossom and
bear fruit. Neither, however, are human beings literally drowning, or in an immediately life-threatening crisis from which we must be rescued. In both cases, the words must be understood as depicting not a literal situation, but rather a way of understanding ourselves in relation to God and the world. As Janet Martin Soskice has emphasized, metaphors such as salvation and flourishing operate as models, opening out to disclose new possibilities of thought. But a metaphor used as a model may distort as well as disclose, especially if its metaphorical status is forgotten and it is not balanced by other, corrective models.

The language of salvation is so thoroughly ingrained into Christian theological thinking that we scarcely recognize that we are working with an extended metaphor: it has come to seem like literal theological truth. But when we contrast it with the metaphor of flourishing, we can begin to see that if we developed a theology around that model instead of (or as well as) the model of salvation, we would be led to quite a different account of the human condition and our relation to one another and to God, as I shall outline. It is of course not the case that there is equal support in Scripture (let alone tradition) for a theology based on the metaphor of flourishing as there is for a metaphor of salvation: developing such a theology requires the same ‘search for lost coins’ that is typical of any theology of liberation which is working with the texts and traditions of the dominant discourse. Furthermore, though the language of salvation is more pervasive, there is at least considerable scriptural warrant for a theology of flourishing, as I have already pointed out and as will become more evident below. It therefore follows that theological concentration on the metaphor of salvation to the virtual exclusion of metaphors of flourishing represents a series of choices, whether conscious or unconscious, on the part of theologians. These choices, I wish to argue, are choices which can be seen to have at least as much to do with the social and

political agendas of modernity as with specifically scriptural or religious requirements.

Fundamentally, the choice of the language of salvation rather than the language of flourishing in Christian theology both denotes and reinforces an anthropology of a very particular kind. If we think in terms of salvation, then the human condition must be conceptualized as a problematic state, a state in which human beings need urgent rescue, or calamity will befall. The human situation is a negative one, out of which we need to be delivered. In Christian theology, this obviously links with the idea of a divine saviour, and hence with Christology and with the doctrine of the incarnation and the trinity. But how would we characterize the human situation in all its diversity if we used instead the model of flourishing? We could then see human beings as having natural inner capacity and dynamic, able to draw on inner resources and interconnection with one another, and potential to develop into great fruitfulness. Whereas with the metaphor of salvation God is seen as the Saviour who intervenes from outside the calamitous situation to bring about a rescue, the metaphor of flourishing would lead instead to an idea of the divine source and ground, the one in whom we are ‘rooted and grounded in love’, in whom we ‘live and move and have our being’, the vine of whom we are the branches and can bring forth much fruit. The biblical references are deliberate: they show again that there is ample scriptural warrant for developing a theology of flourishing, of growth and fruition from an inner creative and healthy dynamic, rather than a theology which begins from the premise that the human condition is a negative condition or crisis from which we must be rescued by an external saviour. Of course, the concept of the divine would then also necessarily be much less deistic: God would not be thought of as a being external to the world, but rather as its source and wellspring: Jesus would not be envisaged as the heroic saviour entering human history from outside, but rather as one who manifests what it may mean to live fully and naturally in the creative justice of God. Concentration on the model of salvation to the virtual exclusion of the model of flourishing has meant that such balancing perspectives have to a large extent been eliminated from theological thought.
This imbalance is, I suggest, riddled with gender implications. In the first place, it is by now very well known that women have been identified with nature and the body, while men have been identified with culture and spirit. Furthermore, sin and temptation have often been seen in Christian history as emanating from the physical, the body, especially from sexuality: as Eve was the mother of sin, so the body, associated with woman, continues to be its cause. It is of course true that there is plenty of scriptural warrant to reject this facile identification of sin with the body: the biblical concept of the flesh does not map onto the physical body nearly as neatly as Augustinian thinkers would have it do throughout the centuries of Christendom. Most theologians now would be embarrassed by Tertullian’s thunderings that each woman is another Eve: ‘You are the devil’s gateway...you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.’ Biblical accuracy notwithstanding, however, in popular and even scholarly theological thinking, sin has been closely linked with bodiliness, especially with sexuality, and hence with woman.

All this is well known. What is not so often recognized is how this reinforces the patriarchal dimensions of the concept of salvation, and how disruptive of it the alternative model of flourishing would be. If we are working with the metaphor of salvation, then, as already noted, the human condition must be seen as sinful, broken, in crisis: this is our natural state, out of which we need to be rescued. However, if we think instead in terms of flourishing, then the natural condition of humanity is good: we need only to be allowed to develop normally. But this would entail a radical rethinking of the underlying assumptions about gender. If the female continues to be linked with nature,
then contrary to tradition, the female must be linked with goodness, with the natural ability to flourish. Alternatively, if the male continues to be linked with goodness, then the male must now be linked with nature rather than with spirit or culture, that which stands over against nature, since it is from within nature, rather than from some external 'spiritual' source, that flourishing occurs. Or, even more radically, the whole millennia-old linkage of the male with spirit and goodness and the female with nature and sinfulness could be disrupted altogether. Whereas the model of salvation coheres unproblematically with a patriarchal structuring of society, a whole new theology of gender relations would be prompted by a theology modelled instead on flourishing.

Moreover, the alternative possibilities for conceptualizing Christ in a theology of flourishing would be highly congenial to feminist concerns. Many feminists have been deeply troubled by the masculinity of Christ: as Rosemary Radford Ruether put it, 'can a male saviour save women?' In the struggle to retain both the understanding of Christ as Saviour and the historically undeniable maleness of Jesus, feminists have found themselves in a conundrum, sometimes suggesting an androgynous Christology or a Christa figure, at other times trying to develop an account of salvation which is independent of the sex (or race or colour) of the saviour. What none of these sufficiently recognizes, however, is that the idea of a saviour is a metaphor, part of the whole model of salvation. It is that model which requires a rescuer from outside the situation, and which constructs Jesus as the rescuer. Once again, the picture of a heroic figure swooping in to rescue the damsel in distress is all too reminiscent of familiar male fantasies. Such a picture would be a wild caricature of contemporary Christologies; but it does point to the ease with which the idea of a male saviour resonates with popular gender stereotypes. It would be of considerable value to feminist theology to develop as a counter-

11. For a useful discussion of some of these, see Hampson, Theology and Feminism, pp. 50-79.
balance a theology of flourishing, in which the idea of a heroic saviour does not get a purchase. Instead, Jesus could be seen as the one who manifests what human flourishing can be, passionate for justice, full of humour and wisdom and insight, with the integrity of compassion taken to its furthest extent: such understandings of Jesus have indeed already been developed within feminist and womanist theology, though not explicitly in connection with a theology of flourishing. Even those who wish to retain a traditional doctrine of trinity and incarnation can hardly deny that this is a much neglected understanding of Christology for which there is considerable scriptural warrant. Many, especially feminists, will want to go beyond this, and argue that the traditional doctrines should not merely be counterbalanced but should be replaced. I shall not argue for either position here, but simply point to the fruitfulness of the model of flourishing as against the model that calls for a heroic saviour.

Another highly significant aspect of the salvation model, from which much else follows, is that salvation is individualistic. A particular individual can be saved, singled out for rescue, though all others around perish. The combined influence of Luther and Calvin on Protestant theology has made this individualized aspect of salvation central to much subsequent theological thought. Luther, agonizing about the state of his soul and his eternal destiny, could not be content to accept that he was right with God in virtue of his membership of the Roman Church or even as a brother in the Augustinian monastery. Something else was necessary, something special, namely the grace of God to himself personally, appropriated by faith. No one could have faith for him; he himself must put his trust in God, and God would save him, Martin Luther, though all others should perish. And having thus committed himself to the grace of God by faith he was assured of his own salvation while the Pope and all the Roman Church were consigned to hell. Again, Calvinistic theology, with its vocabulary of election,
invited people to ponder their personal eternal destiny, and ask
themselves whether they were indeed among the elect, and
whether this was confirmed in their lives. John Bunyan’s
Pilgrim’s Progress is only one of many spiritual autobiographies
of the early modern period which reveal the grip of this individ-
ualized, subjectivized understanding of salvation, in which the
grace of God was observed at work in the inner self, the soul
standing naked and alone before God, rescued by divine grace
from eternal catastrophe and fleeing all companionship to
undertake a spiritual journey to the celestial city. 13

There have been many studies which have discussed the con-
voluted connections between these Protestant conceptions of
personal salvation and the rise of capitalism and individualistic
liberalism. 14 Without rehearsing them, I wish to point out two
things. The first is that such individualism would be impossible
in a theology built upon the model of flourishing rather than
upon the model of salvation. The idea that one could flourish by
oneself alone can get no purchase. Although Hobbes had a fan-
tasy of men springing up as mushrooms out of the ground,
‘come to full maturity without all kind of engagement to each
other’, 15 his fantasy bears no relation to reality: every child is
brought into the world in relation to people, and it is only
through nurturing and care that a child can survive and thrive.
It is within a nexus of relationships that we develop into per-
sonhood, learning to laugh and play and speak and think. At the
most basic physical and psychological levels, human flourishing

13. J. Bunyan, The Pilgrim’s Progress from this World to that which
is to Come (ed. J.B. Wharey and R. Sharrock; London: Penguin, 1967);
C. Hill, A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and
his Church (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); M. Miles, The Image
and Practice of Holiness: A Critique of the Classic Manuals of Devotion

14. Two of the most notable are M. Weber, The Protestant Ethic and
the Spirit of Capitalism (London: Unwin University Books, 1930), and
R.H. Tawney, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (London: Penguin,
1926).

15. T. Hobbes, Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government
and Society [De Cive] in The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of
requires interconnection, not isolation.\textsuperscript{16} The atomistic individualism upon which Western modernity is built is consistent with a theology modelled on the metaphor of salvation in a way in which it could never be consistent with a theology modelled on a metaphor of flourishing. Again, this is not to say that all those who develop a theology of salvation do so in individualistic terms. However, when the understanding of salvation is extended from particular individuals who are saved to larger aggregates or even to global salvation, then it is necessary either that these groups (or the world itself) be seen in peril or crisis and in need of rescue, or else the concept of salvation is stretched in ways that take it so far beyond the basic metaphor that clarity of meaning is lost.

A theology of flourishing would preempt some of these problems. Many of the biblical references to flourishing refer explicitly to the flourishing of the nation or community; indeed, the anthropology of atomistic individuals would be abhorrent to the mentality of the biblical prophets. In the sayings of Jesus, such as that of the vine and the branches, it is again implied that there are many branches, in relation with one another as well as with the vine. The model of flourishing is one which assumes the interconnectedness of people, and indeed of the ecosystem: flourishing is impossible by oneself alone. It is therefore a helpful model to set over against the competitive individualism which can easily be reinforced by the model of personal salvation.

However, it would not be correct to suppose that the metaphor of flourishing connotes a community romantically free from all ills. In fact, one of the questions which demands attention if one is thinking in terms of flourishing is the question of \textit{who} flourishes, and at whose expense? In a world in which the North devours the labour of the South, with a huge flow of cash and goods from the poor to the rich, it is obvious that at least in economic terms it is possible for some groups to flourish off the backs of others, though their humanity may be stunted by it.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, Darwinian theories of natural selection have some-

\textsuperscript{16} I have discussed this in greater detail in my 'Connection or Competition: Identity and Personhood in Feminist Ethics', \textit{Studies in Christian Ethics} 5.1 (1992).

\textsuperscript{17} S. George, \textit{A Fate Worse Than Debt} (London: Penguin, 1988).
times been used as a legitimation of such competition: after all, if the world is one in which only the fittest survive, then is it not the case that cut-throat competition is the law of survival even in the natural world? But this is to misrepresent the situation. Ecologists are tireless in reminding us of the interconnectedness of the ecosystem, the dependence of each form of life on all the others in the biosphere. Though Darwin drew the language of competitiveness from the capitalist economics of his time, even a moderate understanding of the interdependence of plant and animal life makes obvious how misplaced such language is as an overall account of their adaptation and flourishing. The metaphor of flourishing carries with it an idea of connectedness which contrasts with the individualism of the metaphor of salvation. In the former, the question ‘who benefits and who loses?’ is insistent and demands to be addressed: who is labouring and suffering in order that I may flourish? In the latter, it can get no purchase: unless one had the idea that only a certain number of people could be saved, the question of who was damned because of my salvation would not arise. A theology of flourishing, therefore, lends itself readily to a politicized theology of justice and protest; while a theology of salvation easily becomes introverted and depoliticized—which of course means that it supports the status quo.

If the first point about the particularist tendencies of a theology of salvation is that it easily falls in with the competitive individualism of global capitalism, the second is that such competitive disconnectedness is strongly gender-bound. It is a fundamental premise of psychoanalytic theory, whether Freudian or Lacanian, that a person is individuated by differentiation from their primary care-giver, a differentiation which also involves sexual self-identification. When, as in Western societies, masculinity is constructed as other than and oppositional to femininity, the consequence is that whereas a little girl can differentiate herself from her mother without developing an antagonism towards her, thereby retaining connectedness while still establishing her own identity, a little boy must pull himself away from his mother, and see himself in oppositional terms as
a disconnected individual. The interconnections between the construction of masculinity and the socio-economic system of competitive individualism have received much attention. What has been less frequently noted is how neatly it coheres with a theology built on the model of personal salvation.

This is all the more true because salvation has regularly been held to be of the soul. Whatever the state of the physical body and its material conditions, the soul could be saved by the gracious intervention of God. Such concepts are obviously part of the thinking of ‘born again’ Christian fundamentalists, but the inward turn has a long history also in liberal and neo-orthodox Christianity since Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard respectively. Schleiermacher in the Speeches insists that true religion is not the outward form of doctrine or morality, but is ‘essentially contemplative...to have life and to know life in immediate feeling’. Though Schleiermacher’s account of the saviour is more in terms of manifestation and mediation than in terms of a divine rescue, his emphasis on inwardness and individual subjectivity is much to the fore. Similarly, Kierkegaard rejects the objectivity of the intellectual enterprise of theology and declares that truth is subjectivity, that it is in inwardness where authenticity and hence salvation are to be found. Though there are of course huge differences between Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, their agreed insistence on the priority of the inward over the outward is to that extent consistent with the dualism which has dogged Christianity ever since its affair with Platonism in the early years of Christendom.

According to a dualist conception, it is the soul which must be saved, while the flesh—too often equated with the body and particularly with sexuality—must be mortified, put to death, as

18. For a full discussion of this, see N. Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Chodorow has been criticized for not paying enough attention to differences among women, and for a deterministic tendency; but her basic analysis of the formation of differential gender identity is widely accepted.


the enemy of the soul. There are obvious connections here with the gendered understanding of material nature as against the cultural or spiritual, as discussed above. I have written elsewhere about the pervasiveness and theological perversity of dualism\(^2\) and its connection with the construction of the male as spirit and the female as material;\(^2\) it is in any case a well-rehearsed theme.\(^2\) What I wish to emphasize here is, once again, the contrast that arises if, instead of a theology of salvation, we were to consider a theology of flourishing. The notion of flourishing does not begin to make sense unless bodiliness is taken into account: dualism is ruled out from the start. The concept of flourishing is one which involves thriving, luxuriant growth, obvious and exuberant good health: all of these are rooted in bodily well-being, including both physical health and adequate material provision. Sick people, starving people, people whose existence is miserable because they lack the necessities of physical and psychological well-being, cannot be said to be flourishing: the biblical writer connects flourishing with abundance of grain and wine. Of course it is sometimes possible that a person who falls ill can nevertheless flourish in mind or spirit for a time, just as a person kept in solitary confinement can sometimes rise above it and flourish inwardly; but these are occasions for wonder, for amazement, exceptions to our normal expectations. They should not therefore be seen as counter-examples to the idea that flourishing involves connectedness, adequate physical and psychological rootedness to support the blossoming and fruitfulness which grows out of that nourishing ground. A theology built on the model of flourishing, therefore, would be unable to ignore the physical and material realities of people, their bodiliness and their physical and psychological well-being, in the way that a theology built on the model of salvation of souls has sometimes done.

Closely connected with this is the other-worldly orientation of


salvation. From very early in the Christian era, arguably from the biblical sources themselves, the idea of salvation was connected with the idea of eternal destiny. The opposite of salvation was damnation. Medieval sculpture and paintings are replete with portrayals of final judgments, in which the ‘saved’ are escorted by gentle angelic arms to heaven, while the ‘damned’ are given over to voraciously grinning demons, who whip them into the jaws of hell. Indeed, the crisis, the impending catastrophe from which one is saved is precisely damnation to hell: this is where the rhetoric of salvation gets its grip, especially in popular imagination. And once it is also accepted that ‘outside the church there is no salvation’, then not only is the authority of the church absolute, but the metaphor of salvation as a theological model has obtained hegemonic status.

Yet even in the biblical writings there is strong reason to question such an understanding. The sayings attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, for example, speak of eternal life not as a blissful state at which one could arrive after death, having been saved from hell by divine intervention, but rather as a present quality of life. Whoever believes in him, Jesus says, has eternal life; whoever does not is ‘condemned already’, not merely in the sense that there is some catastrophe awaiting of which this person is as yet not aware, but in the sense that such a person is already dealing in death, loving ‘darkness rather than the light’ (Jn 3.18, 19, 36). Such teachings of eternal life as a present quality of life rather than a future state are in obvious tension with the many other biblical passages which speak in terms of a destiny after death, and though they have usually been reconciled by means of the teaching that the future state is conditional on the present, it is clear that even in Scripture eternal life is not seen strictly in other-worldly terms. An emphasis on flourishing would obviously bring it even more firmly down to earth. It is not a heavenly kingdom to which the Hebrew prophets looked, but the flourishing of the theocracy in the land of Israel. Nor is the abundant life spoken of in the New Testament a life reserved for some future scenario, but a fruitful life in the present, ‘rooted and grounded in love’. This is not incompatible with the possibility of a future heavenly state, but the orientation is not
toward death and what happens after death, but toward life in this world.

Philosophers of religion have been much preoccupied with questions of religious pluralism. Can there, after all, be salvation outside the church—or even outside belief in Christ? Can religious traditions other than Christianity be salvific? In the past, these discussions have often gone on as though the concept of salvation itself were unproblematic, and that it was not to be understood literally rather than as a theological model. That is, it was assumed (often without being explicit about it) that there are two alternative possibilities after death, and the question is whether people who are not Christians are automatically consigned to hell, or whether ‘we’ (!) might meet them in heaven because they had somehow been rescued from that fate (‘saved’). The arrogance of such a view has become obvious; and many philosophers are willing to recognize that traditions other than Christianity offer ‘salvific possibilities’; yet the language of salvation remains largely in place.

Such language, however, becomes increasingly problematic as one moves from a traditional Christian notion of salvation as rescue from eternal damnation to an idea of the ‘universal salvific will of God’, to use the terms made popular by the work of John Hick.24 Part of the problem is that ‘salvation’ is a concept which is specific to Christianity. Buddhists, for instance, do not look forward to salvation but to nirvana. For a Christian to say that Buddhists will nevertheless be ‘saved’ seems to imply that Buddhists will find themselves, after death, in a heavenly place ruled over by Jesus—hardly something they would see as desirable. Of course, if the alternative is to burn in hell for all eternity, then even Buddhists would be glad of salvation; but that is hardly the point. Rather, if the idea of religious pluralism is taken seriously, then the question of whether there is any future state at all, and how it should be characterized if there is, is itself part of the investigation; and this means that the language of salvation, with its Christian connotations, becomes

24. Among his many writings, see especially God and the Universe of Faiths (London: Macmillan, 1973) and God has Many Names (London: Macmillan, 1982).
stretched to breaking point. What is one saved from, and by whom? Why should such language any longer be used?

The work of John Hick provides a fascinating case study of how the language of salvation becomes elasticized. In his early thought he held to the idea of heaven and hell, and ‘assumed it to be a central Christian position that salvation is through Christ alone, and therefore that those who do not respond to God through Christ are not saved but, presumably, damned or lost’. The more he entered into the idea of the ‘universal salvific will of God’, however, the more he extended the possibility of salvation to those outside the Christian faith; but he continued to think of salvation in terms of eternal destiny in an other-worldly state after bodily death. In his most recent work, in which he takes his pluralist insight fully seriously, he glosses the term ‘salvation’ as ‘liberation’ or ‘human transformation’, and speaks not in terms of heaven and hell, but in terms of a shift from self-centredness to reality-centredness. Nevertheless, he continues to insist on ‘the soteriological character of religion’ as his starting point, though the concept of salvation is now far removed from anything to do with a saviour or a crisis or catastrophe from which people need to be rescued.

What Hick never considers is the fact that ‘salvation’ is itself a metaphor, and that it is not the only metaphor which could be chosen. In fact, the metaphor of flourishing would provide him with a model much more congenial to his recent work, since it is a model which not only reveals the obvious inappropriateness of individualistic self-centredness, as we have seen, but which also carries within it the ideas of liberation from conditions of oppression which render flourishing impossible. Part of the reason why discussions of religious pluralism tend to get bogged down is, I suggest, because of the fixation on the model of salvation as though it were fully literal, without the recognition that, like any model, it has limitations, and needs to be counter-balanced by other models, among which flourishing is a

25. Hick, Universe of Faiths, p. 121.
27. Interpretation of Religion, p. 21.
significant option. Even philosophers who, like Hick, find the idea of eternal damnation for many or even some of humanity morally abhorrent continue to cling to the vocabulary of salvation as though that were the only one available, even though it now has to be glossed in ways which are at variance with its central connotations of rescue, and continue to a large extent to think in terms of other worlds, worlds beyond death, as part of what salvation involves.

The French philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray has pointed out a significant gender linkage in the preoccupation with other worlds. She points out that while on the one hand the project of modernity has been the mastery of the material world, which is in itself a highly gendered project, on the other hand the identification of reality and goodness with spirit has meant that there is also an element of scorn for the material world and an effort to escape from it. In her words,

> The patriarchal order is based upon worlds of the beyond: worlds of before birth and especially of the afterlife, other planets to be discovered and exploited for survival, etc. It doesn’t appreciate the real value of the world we have and draws up its often bankrupt blueprints on the basis of hypothetical worlds.²⁸

Whether in the Platonic form of the philosophical life ‘with one foot in the grave’, seeking escape from the body through self-mastery, or in the traditional religious form of looking to heaven and trying to live in its light while mortifying the flesh, or in the secular form of space flights and telescopes, or even in the intellectual form of preoccupation with the possible worlds of modal logic, all this attention to the ‘worlds of the beyond’ distracts attention from the actual world in which we live, and our relationships and responsibilities to it and to one another. When this is coupled with the age-old linkage of the female with matter and the male with spirit, the sexist nature of the desire to master and ultimately to escape from matter becomes all the more evident. To the extent that a theology of salvation is couched in terms which implicitly despise this world and look for another, better one, such a theology colludes with attitudes

which are interlocked with structures of domination. Taking a pluralist position here, arguing that salvation is universal, does not meet this point, since the implication is still that this world is one from which one must be saved.

Such a position is foreclosed if the model of flourishing is used instead. It is not possible to emphasize flourishing without emphasizing also the material conditions of people’s lives. Indeed, while it is possible to be ‘saved’ while leaving everything else as it is, this is by no means the case with flourishing. Since flourishing involves the physical and communal realities of a person’s life, as already discussed, a theology of flourishing could not content itself with looking piously to an afterlife where present injustices will be abolished, while doing nothing in the struggle for their abolition here and now. For this reason a theology of flourishing would not be able to avoid confrontation with issues of domination, whether in terms of poverty, class, race, sex, or any other form of injustice: since these are the things which prevent people and communities from flourishing. A theology built on the model of flourishing would necessarily be a political theology which confronted social and economic issues not as marginal theological interests but as central to theological thought.

From this perspective it becomes possible to see that a theology based on the model of salvation is no less a political theology, but the underlying political stance has become invisible, often even (or especially) to those who develop such theologies. Any theology—indeed any intellectual stance—which does not recognize and challenge the present political and social injustices thereby implicitly condones them. When salvation is taken as a root metaphor for theology, it is easy to suppose that this is a ‘religious’ concept, removed from political involvement. But any such removal of the religious from the contemporary world is in the service of the status quo, whatever the intentions of the practitioners. The temptation to remove theology from social and political engagement is to a considerable extent foreclosed if one begins with the model of flourishing rather than the model of salvation. Whereas the rhetoric of salvation lends itself as a tool for those who wish to ensure that religion does not meddle in politics or get seriously involved in struggles against social
injustices, the vocabulary of flourishing does not allow for such privatized and depoliticized religion.  
For spirituality, too there are implications. From what I have said above, it might seem as though the model of flourishing would lead one to emphasize only the public and the political at the expense of the private and inner life. Closer attention to the metaphor, however, shows that that would not be the case. A plant which flourishes does so from its own inner life, ‘rooted and grounded’ in its source. If that inner life is gone, the plant withers and dries up, no matter how good its external circumstances. What is different from the model of salvation, however, is that the inner and the outer are not separable: there is no flourishing ‘soul’ of the plant while its ‘body’ withers in intolerable material conditions. A theology built on the model of flourishing is one whose spirituality is holistic, rather than the privatized, subjectivized spirituality so characteristic of contemporary Christianity. As such, it is highly congenial to feminists, for whom, in spite of backlash, the personal continues to be the political.

29. A notable example of this is the response of the Roman Catholic Church to the liberation theology of the Medellin Conference: the Church’s position was that priests should occupy themselves with the salvation of the people, and not get involved in the political situation. See R. McAfee Brown, Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology (New York: Orbis Books, 1990).