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## Many Salvations

“Salvation” is a word with many meanings. For example, you have probably noticed that it appears in the title of the newest film in the “Terminator” series: “Terminator: Salvation.” For many of us, “salvation” is a bit of mystery. What does it mean? And does it have any meaning outside of a strictly Christian context? In other words, what might it mean for us, as Unitarian Universalists.

In our reading this morning, Christopher Cokinos writes movingly of his dilemma when meeting with his parents. They are Christians who worry about the future of his soul, because apparently they believe that believing as they do is the only way to be “saved.” And the author works through this dilemma for himself by finding his afterlife in the knowledge that with every breath we take in millions of molecules of air that were also breathed by Leonardo da Vinci.

When I was in seminary – not so very long ago – I wanted to learn more about Christian theology. So I took a course in what Christian academics call “systematic theology,” at the Lutheran seminary in Berkeley. The professor, Ted Peters, is both a gifted teacher and a distinguished scholar. Nonetheless, as you might imagine, I raised lots of questions, and our arguments in class were frequent and intense.

Frankly, I was very surprised at the amount of time we spent in class discussing the concept of salvation. Looking back, it seems like half the course. That may be an exaggeration, but it was many weeks – that I know. And – we were required to write our final paper on salvation. At first, I was quite perplexed about the paper – how could I as a non-Christian write meaningfully about this very Christian concept? But the exercise was good for me. I put lots of thought and research into it; I looked at other religions and might be equivalent to salvation for them; and I grew in my thinking about what salvation might look like for Unitarian Universalists. I wrote about a theory of salvation for humans, and for the earth. And I was rewarded by the professor by being accused of being an “eco-imperialist.” At first, I was kind of bothered by this critique, but my colleagues in our environmental group on campus convinced me that this was a badge of honor.

The concept of salvation seems to come primarily from Western Christian sources. My theology Ted Peters, defines salvation as consisting in “Christ’s forgiveness of sins and the gift of a transformed and renewed life in the Kingdom of God.” And this Kingdom of God is a future paradise in which death is transcended. In Lutheran theology, as taught by Prof. Peters, this heavenly kingdom includes a form of bodily resurrection, although for some Christians a resurrection of the soul, or essence, of a person is envisioned. Salvation is also seen as “the reconciliation of sinful and estranged humanity with God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus as Christ.” The very use of the term “salvation,” necessarily raises the question -- “saved from what?” And this, of course, is where we encounter Christian concepts of sin. What Christians usually mean here, is “ontological sin,” or “original sin.” That is, the sin that we bear by the mere fact of being human, as opposed to sin that arises from our behavior. I’ll back to the question of sin in a bit.

One question that continues to interest me is – what might exist in other religions or philosophies that is equivalent to the Christian concept of salvation? Some commentators have attempted to broaden the concept by referring to salvation as “the ultimate destiny of the human person,” or by attempting to equate it with terms such as “fulfillment,” “liberation,” and “transformation.” But I decided to examine some other major belief systems to see whether they might contain concepts equivalent to “salvation.”

Judaism does not really include resurrection and an afterlife as major aspects of its theology. The closest equivalent in Judaism would be covenantal, and it would be based primarily on the community not the individual. That is, the closest equivalent for Jews would be fulfillment of YHWH’s promise to the Hebrew people that they will live again as a united people. And it would apply narrowly to the Hebrew people, to whom God made a unique covenant. And this form of salvation – if we can call it that – would be a matter of fulfillment of God’s promise that Jews will be blessed as a people in this life.

The Qur’an, on the other hand, contains very explicit pictures of an afterlife – of heaven and hell. Faithful Muslims will find their reward in paradise, which will be a place of comfort for the body and the soul – where *the* faithful will see the face of Allah – God. The unfaithful will reside in hell, which is described as a place of fire, torment, and depravity. Islam is seen as an all-embracing way of life that provides a way to salvation in the midst of this temporal life. But this salvation is not based on the idea of original sin—this is simply not a concept in Islam. Humans do not need to be cleansed of sin, and there is no concept of atonement, or redemption. Thus, neither Jesus (who is considered a Muslim prophet) nor Muhammad is seen as a personal savior.

The Hindu term for the ultimate fate of the human soul is *Moksha*, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that *Moksha* is equivalent to salvation. *Moksha* is the release from *samsara*, which is the cycle of birth – death – and rebirth, to which all creatures are subject. There are many heavens and hells, but they are all aspects of *samsara*, and the only way to escape the trappings of cosmic existence is liberation through *Moksha*. When *Moksha* occurs, the soul enters into *Brahman*, which is the “impersonal absolute.” *Brahman* is more a state of being (or non-being) than a place.

Although there are many schools of Buddhism, we can say generally that they all recognize the universality of *dukkha*, or suffering, and that *dukkha* is caused by attachment. Either individually or in community, practitioners seek enlightenment (*Bodhi*), which means release from attachment, or craving, and thus release from suffering. This cessation of suffering and desire is called *Nirvana*, which is a state of liberation from this duality between the human ego and the world, caused by our constant state of desire. Or, we could say that it describes a state of oneness, or unity, with the world and with all beings.

Humanism, a school of thought prevalent in Unitarian Universalist circles beginning in the early 20 Century, affirms the supreme worth of the human life. It sees human nature as an end in itself, not a means to any other goal. Humanism is committed to “human inquiry” as a way to understand human experience, and it is basically scientific and anti-supernaturalist in its outlook. Humanism stresses culture, and the growth and development of the individual. The end of humanist religion would be “the complete realization of the human personality.” And yet, although there may not

be a supernatural power, a heaven, a hell, or salvation, humanists do find sacredness in the growth and development of the human soul. Writing of the great Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century humanist minister wrote: “His ground of confidence in the dignity of humanity was in his conviction that human life had in it the marks of divinity.”

From this analysis, we can see that coming up with a unified concept of salvation is impossible. Jews believe in a very limited covenantal fulfillment for God’s chosen people. Muslims believe in an afterlife in heaven or hell, but without any intervening force for salvation in this life. Hinduism looks primarily to release from the cycle of birth and rebirth, and Buddhism seeks a state of enlightenment characterized by non-attachment. And humanism sees its fulfillment in the realization of human potential. Christianity, on the other hand, sees salvation as the forgiveness of humanity’s ontological sinfulness, and a renewed afterlife in a heavenly Kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, some commentators, in an admirable attempt to promote interfaith dialogue, assert that all religions ultimately meet in the same place, in something akin to salvation. There’s a great deal of appeal to this notion – it’s tempting to think that we are all really trying to get to the same place, and we just call it by different names. Are Buddhists really seeking some sort of connection with God? Are Humanists? Is it fair to say that Jews are seeking salvation and an afterlife instead of fulfillment of their covenant with Yahweh?

Or, does it make more sense to acknowledge that the various traditions are not all trying to do the same thing; that they are not all trying to solve the same problem? This leaves room for traditions to be equally successful in being what they intend to be. The Buddhist is not really seeking heaven and calling it Nirvana; the Buddhist is seeking Nirvana, a state wholly different from heaven. Christian salvation is a solution to the problem Christians pose – attaining forgiveness for their sinful state and finding reconciliation with God in an afterlife. But other traditions aren’t trying to solve the problem that Christians are trying to solve – they proceed on their own terms toward their own ends. And that’s why my title today is “Many salvations.”

Now my story with the children this morning spoke of various paths to the top of the same mountain, and that makes for a nice story. But this analysis of different outcomes, different fulfillments, for various traditions, suggests that we are actually climbing different mountains. But my reason for telling the story is to make a different point, which has to do with the notion of *exclusivity*. Each tradition tends to make the claim that it, and only it, has access to the true desired fulfillment. Most notably, Christians tend to claim that the only way to salvation is to believe in the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the way to forgiveness of human sinfulness and attainment of a permanent afterlife. If we recognize the validity of each tradition – on its own terms – then we can all get to the top of our particular mountain. We might even be able to recognize that various aspects of another tradition’s philosophy or practice can be useful. For example, perhaps we don’t all have to become Buddhists, and accept the entire Buddhist cosmology, to see that meditation practice can be a valuable addition to our own spiritual life. Or we might recognize that Christian composers and musicians over the centuries have created beautiful and inspiring music out their particular religious longings.

Next time, I want to dig further into what might be a Unitarian Universalist equivalent of the Christian concept of salvation. And in doing so, I want to get to the discussion of ontological sin that I didn't get to today, because it's my belief that seeing our selves as sinful by nature is detrimental to our spiritual growth and development.

So, perhaps we can grow in our acceptance of the legitimacy of other religious traditions, by recognizing that we are not all trying to solve the same problem.

And perhaps we can acknowledge that although we may pursue different paths, we all are brothers and sisters, entitled to dignity, caring and respect.

And perhaps we can recognize that we are all seeking to grow and to develop our spiritual being, we are all seeking fulfillment, we are all seeking transformation, we are all seeking to connect with each other, and with all that is mysterious and sacred in this cosmos,

And perhaps we can recognize that what connects us is love.