THE IDEA OF SALVATION IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD RELIGIONS

Tokunboh Adeyemo

In one form or another, nearly all the world's religions and ideologies promise their adherents some form of peace — some way of deliverance from the precarious plight humanity is in. Hinduism and Buddhism promise **nirvana**, a blessedness through extinction of individuality and desires. In African Traditional Religion, a worshipper believes that through divination and prescribed sacrifices he can be delivered from his enemies, real and potential, secure the help of his ancestors and the gods and be prosperous in life. Islam strongly advocates submission to Allah as the pathway to peace. And modern humanism looks forward to a society freed from all forms of violence — social, cultural, economic or political.

All these goals can be referred to as 'salvation'. Are they all equally valid? If so, how do all these ways of being saved fit alongside Jesus' words: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father, but by me'? Or Peter's declaration: 'There is no other name (besides Jesus Christ) under heaven given to men by which we must be saved'?

There is an important sense in which it can be said that the doctrine of salvation forms the theological watershed between Judeo-Christian faith and all other faiths and ideologies. Even within Christendom as Carl Braaten argued, 'the whole of theology is inherently developed from a soteriological point of view. Salvation is not one of the many topics, along with the doctrine of God, Christ, church, sacraments, eschatology, and the like. It is rather the perspective from which all these subjects are interpreted'.[1] Matters of life and death can be second to none to mortals. And that is what the doctrine of salvation is all about. Any inquiry into it, any investigation or exploration, any argument or debate demands seriousness and intensity.

Two approaches are open to us. We can consider the subject religion by religion such as: idea of Salvation in Hinduism, in Buddhism, in Islam and so on and so forth. Apart from the fact that space will not allow any adequate treatment of each system, salvation features cross and overlap

1. Carl E. Braaten, 'The Christian Doctrine of Salvation', Interpretation XXXV (1981), p.117.

DR. TOKUNBOH ADEYEMO *is the General Secretary of* THE ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS IN AFRICAN AND MADAGASCAR. *This is the first part of a two part series on salvation. It was originally given as a lecture at Scott Theological College in January, 1983.*

in the different systems. Therefore, we have opted for the classification approach,[2] which largely follows the flow of history of religion and its repeated pattern.

Salvation by Right Ritual

Going back to the genesis of recorded history of religion known to us, evidences point in the direction that man did not invent, evolve or discover religion. Rather, from the day of his creation he recognised the Creator-God and had fellowship and communion with Him. And when that fellowship and communion was broken as a result of his sin, man sought re-entry and acceptance by means of animal sacrifice.

Genesis 4:4-5 has been variously interpreted by theologians particularly in light of Hebrews 11:4. Taken in its immediate context, the message of Genesis 4 is clear. Abel's faith was authenticated by his obedience of offering animal sacrifice to God which corresponded to what God had done for Adam and Eve as recorded in Genesis 3:21.

After he and his family had been spared in the great universal flood, we read in Genesis 8:20-21 that Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasant aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done'. This practice of building an altar and sacrificing animals to God was neither unknown nor uncommon to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see Gen. 12:7,8; 13:4,18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1,3,7). The idea was so familiar that, as a lad, Isaac asked his father: 'Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' (Gen. 22:7). The ritual of animal sacrifice, either to seek God's pleasure as in the case of Abel; or to express gratitude for life preservation as in the case of Noah; or in obedience to direct command from God with consequent blessing as in Abraham's case, has served as a means of salvation.

From the original pattern laid down by God, copies were made by men. And as man drifted away from God, void of any direct communication from God, no prophets and no written scriptures, his religion fell from a lesser degree of degeneration to a greater one even as his mind became futile and his heart got darkened. The corollary to this was the foolishness of exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles (see Rom. 1:21-22). At the

2. The classification approach is used by Robert Brow in his contribution, 'Origins of Religion', in the Lion Handbook on *The World's Religions* (England: Lion Publishing House, 1982), p. 48.

time when the worship of Creator-God had degenerated to the worship of many man-made gods and as people lived in some form of settled conditions, priestcraft became a trade. Its essence is the rise of a group or groups of people who claim to control access to God or the gods and who suggest that the offering of sacrifices is a meritorious act which forces God or the gods to grant favours. Brow states the general conclusion of modern anthropologists in saying that:

> The tribes have a memory of a 'high god', a benign creator-father-god, who is no longer worshipped because he is not feared. Instead of offering sacrifice to him, they concern themselves with the pressing problems of how to appease the vicious spirits of the jungle. The threats of the medicine man are more strident than the still, small voice of the father-god.[3]

It can be said that this is where African Traditional Religion is and its idea of salvation as I have discussed elsewhere [4] is ritualistic and utilitarian. Dr. O. Imasogie has come to the same conclusion in his most recent book.[5]

If salvation by right ritual is accepted as the oldest idea of salvation it is only to be expected that ritualistic practice shall be the norm in Hinduism which is the oldest of the living religions. With no founder, no central authority, and no fixed creed, the 563 million Hindus[6] who live mainly in India adhere to **karma-marga** (the Way of Works) for salvation. This is a system of consistent obedience in carrying out ceremonies, sacrifices and pilgrimages to accumulate merit. The Brahmin priesthood in India became hereditary and by 700 B.C. it exercised great power. Brow writes: 'The Brahmins were in charge of all sacrificial duties for which they were paid fees by the people. They were now suggesting that by the right sacrifices, which they alone could offer, they could procure the favours of the god, various temperal blessings, and a good place in heaven. Gods, men, governments, all were under priestly control.'[7]

In passing it can be noted that whenever the priest assumes and exercises absolute control over people's conscience and destiny as in Hinduism of 700 B.C. or Roman Catholicism of the middle ages, religious revolt is what follows. So it was during the sixth-century B.C. seven world

3. ibid, p. 31
4. Tokunboh Adeyemo. *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979), pp. 37-39.
5. O. Imasogie. *African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1982), pp. 76ff.
6. See 'Hidden Peoples 1980' chart issued by Marc, a research arm of *World Vision International*.
7. Robert Brow, p. 38.

religions appeared within fifty years of each other and all have continued to this day. These are: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Vedanta Monism and Taoism.

Salvation by Doing What Makes One Happy [Humanist]

The priest became an intolerable burden to the people. Morality was divorced from religion. People were denied their right. Truth and justice disappeared all in the name of religion. And since it appeared that the gods were allies of the priests, people began to reject the god-idea as they rejected the priest. In India for example, some of the warrior caste became atheists [**charvakas**]. Having rejected God and the gods, some of this Kshatriya caste turned away from Hinduism and started looking to man for salvation. 'Since the only good that man knows is happiness', they reasoned, 'then the highest good (i.e. salvation) is to do what makes one truly happy'.

Two centuries later the Epicureans, disciples of a Greek philosopher, Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) gave the idea a philosophic stance by adding a little logic and an extensive system of physics. They argued:

> Since pain is evil, and since religion causes the greatest crimes and worst pains, especially the fear of divine punishment in a life after death, one's first principle must be that nothing ever comes from nothing by divine power. The universe is a collection of atoms and all phenomena are explained by their bumping each other.[8]

The Epicureans explained the world mechanically in order to prove that the gods have nothing to do with it. Salvation is the pursuit of pleasure which is sought through experience. 'More to an Epicurean's taste were good meals, dozing in the sun, while avoiding politics and family life'.[9] This doctrine of salvation became a seed for modern theology of existentialism and atheistic movements though with modifications. When Karl Marx, the father of Communism was asked what his objective in life was, he said: 'To dethrone God and destroy capitalism'.[10] Dr. Tai Solarin, a reknowned Nigerian educator and writer categorically denounces the existence of God and seeks salvation in man and hardwork. In his book, *A Message for Young Nigerians,* he says:

> God to people of my sort, is a soporific phantom, tossed round by people who have nothing to do, but proffering the belief in God

---

8. Gordon H. Clark, "Greek Ethics", *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics,* ed. Carl F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Canon Press, 1973), p. 277
9. ibid, Apostle Paul was confronted while at Athens by certain Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers (Acts 17:16ff).
10. William Steuart-McBirnie. *Karl Marx* (Glendale: Voice of Americanism, n.d.), p.3.

to tantalize the working hours of such other millions of people who, too, have nothing to do. I am a humanist. Man is the noblest of all living things. I live to serve him totally, particularly the human child, and die in his service.[11]

These two contemporary examples are cited to indicate that the idea of man seeking salvation from within himself is neither recent nor dead. In fact it is on the increase among our disillusioned intellectuals. Some call it 'political salvation', or 'scientific socialism' and the like.

Salvation by Losing all Desire

Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as Buddha upon founding Buddhism, was a prince of the second or warrior caste in India. Tradition has it that at the age of 29 he was shocked into seeking the meaning of life, the answer to the problem of sin and suffering, by the sight of a leper, an old man and a corpse. Initially a Hindu, he rejected priestcraft, the gods and sacrifices as a solution. He tried unsuccessfully the way of philosophical speculation before undertaking the path of extreme bodily asceticism. That also didn't work. At 35, while seated under the bo tree in meditation, he experienced enlightenment and thus became the Buddha, the enlightened one.

His intepretation of life and meaning was simple and down to earth. Owing to the law of **Karma,** or cause and effect, mankind is in bondage and through rebirth or reincarnation all human beings reap good or evil consequences of their actions. Through enlightenment and obedience to the right conditions it is possible to liberate man from karma and lead him to salvation, that is **nirvana.** Buddha promulgated the Four Noble Truths and the Noble eightfold path to freedom.

The Four Noble Truths

1. The first truth is the knowledge of suffering. It states that all individual existence is miserable and painful — birth, aging, illness, worry, pain, despair, distress.
2. The second truth is that the cause of all suffering and unhappiness is desire and ignorance — the desire to be, to have, to indulge oneself in lust and power etc.
3. The third truth is that suffering can be destroyed by suppressing desire. The central aim of Buddhism is to give eternal release from suffering. This means freedom from the endless cycle of rebirth and entering the blessed state of **nirvana.**
4. The fourth truth indicates the way to the third i.e. removal of suffering, and this is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path:

11. Tai Solarin. *A Message for Young Nigerians* (Ibadan: Macmillan Nigeria Pub. Ltd. 1981), p. 91.

The Eightfold Path

1. Right knowledge or understanding which refers to the Four Noble Truths.
2. Right attitude or intention — a mental attitude of goodwill, peaceableness, keeping away from sensual desire, hate and malice.
2. Right speech — wise, truthful and reconciliatory. No lying, useless chatter and gossip.
4. Right action — embracing all moral behaviour. No murder, stealing and adultery.
5. Right occupation — no exploitation.
6. Right effort or self-discipline. Evil impulses must be prevented and good ones fostered.
7. Right mindfulness or awareness or self-mastery, not giving in to the dictates of desire in thought, speech, action and emotion.
8. Right composure is achieved by intense concentration which frees the holy man from all that holds him back in his quest.

The Eightfold Path can be condensed into three: morality (right speech, action, occupation); spirituality (right effort, mindfulness, composure); and insight (right knowledge and attitude). No doctrine of a personal God is found. All that is wrong lies with man and man has the solution.

Monasticism, though distinct at different points, shares in this fundamental principle of attaining salvation by losing all desire.

Salvation by Right Actions [Moralism]

The main distinction between a humanist, who sees salvation in doing what brings happiness and a moralist, who conceives of salvation in right actions is that the moralist allows the possibility of the existence of God though he also doesn't seek salvation from God or gods.

The earliest religious expression of the idea of salvation by morality purely by personal effort was also in India. It was started by Vardhamana, a contemporary of Buddha (599-527 B.C.), who later became Mahavira (great hero) or Jain (the Victor) following his enlightenment. He was also from the second caste. Like Buddha, he also reacted against priestcraft, the sacrifices and even God. He rejected prayer and worship as unnecessary. His thought was that good is always rewarded and evil punished. Therefore, salvation could be attained not only by destroying evil but by doing good. His religion became known as Jainism.

He taught that no injury should be done to any animal life. This gave birth to vegetarianism. His goal of salvation is the highest heaven where the soul dwells in eternal and conscious individuality.

If the respect for animal life is omitted from Jainism, one will discover that Jainism is similar to what Zoroaster in Persia had preached before, and what

Confucius was preaching in China at the time of Mahavira in India (551-479 B.C.). The three were first and foremost preachers of ethics.

And down through the ages the world has known moralists or ethicists who believe that salvation is possible simply by doing what is right and good quite apart from any doctrine of God. In this class we can include Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), the Stoics of Greece, the high-principled Chinese, Roman and English 'gentlemen', the modern humanist and many liberal Jews.[12]

Salvation by Union with the Absolute

This idea originally emerged from Hinduism in an attempt partly to give philosophical stance to the ancient priestcraft and partly to arrest those systems which have broken away from it. The teaching advocates that there is only one ultimate substance or principle or Reality called **Brahma.** Union with that Reality is salvation. And this can be achieved through philosophical speculation and meditation known as **Yoga.** Yoga is a Sanskirt word for 'yoke' a union of oneself with Brahma, the ultimate Reality, to the point of oneness. Yoga is a mystic and ascetic discipline by which one seeks to achieve liberation (i.e. salvation) of the self and union with the supreme spirit or universal soul through intense concentration, deep meditation, and practices involving prescribed postures, controlled breathing, etc.[13]

In this religious system called Monism (which is Reformed Hinduism); gods, priests and sacrifices are not banished as in Buddhism. Rather, the sacrifices are spiritualised and God is given a new meaning. He is no longer a theistic Creator but a pantheistic absolute or what Tillich called 'the ground of all being'.

Monism has taken different forms in different places and at different times. In China, a Chinese teacher Lao-Tse, (604-517 B.C.), a contemporary of Confucius, taught and strongly advocated a return to the simplicity of nature, a quiet and personal search for the **Tao,** the eternal, impersonal, mystical supreme principle that lies behind the universe. Instead of a stress on meditation, it was more a seeking to be natural (in dress, food, ways of life), or at one with the course of nature. From this thought, Taoism, one of the three recognized official religions of pre-Communist China, evolved.

In our day many of the sects like Christian Science, Unity Church and cults like Hare Krishna, and Transcendental Meditation have their roots in Monism and share its idea of salvation.

Salvation by submission

The idea of salvation by submission can also be described as salvation by strict adherence to law, or salvation by faith and works. In this system which

12. Brow p. 44
13. Webster's *New World Dictionary,* Second College Edition, 'Yoga', p. 1649.

is found in theistic religions, salvation take the form of cooperation between God and man.

Judaism is the oldest form of salvation by keeping the law in sincerity. The commandments of the written law which have been expanded to 613 precepts of which 365 are negative, stipulate what to do to obtain blessings from God, and things to avoid curses. Practice of the law is more important than belief. Salvation in Judaism is primarily social and corporate, and includes every aspect of life. It pertains to material prosperity, justice and continued historical existence of the people of Israel more than anything else.

Islam, which means 'peace' shares a lot in common with Judaism, more than is often realised. A muslim is one who submits to the will of the one and only God called Allah. For salvation, which is interpreted largely in material terms, Islam demands **Iman,** that is belief in the articles of faith; and **Din,** which is the practice of religious duties or the five pillars of faith. When a muslim complies with this demand he can legitimately expect rewards from God.

Essentiality, the Roman Catholic theology of salvation fits into this category. While it is held that the atonement of Jesus Christ is efficient for salvation, it is not sufficient. Therefore, the faithful has to make penance, confession, seek absolution and purchase indulgences. This was the interpretation of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* formula, meaning that outside the Church there is no salvation. Even with new theological interpretation being given to this formular since Vatican II, the notion of salvation by cooperation still persists.

Salvation by Grace through Faith alone

As demonstrated above, the world to which Jesus Christ came was rich in religions, in philosophical ideas, in rules and regulations and in humanistic efforts to give meaning to existence. But Jesus did not come to offer a religion, an idea, a law or a formula about reality. Rather, by his coming, he put an end to rituals and religions. He fulfilled the law in himself. He unveiled the personal Creator-God. He offered life. By a life of sinless obedience, he manifested the highest degree of morality and ethics. By his acts of mercy and compassion, he demonstrated the love of God. His teaching about what is right, good and just has never been paralleled. He met the quest of philosophers concerning reality and truth. He lifted-up the poor; released the oppressed; healed the broken-hearted; set the captives free; fed the hungry; raised the dead; opened blind eyes; and proclaimed the good news of God's Kingdom. Above all, he suffered and died on the cross in the place of all sinners — not for any crime he had committed, but to pacify the wrath of God. He died so as to reconcile man to God! And he rose again so that justified man may be able to live by the power that raised Christ from the dead.

This is salvation in the New Testament. It is a restoration of that original relationship, fellowship and communion with the living personal Creator-Father God. It is holistic: body, mind, soul and spirit. It is both vertical and horizontal. The one who is reconciled with God is sent to his world, to his neighbour and to his community to live-out a righteous, holy and just life in the power of the Holy Spirit. All of this is by God's grace, totally unmerited, unearnable and undeserved. Christ has finished it, all that man does is to believe — and even faith is a gift from God. Salvation by grace is not man trying to reach God; but God reaching down and out to man. It is full and free.