

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOTERIOLOGICAL DOCTRINES OF WORLD RELIGIONS

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Abstract

Salvation is an important feature of theology in religions. Philosophers study it as a comparative analysis of different religions about their concepts of salvation. Soteriology is a branch of theology in which religious doctrines of salvation of different religions are discussed. There are over 10,000 religions in the world. Followers of these religions are further divided into innumerable sects and subgroups. All of them talk about salvation of their adherents. In addition, a sizeable population of the world is associated with atheism and agnosticism who offer their own theories. Since most of the religions accept that there is an end to this world and there is a life of human beings beyond their deaths, the aspect of salvation becomes important for every individual in this world. But the problem is, the followers of 10,000+ religions and their innumerable subgroups differ on their concept of Creator and creation in this Cosmos and have adopted different religious and salvation theories. Brief accounts of soteriological theories of some major religions have been provided in this paper to help readers find a logical answer in this context.

Keywords – Soteriology, Salvation, Religion, Islam, Qiyamah

Nature and significance of salvation

The English word 'salvation' is derived from Latin 'salvatio' and Greek 'soteria' which literally means deliverance from a gloomy situation. Soteriology is a combination of two Greek words, 'soteria' (salvation) and 'logy' (doctrine/science). Soteriology implies beliefs in salvation of the adherents of a religion. There are different assumptions in various religions about human nature, their ultimate destiny and salvation.

A presupposition

It is important to note beforehand that this article is purely focused on soteriological argumentation, ergo, only religious, and philosophical narratives about the past and the future of humanity shall be considered.

Therefore, scientific narratives pertaining to the past, i.e., Darwin's theory of evolution, and the future, i.e., Futurology, have been tacitly omitted to bring clarity and coherence to the paper.

History of religions

It is believed that human beings had a golden age when they were under the watchful eyes of their parents, Adam, and Eve, the first human beings on planet earth. There was an order in human society oppression on fellow human beings by a few individuals was non-existent.

Adam, the first person to have been created, is mentioned in the Bible in the narrative of creation (Genesis 2:5–7, 2:15–4:1, 4:25).

The Quran says – 'O mankind! Fear your Lord Who created you from a single person, and from it created its spouse, and from them both, has spread the multitude of men and women (4:1)

Quranic accounts confirm that Adam (عليه السلام) was a Prophet of God. The Quran also confirms that Allah provided knowledge to Adam (عليه السلام) about His Lord and this Cosmos.

The Quran says - 'And Allah taught Adam (عليه السلام) the names (facts) of all the things (in the Cosmos).' (2-31). These facts included the fact about their Lord and the facts about the things in this Cosmos created by Him.

Adam (عليه السلام), and Eve (Hawwa - عليها السلام) followed, and taught to their children, the original religion of mankind, which was worship of their Lord who created them and deal with the things of this world as per their natures. This is the reason their children and grandchildren led a

happy and serene life untouched by disease, wickedness, etc., in harmony with God.

Some people object to this metaphysical narrative. However, most human beings subscribe to this logic that all humans have the same origin, and they are the children of the same mother and father who are known as Adam (عليه السلام), and Eve (Hawwa - عليها السلام).

It is also logical to believe that, as the people grew in numbers, some of them migrated to fertile lands in search of prosperous life. The process of migration from one land to other has continued throughout the history of mankind.

The human societies evolve with the passage of time as their thinking, cultural practices, and concepts also change. The environment plays a major role in this evolution. Therefore, it is logical to believe that after the lapse of a considerable time, after the death of Adam (عليه السلام) and Eve (Hawwa - عليها السلام), when people had migrated to different lands, they forgot the original religious teachings of their forefathers and adopted to new religious theories that came to their minds. This is the reason, we have over 10,000+ religions in the world today.

The Quran says, 'Mankind was a single community, (and when people started differing with each other) Allah sent prophets to give good news and warning (reminding them of their original religious teaching), and with them He sent the Scripture with the Truth to judge between people in their disagreements. It was only those to whom it was given, who disagreed about it after clear signs had come to them because of rivalry between them. So, by His leave Allah guided the believers to the truth they had differed about. Allah guides whoever He will to a straight path'. (2-213).

Salvation in Abrahamic religions

Salvation in Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) involves restoration of body and soul after resurrection. It is followed by the day of judgement in which, fate of every human being is decided. Some will receive salvation and others will be damned.

A brief account of salvation philosophies of some important Abrahamic religions is provided below.

(i) Salvation in Christianity

The soteriological arguments in Christian community can be divided into two major periods, (i) early Christian Soteriology up to 4th Century CE, and (ii) Later Christian Soteriology after 4th Century CE.

In Christian theology, Soteriology is closely related to Christology. Christology is a subject in which the 'person of Jesus' is studied, as to what was his status; if he was a human being, or divine or both human being and divine. This debate was carried out extensively during the first 4 centuries of Jesus's birth and majority of the Christians believed that he was an Apostle and enjoyed highest status among human beings. This is known as earlier Christian Orthodoxy.

The current Christian orthodoxy which came into being during 4th century CE, is based on an event that took place in 325 CE under the direction and supervision of a Roman King. Details in this context are described in a book titled 'Ecclesiastical History' written by Eusebius of Caesarea.

Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339 CE), the bishop of Caesarea Maritima in the Roman province of Syria, Palaestina, belonged to proto-Orthodoxy sect of Christianity who had the patronage of Roman Kings as their beliefs were influenced by Roman Hellenistic philosophy. Eusebius is reported to be one of the earliest authors about Christian orthodoxy. He wrote a book titled 'Ecclesiastical History'. As per this book, the Christ was both divine as well as human being, not two halves joined together. They regarded God as three persons, (i) the Father, (ii) the Son, and (iii) the holy Spirit.

In modern times, many early Christian writings have been discovered and based on them the Christian scholars have challenged the Eusebian narrative of Christian orthodoxy. They have concluded that, what became Christian orthodoxy was nothing but the beliefs of a small sect of Christians who managed to eliminate other sects

by the end of 3rd century CE because of their proximity to Roman rulers.

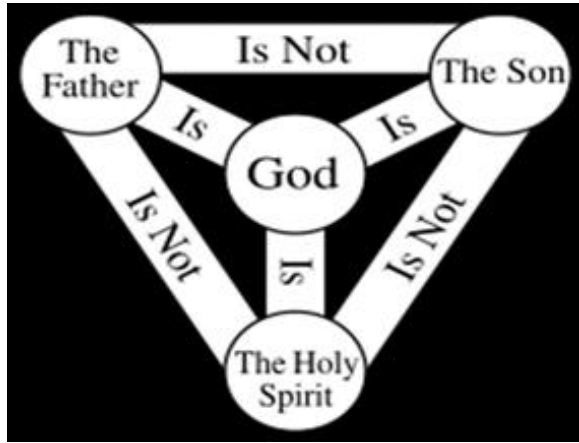


Figure 1: A graphic explanation of the declaration of Nicaea

In their declaration of Nicaea, 325 CE, they claimed that Jesus was the God in eternity and that he was begotten as the son of God, rather than made as a son of God. He is from the same substance as that of Father God and he is divine, eternal, and coexistent with the Father God.

Subsequently, they claimed that martyrdom in defending these beliefs is a major source salvation for Christians.

Critics of modern Christian orthodoxy say that Christian theology was hijacked by Greek Hellenistic philosophy, and Christian faith was Romanized in the declaration of Nicaea in 325 CE. Even Greek philosophical language was used in the declaration of Nicaea.

(ii) Salvation in Judaism

Jews claim that followers of Judaism do not need salvation through someone, as is believed by Christians. They say, salvation cannot be obtained by invoking a deity or believing in an outside power or influence other than God. They say God, as Universal Spirit and Creator of this world, is the only source of salvation of human beings which is subject to the condition that they act as per the moral principles stipulated in Torah.

Jews claim that in the end times a Jewish Messiah will come and free the world from war and suffering and lead the mankind into universal

brotherhood under the fatherhood of one God. Some Jews believe that Messiah will be a human, a non-divine person, who will restore the physical kingdom of Israel, rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and will bring peace to the earth. Some others believe that Jewish Messiah is not human, a supernatural being or divine, rather it would be a dominating human influence in an age of universal peace and spiritual regeneration in the end times.

Jews say that salvation is open to all human beings and is not limited to the followers of Judaism. The only condition is people should observe ethical values as summarized in 10 commandments of Yahweh (Jewish God) in the Old Testament (Torah). Torah consists of 613 written commandments, in addition to the oral law that was given the Moses (عليه السلام).

Jews claim that they are chosen people as they have the privilege to show to the world the principles of ethical way of life. For Jews, the salvation is achieved by living a righteous life dedicated to Yahweh, the God of Creation, in his sincere worship, particularly during appropriate Jew holidays.

Jews also believe in resurrection, after life, and divine judgement. They say that the salvation of individual Jew is connected to the salvation of humanity, as Yahweh, the Jewish God, expects them to function together spiritually and be accountable to each other. The concept of salvation of Jews is also tied to the restoration of Israel. Jews belief that God will free the people of Israel from different exiles in the end times.

Salvation in Non-Abrahamic religions

Followers of non-Abrahamic religions believe that human body is the corrupt substance in which soul is imprisoned, and salvation is freedom of soul from this physical prison. They also believe in a cycle of rebirths and incarnations before ultimate salvation of the soul in a disembodied realm is achieved. Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Orphism, ancient Greek religions, Manichaeism, ancient Iranian religions, etc., are included in this category.

A brief account of salvation philosophies of some important Non-Abrahamic religions is provided below.

(i) Salvation in Hinduism

Hinduism has no founder, no central authority, no permanent creed, and no fixed moral standards. Some Hindus worship a personified power of nature, while others worship idols of individual choice which are different in every region. They claim Hinduism is a Sanathan Dharma (eternal religion).

In Hinduism, salvation is related to the freedom of soul from the cycle of rebirth. In Sanskrit language salvation is termed as 'Moksha'. As per Hindu belief, when a person dies, his soul (Atma) enters a new body, depending upon his deeds, and this cycle of rebirth continues until it achieves freedom in the end.

Hindu book Baghavad Gita describes Hindu God Krishna as saying, human soul travels through 8.4 million physical bodies of different species and animals, before entering a human body. And after the death of this human body, it travels into many more human bodies before it could achieve moksha or nirvana (freedom).

Hindus say that to achieve salvation one need not become ascetic because it is not possible for everyone to denounce normal life and become ascetic. They claim the soul is always learning through its rebirths and advances itself towards the aim of moksha. They say, it is important that everyone works towards his moksha, and for this purpose, one should fulfill all his duties towards society and his family. All actions should be done as duties within the framework of the rules of the society while one devotes all his actions to his personal god.

The concept of salvation has changed throughout the history of Hinduism. This can broadly be divided into three distinct periods, (a) the early period, (b) the middle period and (c) modern period.

(a) The early period

The early period can be divided into the following 4 segments.

(1) Pre-Vedic period 3000-2000 BC

During pre-Vedic period, people used to worship trees, animals, gods, and goddesses. Most prominent among the gods was Shiva. There are no records available to establish that salvation of human beings was clearly defined during this period.

(2) The Vedic period 2000-600 BC

During Vedic period some scriptures were written which are known as Vedas. The religion during this period was mostly nature worship. They prayed powers of natures like sun, moon, sky, wind, rain, dawn, earth, air, and fire. Some deities, like Indira were famous during this time. To attain salvation during this period, people were asked to offer worship of various gods, sacrifice animals to the idols of these gods and hymns were recited to appease these idol gods.

(3) The Brahmanic period 600-250 BC

During Brahmanic period, the priests became more important than gods. Details in this context are available in a work titled, 'Brahmanas' which was written during this time. Many sacrifices were introduced which were performed by Brahman priests. A total of 609 types of animals were to be sacrificed in a prescribed succession by the followers of these priests.

(4) The devotional period 250 BC – 250 CE

The devotional period is known as 'Upanishad' period in which many books were written. During this time, Vedic gods, and the rituals of sacrifices of Barhamas were discarded and it was also claimed that four-fold caste system was the creation of Brahma (the new god). The books written during this time emphasized upon the knowledge of the reality of gods to be the main source of salvation. The transmigration of soul into various bodies was also introduced during this time. The major source of salvation during this time was worship of Manu (a new god). During this time, Bhagavad Gita became very popular which affirms the caste system and

emphasizes that salvation can be achieved by worshipping the personal deity of every individual.

(5) The middle period, 250-1700 CE

The salvation theories during this period can be derived from Hindu literature 'Puranas', and various philosophical schools of different sects within Hinduism. The Puranas consists of two stories (a) Mahabharata and (ii) Ramayana. During this time, the salvation was related to the devotion to any of the thousands of gods, rivers, or mountains. For this purpose, people visited temples, sacred places in the mountains and rivers and performed worship. The idols of gods were in all formats of human and animal representations which were distinctively male and females.

Many philosophical schools were also developed to counter the attacks of Jains and Buddhists. These include, (a) Nyaya school, (b) Vaisheshika school, (c) Samkhya school, (d) Yoga school. (e) Mimamsa school, and (f) Vedanta school. Among these, Yoga school is very popular in India.

In Hinduism, remission of sins through repentance is not mandatory rather they believe that salvation can be achieved through certain ceremonies, like performance of worship of certain gods, bathing in certain rivers, recitation of certain mantras, etc. They claim the power of Shiva is reflected in female gods like Parvathi, Kali, and Durga. They also worship Shivaling (penis of god Shiva). Some Hindus say Vishnu is an important god and loving devotion to Vishnu is the best means of salvation. Some Hindus claim that devotion to Rama (a Hindu god) who is claimed to be the incarnation of Vishnu, is a major source of salvation.

(6) Modern times, 1700 - Present

Many Hindu reformers in the recent past were influenced by Christianity and tried to reform Hinduism accordingly. Important among them are as follows.

(a) Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833)

Ram Mohan Roy rejected idol worship. He propagated that salvation can be achieved through a spiritual way rather than by idol worship.

(b) Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884)

Keshab Chandra Sen joined the doctrines of different religions and claimed that salvation can be achieved through faith, yoga, bhakti, and asceticism.

(c) Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1834-1886)

Ramakrishna Paramahansa was a devotee of Hindu female god Kali. He claimed all religions are basically good and introduced meditation of Samadhi. He is the founder of Ramakrishna order in Hinduism.

(d) Swamy Vivekananda (1862-1902)

Swamy Vivekananda was the disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. He claimed no one is a sinner in the world and to call anyone a sinner is a sin. He emphasized the identification of individual soul with Brahma, the universal soul of Hindu god Brahma.

The New Age thinking in US is drawn from this school. New Age beliefs include, transmigration of human soul, reincarnation, astrology, psychics spiritual energy in mountains, trees, and other objects, etc.

(ii) Salvation in Buddhism

Like Hindus, Buddhists also believe in the cycle of rebirth of human beings. The aim of salvation in both Hinduism and Buddhism is the same, to escape the cycle of rebirth, but they differ in its meaning and action in achieving it. In Hinduism, Brahmins are considered a super cast who only have access to gods through rituals and are the intermediary for human salvation. Buddhism discarded the Hindu caste system and claimed that whoever understands the teaching of Buddha can achieve salvation. Once an individual has become enlightened, he will achieve the state of nirvana (freedom). In Buddhism, nirvana is freedom from the suffering

from the continuous cycle of rebirth which is known as Samsara.

All Buddhists subscribe to Buddha's doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. However, Theravada Buddhism believe that each person is responsible for their own enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhism was developed in 100 C.E. Mahayana means the big vehicle that transports conscious beings (bodhisattvas) off the Samsaric cycle towards enlightenment and nirvana. Bodhisattvas are selfless enlightened beings who delay their own final nirvana (parinirvana) until every conscious being reaches enlightenment. Mahayana considers the Buddha to be nearly divine in nature, a superhuman who is worshiped by them. Theravada considers the Buddha an exemplar, the great teacher.

Followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism do not believe in salvation the way it is understood in other religions, as they do not believe in Paradise and Hell. They believe in reincarnation after death. As per this belief, one's actions (karma) allow a person to reborn at a higher or lower level. Birth and death are not predestined, rather they are the consequence of actions (karma). However, one is able to break from the cycle of rebirth and attain the highest spiritual state called Moksha or Mukti in Hinduism. For Hindus, it is not a state of happiness, rather it is merging with the collective existence (Brahman). In Buddhism it is seen as an end to suffering, the cycle of rebirth and ignorance and attainment of happiness, freedom, and moral perfection.

Islamic concept of salvation

Muslims concept of Tawheed (oneness of God) remains unchanged from Adam (عليه السلام), the father of humanity till today.

Quran says – [Say (O Prophet ﷺ), 'We believe in Allah and in what was sent down to us and what was sent down to Ibrahim (Abraham), Ismail (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), Ya'qub (Jacob), and the Tribes, and what was given to Musa (Moses), Isa (Jesus), and all the prophets (عليهم السلام) by their

Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we devote ourselves to Him.

The Quran testifies that revelations were given to all prophets who are believed to be 1,24,000, from Adam (عليه السلام) to Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم).

It is in Hadith - Abu Umamah al-Bahili narrated that Abu Dharr (رضي الله تعالى عنه) asked the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) how many Prophets were there? The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) replied 'One hundred twenty-four thousand, from which three hundred fifteen were Apostles. (Musnad Ahmed).

Out of 1,24,000 prophets and Apostles, 26 have been mentioned in the Quran. The Quran says – 'And certainly We sent Apostles before you (O' Prophet ﷺ), there are some of them that We have mentioned to you and there are others whom We have not mentioned to you] (Ghafir - 78).

The Quran testifies that the basic beliefs of Islam remained unchanged from the first human being Adam (عليه السلام) till today and it is the only book in the world which has remained unchanged and unaltered ever since it was revealed 1500 years ago.

The Quran says, 'Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west; rather righteousness is belief in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and to give wealth, however cherished, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, to those who ask, and for freeing slaves; It is to establish prayer and give Zakat; to honor the promise when it is made; and to be patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the mindful'. (2-177).

Muslims believe that Allah is Most Compassionate and Most Merciful, and every Chapter of the Quran starts with this statement. As per Muslims belief, salvation is not just balancing good and bad deeds, it is doing good deeds and praying Allah for His mercy for their salvation.

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, 'do good deeds sincerely and be happy for no one's good deeds can put him in Paradise. The companions asked, 'not even you. O Prophet (ﷺ)'. He replied, 'not even me unless Allah bestows His mercy on me'. (Bukhari).

Conclusion

When we analyze the soteriological theories of different religions, we come to conclusion that Islam is the only religion which dates back to the first human being on the Planet earth, and it is the only religion whose faith and scripture has remained unchanged throughout the history of humanity. Therefore, it looks more logical to believe that the soteriological explanation of Islam is more logically convincing than any soteriological theories of other religions.

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Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.