

# Salvation

Salvation: A Christian View

Dr. Terence Nichols

Salvation in Christianity means being saved from sin and damnation. In other words, salvation means eternal life with God and Jesus Christ with the company of the saints in heaven. Loss of salvation means ending up in hell, cut off from God and from others as well. Hell is often pictured as a place of fire and demons. But it is not necessarily a place, certainly not a place on earth, so much as it is a state—a state of isolation from God and from others. Even though there might be other people on hell, there is no love in hell, and hence everyone in hell is loveless. At first this might seem paradoxical: after all, God is present in hell as much as God is present anywhere; God is omnipresent. But even though God is present in hell, those in hell are not present to God; they have voluntarily cut themselves off from God and others. They are in hell by their own choice, then, not because God got angry at them and flung them into hell. Indeed, God continues to love them even in hell, but they are closed to God's love.

Heaven, by contrast, is not a place in our universe (which could be discovered by astronauts), so much as it is a state of the fullness of God's love. Heaven is also a state of perfect joy, in which all our desires will be fulfilled. This means of course that we have to change; some desires are incompatible with heaven. If I desire to be number one, that is incompatible with heaven; only God is number one. To the extent that I am selfish, I will not fit in heaven, because the more selfish I am, the more I will be cut off from God and others in love, and hence will not be present in heaven.

Salvation, then, for Christians, is being in heaven with God, Jesus Christ, and the communion of the blessed.

It is disputed in Christianity to what extent salvation is the result of God's unearned gift of grace, and to what extent it is a result of free choice. Some Christian groups, notably John Calvin and his followers, held that the people were predestined to heaven (or hell) and that they had no free choice in the matter. Martin Luther also held that salvation is entirely a matter of God's saving gift of grace, through Jesus Christ, and that we contribute nothing to our salvation. But this has not been the mainstream Christian position. Roman Catholics, and most mainline Protestants today, and probably most evangelicals and Pentecostals, would hold that salvation is a result both of God's gift of grace, through Jesus Christ, and our assent to that grace, or our cooperation with it—for we can, after all, refuse grace. That is precisely what the people in hell have done, refused the gift of God's grace. So most Christian groups would hold that we are saved both through God's free gift of grace, given through Jesus Christ, and our own free choice, in assenting to and cooperating with God's grace.

All Christians also hold that faith in God, and in the saving work of Jesus Christ, is essential to salvation. Faith here means belief—we must believe in God after all, to be open to God's grace—but faith also means trust in God (and in Christ). And, in the New Testament, it also means living out one's faith, what Paul calls the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26). So 'faith' means belief, trust, but also obedience, or in Muslim terms, submission (*islam*), to the will of God. Now faith is paradoxical; it is both something we do, it is a human act, but it is also a gift of God and the Holy Spirit. Paul makes this clear in I Corinthians chapter 13, faith, like hope and love, is one of the three supreme gifts of the Holy Spirit. So faith is both a gift of God, a grace, and something we do, a human act. Thus Paul writes: "For by grace you have been saved through faith..." (Ephesians 2:8). In this respect, faith is like love (Greek: *agape*), which also is a gift of God and something we ourselves do.

It is debated in Christianity how much good works, such as works of charity, contribute to our salvation. Lutherans, and most Protestants, hold that works contribute nothing to salvation; salvation is a matter of faith alone. Some passages in scripture seem to support this, especially some of Paul's writings: "...we ... know that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 3:16). But Paul also writes "For he will render to every man according to his works..." (Roman 2:6), and "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body." (2 Corinthians 5:10). Similarly, Jesus is reported to have said: "Not every one who says to me 'lord, Lord' shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21). Finally, in the Book of Revelation (and elsewhere) we read: "And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done..." (Revelation 20:12).

Catholics and some Protestants hold that faith is primary in salvation, but that God also rewards good works, so that salvation comes to us both as a gift of grace and as a reward for good works. Thus, according to the Catholic position, if one serves the poor (with the right intentions, of course—out of love, not out of an expectation of reward), God does not forget about those works, but honors them in considering one's salvation.

What is the relation of salvation to love? In the first place, we have to consider what is meant by 'love.' The word in English has a wide range of meaning, from desiring something (I love ice cream) to selfless sacrifice (I love my children and would give my life for them). The New Testament word for God's love is *agape*, which means a love that is selfless and self-sacrificing, like God's love for us. It is this love to which Christians are called. There is a great deal said about love both by Jesus and by Paul. Jesus sums up the whole law (the law of Moses) as love of God and love of neighbor: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-39). Similarly, Jesus calls us to love not only our friends, but even our enemies: "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you..." (Matthew 5: 44). Paul likewise writes: "... if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (I Cor. 13:2). Also Paul writes: "...the only thing that counts is faith

working through love” (Galatians 5:6). Paul lists love as the first of the gifts of the Spirit (I Cor. 13:13), and the first of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). In the first letter of John we read: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God.” Finally, in a passage which directly addresses who will be saved, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25: 31-46). There he says that those who will be saved will be those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome stranger, and visit those in prison. In other words, those who do the deeds of love are those who will be saved.

Thus, salvation comes as a gift of grace, in response to our faith, but also in response to love (*agape*) both of God and of others.

### Salvation of Non-Christians

Paul thinks that Christians are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, not just faith in God. But this would seem to mean that only Christians can be saved. Many texts in the New Testament would support this position. For example, in Acts 4:12 Peter says: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Also, Jesus says in John’s gospel “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14: 6). Yet there are other New Testament passages which are more inclusive. In Acts 10: 34-35 Peter says: “Truly I perceive that God show no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Also I Timothy 1:3 reads: “... God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” Thus we can find texts in the New Testament which are exclusive—indicating that only Christians are saved-- and texts which are inclusive, indicating that other besides Christians can be saved. Not surprisingly, this has led to a division of opinion in the Christian churches. Many think that only Christians can be saved, others think that non-Christians can be saved. Generally, Catholics and mainline Protestants believe that non-Christians can be saved, while more traditionalist and Fundamentalist Protestants believe that only Christians can be saved. Here is what Vatican Council II (the most recent Catholic ecumenical council, 1962-65) says about the salvation of non-believers:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Not does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those, who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace. (Document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, # 16).

### Salvation: Sunni View

Dr. Adil Ozdemir

Can humans save themselves? Are individuals free? If God is all knowing and all powerful, are individuals responsible for their own fate? If we accept that God created

humans, does this mean that God creates the choices and actions of humans? If God interferes in human lives, how can we talk about individual and social morality and responsibility? One can ask many such questions, yet it is clear that these and similar questions revolve around an understanding of the relationship between God and humans. In order to understand salvation and righteousness in Islam, it is necessary to examine this relationship, as well as the place of love and justice, faith and actions, and natural laws and their interruption by miracles and intercessions.

The role of individuals in determining their own destiny is at the heart of Islamic theology, law and ethics. The Qur'an is clear that God exists and acts as the creator, sustainer, guide, helper and judge. Yet, the Qur'an is also clear that God wills to create a moral individual as the foundation for a moral society and a moral world. If we grant that God is all powerful and all knowing, how can He share authority with the individual as His creature, who is limited in power and knowledge? Can two authorities who are equally free and independent coexist? If humans are free and responsible, how can we talk of God as the savior of humans? How can God be God, who is free and has power over all things, including the choices of humanity? If humans are not free, how can they be morally responsible for their decisions?

In a moral society that teaches and expects individuals to take full responsibility for their actions, it is a philosophical problem of consistency to also claim a savior, substitute, or intercessor for personal salvation and wellbeing. Similarly, it is a logical question to claim full responsibility for individuals yet also recognize that humans are creatures limited in capacity, bound by time and space, and interdependent. As in other religious traditions and philosophical schools, the Qur'an has revealed answers to these existential human questions, although Muslim schools of thought have differed in their interpretation of the Qur'anic revelation.

Liberal, rational theologians have traditionally emphasized human freedom and tended to see human responsibility as required for a moral individual and society. Known as *al-Qadarayts* and *al-Mutazilites*, these theologians stressed God's unity (*tawheed*) and the inseparability of God's attributes from His person. They claimed that even the Qur'an, as the manifestation of God's knowledge, is created in time, and that man can produce works similar to the Qur'an (*khalkul al-Qur'an*). They denied the miraculous nature of the Qur'an and claimed that any miracle is a breach of the laws of God in nature (*Sunnatullah*), which God promised to keep.

For the Mutazila, Muslims who violate the law cease to be believers. By sinning, they fall into a position between faith and unfaith, unable to enter paradise until they repent. This in-between position is known as the position between positions (*al-manzela baynal-manzalatayn*). The Mutazila also taught that because God promised reward for those who do good and punishment for evil sinners (*al-wa'd al-waeed*), it would be a violation of God's promise to reward sinners and punish those who do good. As a principle of justice and consistency, God is obliged to keep his promise.

To support their views, the Mutazilates cited a number of verses from the Qur'an, including, "Whomsoever wills let him believe, whomsoever wills let him disbelieve," and "Whoever does an atom weight of good will see the reward of it, whoever does an atom weight of evil will see punishment for it."

Opposing the Mutazilites' position was a group of theologians known as predestinarians (*jabreeds*). This group held that God, as the omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent creator, has predestined every individual. Therefore humans have no free will to choose their own good. Humans are likened to a leaf swung by the wind; unless God wills it, humans can do nothing to save themselves. This group also justified their stance by citing verses from the Qur'an, such as "God created you and what you do when you threw it was not you who threw but it was God who threw. God is the doer of what he wills," "Whomsoever God guides he will be guided, whomsoever God leads astray there will be none to guide him," and "You will not will until God wills."

Between these two opposing views, a number of theologians have defended a middle position. Led by Hasan al Basri, Al As'ari and Al Maturedee, these theologians shaped the mindset of the dominant majority of Muslims, known as the people of the way of the prophet and the community (*ahl al-sunnah wal jamaa'a*). This position, which is called the moderate position, holds that humans are responsible, answerable and accountable for their choices. They are and must therefore be free. Yet this position also maintains that God is free and sovereign as creator, sustainer, guide, helper and judge. To reconcile between a sovereign, free God and responsible, free human individuals, this position teaches that humans choose or acquire with the free will that God gives them, but God creates the actions. In other words, the responsibility of the choice goes to the human individual while the creation of the action belongs to God. God has the greater will and humans have the lesser will.

According to this intermediary position, humans are responsible and therefore subject to punishment for wrong actions and reward for good deeds. This is in keeping with the principle of justice that God commands in the Qur'an. Yet, with His greater will God may interfere with an individual's action and may prevent something from happening. God may or may not allow an action to happen. Therefore God has the right to interfere and intercede at will without violating the principle of justice or His law in nature.

The moderate group justified their position by formulating a theology that God's unity is not violated by the separation of God's attributes from His person. According to this group, it would be unjust to attribute necessity to God (who is free) by obliging Him to reward those who do good and punish those who sin. Such conditioning of God's action and sovereignty does not fit with a moral God who is free.

In their discussions with their opponents, the moderate group related the following story: Three brothers in the hereafter were conversing among themselves. The eldest was in heaven, the middle in hell, and the youngest in the middle. The youngest brother called out to God, "My God, why did you take my life so early and not allow me to live as long as my eldest brother, who is in a better place in heaven? If I had lived longer I would have

done good deeds and attained that higher place in heaven.” God answered, “Be satisfied with what you have. If I had let you live longer you would be like your middle brother who is in hell now. You would have been a bad person.” Listening to this conversation, the middle brother in hell calls out, “My God, why did you allow me to live longer than my younger brother? If I had died, I would not have been able to do the things that I did and would be in a better place, like my brother.”

The moderate group accepts the value of action alongside the inevitability of fate. They defend responsibility for actions, but not to the extent of the Mutazilites, who make actions the determining factor. Instead of obligating God, the moderates leave room for mercy and intercession for those who keep faith but fail to do the requirements of the law. The moderates read the same Qur’anic verses as the other groups, but with a broader perspective.

Salvation: Muslim View

Dr. Liyakat Takim

Salvation in the Islamic tradition is linked to holding correct belief and performing morally upright actions. Indeed, it is correct to state that the Qur’an does not support the idea of a salvific or redemptive figure who can redeem the sins of faithful Muslims and ensure them salvation. Rather, human beings are solely responsible for their salvation. For those who are saved the Qur’an promises them heaven where they will be amply rewarded with whatever they desire.

Salvation of other faith groups is a controversial topic among Muslim scholars. Given the pluralistic environment in which it was revealed, the Qur’an addressed topics such as freedom of conscience, rights of minorities, human rights, and religious pluralism, issues that a multi-faith community is bound to encounter and grapple with.

Muslim scholars have invoked Qur’anic verses to vindicate their positions. Verse 2:62 in the Qur’an provides salvation to, “whoso believes in God and the Last Day among the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabeans.” This inclusivist position promises salvation to the people of the book. However, it is apparently contradicted by verse 3:85, which states that, “whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him. In the next world he shall be amongst the losers.” The verse is often quoted by those who believe that it abrogated the promise of salvation offered to the people of the book (Christians and Jews) in verse 2:62.

Verse 3:85 provided a major impetus to those who saw salvation restricted to Islam. However, it is important to bear in mind that the verse that affords salvation to other monotheistic religions (2:62) is repeated almost verbatim in 5:69, which was apparently revealed after 3:85.

Besides salvation, the Qur’an also urges the respect for the beliefs of others. It states, “Had God willed, they would not have been not idolaters; and We have not appointed you

a watcher over them, neither are you their guardian. Abuse not those to whom they pray, apart from God, otherwise, they will abuse God in revenge without knowledge. So We have decked out fair to every community their deeds; then to their Lord they shall return, and He will tell them what they have been doing” (6:107-108).

Since guidance is the function of God, it is He alone who has the right to decide the “spiritual destiny” of human beings. The Qur’an categorically maintains that the ultimate fate human beings be left to God, the true judge of human conduct. Not even the Prophet has the right to judge the ultimate fate of human beings. As it states, “Upon you [O Prophet] is the deliverance [of the message], upon us is the reckoning [of the deeds] (13:40).” In another verse, the Qur’an states, “Had God willed, they would not have been idolaters. We have not appointed you as a watcher over them, neither are you their guardian (6:107).” As the Qur’an asks rhetorically, “Isn’t He (God) the best of judges” (95:8)? By elevating judgment to the divine realm, the Qur’an accommodates the space for coexistence on the human plane.

Coexistence in a pluralistic milieu is often militated by an exclusionary vision that denies salvific space to those who do not share that particular religious tradition. In an attempt to demonstrate the preponderance of their faith, some Muslim exegetes deemphasized the ecumenical and universal passages in the Qur’an that appeared to offer salvation to other monotheistic traditions. The commentators of the Qur’an sought to invalidate the claims of previous scriptures so as to circumscribe the ecumenical thrust of verses like 2:62 by resorting to various interpretive devices. For example, they appealed to the *naskh* (abrogation) principle. Other commentators limited the application of the verse by assigning the reason for its revelation to a specific group of people. The third approach has been to limit the verse to a strictly legalistic interpretation and the fourth has been to restrict the universality of verses 2:62 and 5:59 until the coming of Islam. Thereafter, some commentators of the Qur’an claimed that salvation was possible only to those who hold the faith of Islam.

A number of Muslim commentators have used verse 3:85 to argue for the finality and supersession of Islam over all other religions. The verse states that no religion other than Islam is acceptable to God. It has been interpreted in the previous and modern commentaries as abrogating 2:62 which, as noted, offers salvation to the people of the book.

It is plausible to maintain that in verse 3:85 the Qur’an is using the word *islam* in a generic sense, i.e. indicating the act of submitting to God rather than referring to the seventh-century institutionalized religion. This view becomes even more plausible when we examine the two verses preceding verse 3:85 both of which indicate that the generic rather than the historical understanding of *islam* is being used. Thus, verses 3:83 and 3:84 state, “Do you seek another religion apart from the religion of God while to Him submits (*aslama*), willingly or forcibly, whoever is in the heavens and on earth and to Him they shall be returned? Say, We believe in God and what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Isma’il, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes. We believe in what Moses, Jesus and [other] prophets have been given from their Lord, we do not differentiate between any of them, we submit to Him (*nahnu lahu muslimun*).” In both

verses, the word *islam* is used in the sense of submission to the one Lord rather than the religion brought by Muhammad.

Muslim exegetes, on the other hand, construed the same word (*islam*) in verse 3:85 as referring to the historical religion brought by Muhammad. Hence, after the coming of the Prophet, Islam is assumed to have nullified previous revelations. The universal discourse of the Qur'an that defined a believer as responding to two main beliefs: "belief in God and the last day" was undermined by this interpretation.

It is to be noted that, despite the distortions in earlier scriptures mentioned by the Qur'an, it confirms the validity of these revelations especially their central theme, namely "submission" based upon sincere profession of belief in one God. This theme of unity with rather than supersession of previous revelation is evident in the 26th chapter of the Qur'an where it recounts the stories of previous prophets. All the prophets are united in delivering the same message to their respective communities i.e., "attain God consciousness (*taqwa*) and obedience to the prophets." However, in the classical exegetical literature, this principle of God's message revealed through a series of prophets provided the theologians with the tool of abrogation with which they claimed that Islam was the culmination of divine revelation and that, because of it, the adherents of other monotheistic traditions could not be saved. Such an exclusivist theology could not foster a peaceful global human community based on the principles of peace, justice, and equity.

The foregoing suggests that the Qur'an seems to accord much room for the individual to negotiate his own spiritual space. Unfortunately, those interpreting Islam have been less tolerant when it has come to validating rival claims to the truth. There is a clear tension between the tolerance exhibited by the Qur'an and the interpretation of later exegetes who, in all probability, were responding to the polemical disputations in which they had to assert the supremacy of Islam over previous revelations. They adopted exclusivist theological and juridical positions imposing, in the process, their own interpretations on the Qur'an. At the same time, they restrict salvation to those who share their beliefs.

#### Points of Agreement:

Muslims and Christians agree that salvation means being saved in heaven, with God, the angels, and the company of the righteous. Muslims and Christians agree also as to the nature of hell--exclusion from the presence of God and the company of the righteous. Finally, both agree that salvation is awarded primarily for faith, that is, belief, trust, and submission to God's will.

#### Points of Disagreement:

There are several significant points of disagreement within each tradition. The first, is the amount of weight assigned to free will, versus God's grace and predestination. Some Christians, and some Muslims (probably a minority in each tradition) tend to minimize free



will and think of humans as predestined by God either to heaven or to hell. The majority, however, see salvation as a matter of God's grace and human free cooperation, so that both human freedom and God's grace are factors in salvation. Some within each tradition would hold both that humans choose their salvation freely AND that God predestines and foreknows the salvation of each person. Thomas Aquinas, for example, held this position in Christianity. Many Muslims may also hold this position.

A second point of disagreement is how much weight is assigned to faith--that is, belief, trust, and submission--in salvation, and how much weight to assign to good works. Generally, in Christianity, faith is seen as primary, with good works contributing to salvation (Roman Catholics, Anabaptists, some Holiness Churches), or not contributing to salvation (Lutherans, Calvinists, many evangelical and fundamentalist churches). Muslims, generally, seem to stress the importance of works in salvation more than Christians do. As Dr. Takim writes (above): "Salvation in the Islamic tradition is linked to holding correct belief and performing upright actions." The Qur'an generally seems to couple faith with good works, as if they go together (see "Faith and Works," Ozdemir article). For example, Qur'an, Surah 2:177 says: "They have true righteousness who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels and the Scripture and the prophets, who spend their substance ... on their own kinsfolk, and orphans, the impoverished, the wayfarer and those who beg, and on the ransoming of slaves."

A third point of disagreement, within both Christianity and Islam, is the role of intercession. All Christians believe in Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity. Some Christians (Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox) also pray to the Mary and the saints as intercessors. For example, part of the prayer of the Rosary is: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." Other Christians (Protestants) do not pray to the saints for intercession. Similarly, some Muslims believe that Muhammad will intercede for his community on the last day—note what Dr. Ozdemir writes in his article on the Muslim *Umma* (community): "In Muslim imagery of the resurrection day, the prophet Muhammad is depicted as imploring Allah until the last member of his community is forgiven and taken to the mercy of God and to paradise." Other Muslims, on the other hand, do not believe in intercession at all.

Points for Further Discussion:

All the points above are also points for further discussion. To what extent is free choice a factor in salvation, and if it is, does God also foreknow and predestine the salvation of people? How is this possible? And again, to what extent are both faith and works important in salvation? Again, to what extent is intercession a factor in salvation?

Finally, each religion has to consider the salvation of the other from its own perspective. For Christians, can non-Christians be saved, and if so, how? For Muslims, can non-Muslims be saved, and if so, how?