

Salvation: Christian and Buddhist

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There are many types of religion in the world today. There are the elemental religions found among non-literate, tribal people which are elemental because they focus on nature and the immediate survival needs of people. They give spiritual support to people in harsh environments, based in group solidarity. As ethnic or tribal religions, they have no special founder. Tribal forms of religion do not offer salvation in another world nor a judgment on the universal moral quality of life in this world based on those beliefs.

In addition there are the founded religions, emerging at a more developed stage of culture. These are religions established through revelation or teaching given by an ancient sage. In the West, Christianity provides the major paradigm for religion based on revelation, while in Asia Buddhism is a leading model of religion based on the wisdom of an ancient sage gained through enlightenment.

The founded religions may also be called religions of salvation, because they establish standards of belief and morality which determine whether one faces retribution or punishment in a hell in the afterlife or life in a paradise without suffering. Some sacred texts describe the punishment of sinners in horribly graphic images. The pictures vary among the faiths, but the basic distinction remains.

In recent years there has been an attempt to mitigate the aspect of retribution in religion by focusing only on positive, uplifting views of life in the presence of God and with one's loved ones in the hereafter. We often hear it said that "he went to a better place." This means that the alternative of a blissful afterlife surpasses this life, and ignores the aspect of retribution. The idea of salvation in the founded religions requires that there be alternatives dependent on one's choices and mode of life.

The Christian view of salvation is based on the Bible. The story of Adam and Eve's disobedience of God's command not to eat a certain fruit in the Garden of Eden has been interpreted by Christians to indicate that all people, universally, are stained by Original Sin, evidenced by their continual, sinful rebellion against God throughout human history in every culture and society.

Salvation, therefore, in general Christian understanding requires a recompense, or repayment for that sin. Christian faith holds that such repayment has been provided by God through his Incarnation in Jesus Christ and his subsequent death on the cross. God sacrifices his Son Jesus as a universal means of salvation for all people. God pays the recompense for their deeply embedded sin, which they cannot do for themselves.

Through faith in Jesus and the ritual of baptism, the stain of Original Sin is removed, enabling a person to enter paradise after death. In Catholic Christianity there is purgatory where un-atoned sins which have been committed during life are purged through the prayers and religious services offered on behalf of the departed by loved ones still on earth. This compassionate view implies that few people actually end up in hell, since ultimately all sins will be atoned for. Protestant Christianity simply offers eternity in heaven or hell, depending on one's choice for Jesus in this life.

The Christian church became the intermediary between God and the faithful by assuring entry into paradise through the act of faith and participation in services such as baptism and communion where Christ's sacrifice is re-enacted or remembered. Confession of sin also

enables God's forgiveness. These practices aim at purifying the human spirit as the way of salvation.

Salvation in Buddhism follows a different paradigm or template because human evil is not viewed as sin against God or violation of his commands. Human evil is grounded in fundamental ignorance. It is not the simple ignorance of facts, but a blindness to our true nature as passion-ridden beings filled with hate, greed and the delusion of our own goodness. Such ignorance causes the violence and suffering we see in our world perpetrated by humans. We are in bondage to our egos and driven by unknown forces in our subconscious. In Buddhism karma functions as the predisposition to engage in actions whose roots lie beyond the boundaries of our consciousness.

Salvation is liberation from such bondage through the transformation of our consciousness and our awakening to our true nature, our Buddha nature. It is the awareness that we are more than we appear; that we all possess the potential to express compassion rather than turning to violence. Ego is not abolished, but its condition is made clear. As in psychiatry, by becoming aware of the hidden source of our actions in the subconscious, we gain power to choose more fruitful actions.

Buddhist practices such as meditation and worship provide the opportunity to become aware of our deeper self, our Buddha-nature, our root in eternity. There are many, diverse traditions and means to that end as a result of Buddhism's long history among the cultures of Asia.

In Japan, there are generally two fundamental approaches to salvation in Buddhism: the path of wisdom illustrated by the Zen-meditative tradition and the path of compassion or devotion in the Pure Land tradition. The Zen path traditionally has approached enlightenment, employing with strict, monastic discipline of life and thought. However, in recent times in the West particularly it has also become a practice for ordinary people apart from monastic requirements. A number of traditions of Buddhist meditation have become popular such as Zen, Tibetan Meditation, Mindfulness practice associated with the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, and Vipassana or Insight meditation. The use of meditation has also become established among Western Pure Land followers.

The Pure Land path emphasizes trust in Amida Buddha and his Vows of universal salvation. Behind this tradition we see Bodhisattva Dharmakara striving to create a world where enlightenment is possible for ordinary, foolish beings entangled in their blind passions. This is the Pure Land. He made forty-eight Vows designed to establish this ideal world and the means to be born there. Based on this tradition, various doctrines evolved that structure Pure Land faith and practice as justification for the teaching and practice. However, for the ordinary person the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha with simple faith brings birth in the Pure Land and eventual enlightenment. This practice is suitable to the life conditions of working people.

Though initially promoted by monastics, the popular and independent Pure Land sect and the True Pure Land sect developed in Japan with several sub-sects. The Pure Land sect claims Honen (1243-1212) as founder, while the True Sect of the Pure Land was established by Shinran (1273-1263), a disciple of Honen. The major differences between these sects is their understanding of the nature of faith and the meaning of practice.

Where Zen aims to realize what is beyond words, the Pure Land path requires words to communicate and arouse faith in the story of Dharmakara becoming Amida Buddha and the teachings that flow from that story. Therefore doctrine plays a greater role in development of this tradition. However, the ultimate goal of all paths in Buddhism is the same, to reach enlightenment and Buddhahood which is also Nirvana.

According to the Pure Land foundation story, the Bodhisattva was originally a king who became deeply aware of the sufferings of the people. Seeing that politics was too limited to resolve ultimate life problems, he renounced his throne and became a disciple of the Buddha of his time. Fulfilling his Vows to end suffering, he became Amida Buddha, residing in his Pure Land.

As Amida Buddha, he welcomes all people with faith into his land. The method for achieving/receiving entry into that realm was the recitation of Amida's name. In Honen's tradition, it is calling on Amida to please save each of us. In Shinran's tradition it is a grateful response to the salvation already assured through the fulfillment of Amida's Vows and the arising of trust in the Vow in the devotee. In the former, faith is a seeking expressed toward the Buddha, while in the latter, faith/trust is viewed as a gift, bestowed by the Buddha. In Jodo Shinshu, faith/trust arises spontaneously within one's consciousness with the recognition that Amida's Vow is the truth for one's life.

With respect to the afterlife, all beings have been embraced within the compassion of Amida's fulfilled Vows. Though they are saved, they do not know it and, therefore, see themselves subject to karmic destiny. But even with such a destiny, the retribution is not eternal and the person eventually is born into the Pure Land. Also for those in whom faith has been awakened, birth in the Pure Land is not entry to a life of eternal bliss apart from worldly suffering. Birth in the Pure Land means taking up the Bodhisattva's task of saving all beings. The Bodhisattva is reborn into the world not as the fulfillment of karma but as his compassionate commitment to the welfare of all beings. It is also imaged as becoming Buddha, whose compassion never ceases to lure and nurture beings on the path to enlightenment. The goal of Pure Land salvation is not only my individual salvation, but the salvation of all beings together and inseparably.

The foundation story of the Pure Land tradition, while not factual in our everyday sense, presents a spiritual paradigm or template as the basis for personal transformation and emancipation from the egoism that distorts our lives and relationships. The king who renounces his throne represents the realization that we can only fulfill ourselves by aiming at the fulfillment of others. This theme runs through the teaching from its founding story to the ultimate fulfillment in becoming Buddha. Buddha is that force which works within the world for good, serving the welfare of others. It places that ideal within a cosmic framework, encouraging and challenging us to realize that the myth is our myth, shaping our spiritual life. It becomes our Reality, nurturing all intimations for good over our petty concerns and limited, moralistic compassion. It broadens our understanding of ourselves and others for the welfare of all.

The individualism of modern society has abetted a selfishness that pursues benefits for oneself, while ignoring the needs of others. Hence, there is a demand for government services, but resistance to paying taxes that assure those benefits for all. The Pure Land story challenges us to reflect on and rise above our own petty selves.

Both Christianity and Buddhism aim at the transformation of our worldly life through the realization of ego-transcending values. As active religious faiths, they are often viewed as opposing each other. This need not necessarily be the case. Each perspective offers something from the world's wisdom, which, if seriously considered, can strengthen the religious commitment of each person. By transcending the polarization of religious views, the resources of all spiritual traditions become available to help resolve our urgent problems.