

COMPARATIVE SOTERIOLOGY AND LOGICAL INCOMPATIBILITY

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INTRODUCTION

There is a tremendous amount of material that could have been included in this work on comparative soteriology; Nonetheless, I will attempt to encompass a variety of religious belief systems. I have selected Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity as world-wide representatives of different schools of thought.⁽¹⁾ When we think of religion,⁽²⁾ we normally conjure up images of rules and regulations. In fact, most religions are primarily centered on some principle or guideline to follow in order to sustain or create some type of welfare for the individual. For this reason religion ultimately represents the desired path of each person who holds to some type of religious system. This brings us to the concept of *soteriology*. The term *soteriology* refers to the method or system of how one ought to operate in order to maximize personal and/or corporate salvation. *Salvation* itself actually carries a variety of definitions; However, the most basic way of defining it is in terms of "deliverance" or "welfare."⁽³⁾ The question that immediately comes to mind is, "What exactly is one being 'delivered' or 'saved' from?" Indeed, every religion carries its own system and interpretation on such matters as these. Therefore, we shall examine and analyze each soteriological system according to the respective religion and determine if any or all religions can be simultaneously true.

JUDAISM

Judaism, like many religions, is a religion stemming from a long history of war and slavery. The most known aspects of Judaism are the dietary regulations, cultural practices, and political practices.⁽⁴⁾ In regard to belief, the most profound aspect of Judaism is its adherence to a monotheistic God.⁽⁵⁾ According to Judaism, God⁽⁶⁾ is an immaterial Being who transcends both space and time.⁽⁷⁾ In fact, this may be the reason why physical images of God (or any god) were forbidden.⁽⁸⁾

Historically, shortly after the creation of the universe, the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, walked the earth as perfect humans. God had told Adam not to eat of the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17). According to the Genesis narrative, Eve was tempted by a serpent (a manifestation of the Devil) to disobey God's command not to eat of that tree. Eventually, both consumed the fruit God told them not to eat. This brings in the concept of the *Fall*. The Fall is the introduction of sin⁽⁹⁾ into the human race through Adam and Eve. So the problem, or need, for salvation enters the picture. With the deprivation of perfection now existing in the human race, mankind's communion with God had been severed . . . permanently.⁽¹⁰⁾

Although God never ceased to communicate with mankind, He never allowed sin to go unpunished. This is seen in early social justice God instituted in regard to what we would now consider a capital crime (cf. Genesis 9:6). Indeed, the seriousness of sin in mankind required a holy priesthood for selected priests to

present animal and even incense sacrifices. Numbers 16:5 provides three elements which set someone apart as a priest. Merrill F. Unger states, "Holiness is essential to fellowship with God."⁽¹¹⁾ The priest had the difficult job of remaining as sinless as possible (although complete sinlessness was unattainable).⁽¹²⁾ The priest then acted as the intercessor between the Jews who sought repentance and YHWH who sought fellowship. Further, the Jews were required to obey all of God's commandments in order to remain as sinless as possible.

The underlying principle of atonement is found in Leviticus 17:11, "it is the blood [of animals] that maketh an atonement for the soul." Thus, the high priest went before God in what was called the Holy of Holies (where YHWH allegedly dwelled) in order to present an animal sacrifice.⁽¹³⁾ This sacrifice allowed for a remission of sins of those involved. Although no one could become perfect and join God in heaven, YHWH designed a decent dwelling place for devoted Jews in the afterlife.⁽¹⁴⁾ In regard to Reformed Judaism, such practices remain forever buried in the past. Reformers see the *Torah* as non-applicable today and do not represent the views of Orthodox Judaism, the view under analysis here. Orthodox Judaism today engages in very little sacrifice but continues to require obeisance of God's laws dictated in the *Torah*.

Finally, the racial aspect of Judaism comes into play. While one may become a Jew and obey the ordinances and restrictions therein, Jewish salvation ultimately favors one who is the descendant of Abraham, the first Patriarch in Jewish antiquity.⁽¹⁵⁾ According to the Book of Genesis, God promised to bless the descendants of Abraham. For this reason, Jews consider themselves to be favored among God with the hope of being saved from the post-mortem abode of the Gentiles (non-Jews).

ISLAM

Much like Judaism, Islam itself clings to a strict adherence to monotheism. While asserting the existence of the Old Testament prophets, the prophet of the Sixth and Seventh Century, Muhammad, stands out as God's (referred to in the Arabic as *Allah*) special spokesperson for the Qur'an.⁽¹⁶⁾ This prophet, like the prophets of antiquity, received divine revelation for God's people today. According to Muslim scholars Jane Smith and Y. Haddad, "So intense is the Qur'anic concern for and insistence on the day to come when all will be held accountable for their faith and their actions, that the ethical teachings contained in the Book must be understood in the light of this reality."⁽¹⁷⁾ Muhammad Abdul Quasem emphasizes that the Qur'an's "central theme" is eternal salvation and damnation.⁽¹⁸⁾

For Islam, there is no acknowledgment of "fallenness" or depravity. However, basic human weakness and forgetfulness are inherent in human nature. In the Islamic system, God only loves and forgives those who obey him. Basically, no conversion exists at all. Instead, one simply reflects and submits to the will of *Allah*.⁽¹⁹⁾ There are essentially three "reflections" or "means" to achieve Islamic salvation. First, one must acknowledge the oneness of God. Second, one must believe in the prophecy of Muhammad.⁽²⁰⁾ Third, one must believe in a life after death. This final acknowledgment is important since "its denial is considered as infidelity (*kufir*), which causes eternal damnation."⁽²¹⁾

In addition to the threefold mental acknowledgment, one must perform the five religious pillars of Islam:

- 1) Confession of faith
- 2) Prayer
- 3) Fasting
- 4) Almsgiving

5) Pilgrimage to Mecca

In regard to the pilgrimage (5), it is only required that the Muslim venture to Mecca once in a lifetime. Some Muslims have attempted to add a sixth pillar called *jihad*, an exertion in the cause of God or a holy war. But suffice it to say, Islamic salvation is centered around works in order to appear after death to "the bliss of the garden or the torment of fire."⁽²²⁾

Therefore, for the Muslim, one is to submit his mind and actions to God who works to achieve his own ends. For the Muslim everyone is fated to behave in a certain way and on a practical level freedom tends to not exist. Allah is in complete control and in order for one to participate in his predetermined plan he or she must pledge complete allegiance to him. Salvation is something future that will provide entrance into Islam's paradise granted that one, in his submission to Allah, follows the five religious pillars of Islam.

BUDDHISM

Since it is not possible to telescope all of Eastern thought into one religion, Buddhism provides some basic foundational beliefs linking some forms of Hinduism and other Eastern and Oriental thought. However, Buddhism essentially did rival Hindu thought. Its founder is unanimously considered to be Siddhartha Gautama (b. 563 B.C.). Some basic beliefs include ominous views of God. God is not seen as necessarily infinite or even alone, but God exists as some type of focal point of meditation. In essence, belief of who God is appears to be of the least importance. Really, one may hold to as many gods as one seems fit. For Gautama, subservience to any supreme God was futile.⁽²³⁾

Be that as it may, our main concern here is the Buddhist concept of salvation. Historically, Gautama began practicing a life of strict asceticism by abstaining from any type of worldly pleasures, including food (e.g. he had eaten only one grain of rice per day).⁽²⁴⁾ Gautama eventually decided that asceticism was of little value. J. Isamu Yamamoto explains the following sequence of events:

Self-torture was vain and fruitless; privation was no better than pleasure. He understood then the importance of what he called the Middle Way. Abandoning a life of extreme austerities, Siddhartha ate solid food. This act angered his fellow monks, who thought Siddhartha had weakened and succumbed to his physical needs . . . Siddhartha sat at the foot of a fig tree (commemorated as the Bodhi tree). There Mara, the evil one, tried to thwart Siddhartha from becoming the Buddha . . . Siddhartha withstood all the challenges and experienced the revelation of liberating awareness--the way that provides escape from the cruel causality of samsara (the cycle of rebirths). He discovered the Four Noble Truths, which became known as *Pavedhanana*, the wisdom of Realization. Siddhartha henceforth was the Buddha--the Enlightened One.⁽²⁵⁾

Following Gautama's conversion experience, he instructed his new followers at the Deer Park ("Isipatana," near the Ganges River in northeast India) to practice the *Dharma* and *Vinaya*.⁽²⁶⁾ Prior to his death, Gautama exhorted his disciples not to grieve and said, "Decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your own salvation with diligence."⁽²⁷⁾

Central to Buddhist thought is the quest to save yourself through moral and physical discipline. Further, one may encounter a type of conversion to this religion, or rather *in* this religion. Through the achievement of recognizing the purpose and source of suffering, one may make the steps necessary for deliverance from it. For the typical Buddhist, he or she saves himself with the hope of being enlightened so that the "self"⁽²⁸⁾ will break free from the cycle of rebirths (or *reincarnation*). Future salvation, called *nirvana*, is not attained in only one life. Instead, there is a need for a succession of lives in order to achieve salvation. Through the long and difficult task of the Four Noble Truths, one must be delivered from suffering while still living. Then and only then can one achieve nirvana.

Through following rules and principles, one can receive salvation by comprehending and obeying the Four Noble Truths as taught by Siddhartha Gautama. This long process requires the individual to save himself from the Buddhist concept of suffering in order to break the cycle of reincarnation. This system emphasizes the idea of personal salvation apart from any benevolent act of any Divine Being.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity, perhaps a religion we are all familiar with, carries in its name a possible inclusion of about several hundred schools of thought. While not relying on what merely claims to be Christian I will base Christianity's soteriology on what I consider mainline or orthodox Christianity.⁽²⁹⁾ In order to explain what Christianity teaches about salvation, I must exclude rival schools of thought that teach soteriological methods more comparable to the aforementioned religious systems. As a note, I will only be mentioning a couple of Christian-claiming faiths that are self-proclaiming non-mainline Christians. That is, these religions, although they claim to be Christian, agree that they are not an outgrowth of what is considered mainline or orthodox Christianity.

Mormonism is a recent western religion claiming to be the "restoration" of the historic Christian church. The original founder of the Mormon church, Joseph Smith, Jr., admits freely that Mormonism is radically different from mainline Christianity. In a vision Smith declared, "I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right . . . I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight."⁽³⁰⁾ Apparently for Smith, the existing Christianity was incorrect. This led Smith to the establishment of the new, "restored" Christianity that differed radically from mainline Christianity. Thus, Mormonism does not embrace the classic creeds of the historic Christian church.

The Jehovah's Witnesses of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society proclaim and take great delight in departing from mainline Christianity (which they call *Christendom*). For example, one of the Watchtower publications groups the Protestants and Catholics in with the non-Christian faith of Islam by declaring that the "Catholic kills Catholic, Protestant kills Protestant and Muslim kills Muslim. Do you think such a course is according to God's Word and really shows the spirit of God?"⁽³¹⁾ Further, Jehovah's Witnesses clearly deny the creeds of the mainline Christian church.⁽³²⁾ The same can be said for all of the non-mainline Christian churches that admit their departure from mainline Christianity.

Some basic beliefs about Christianity include such doctrines as the Trinity. The Trinity is the view that within the nature of the one God are the three Persons, metaphorically called the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The late Christian theologian Dr. Walter Martin states, "the trinity of God is far above the idea of mere agreement of will or goal; it is a unity of the basic Scriptural nature of substance, and Deity is that

substance (John 4:24; Hebrews 1:23).⁽³³⁾ Christians have held to the idea that the Jewish record of the Fall is accurate and demonstrates a real need for salvation outlined in the above section on Judaism. Central to Christianity is the unique view of the *messiah*. The messianic preconception of the savior in Judaism was that of a temporal-political figure. There was no concept of a dying and rising messiah. This made historic Christianity all the more questionable by the Scribes and Pharisees of the early first century. However, the Christian tradition recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited messianic hope. Jesus established a unique system of soteriology differing from the world religions then and now (more on this in a moment). Finally, Protestants and Catholics basically agree on these essentials of the Christian faith, the only main exception being the view of justification by faith. Catholics believe in a purification process that is required before entrance into heaven can be granted.⁽³⁴⁾ The Protestant view will be emphasized below. This has caused both Catholic and Protestant scholars to ride the coattails of the sanctification/justification debate. Peripheral views such as Purgatory, ritual worship, and mariology leave the creeds of mainline Christianity untouched. Ecumenically speaking, the concept of soteriology between the two Christian points of view remain in agreement.

Still one main difference in interpretation remains: *Arminianism* versus *Calvinism*. Arminianism (in regard to salvation) is the view that mankind retains enough good from the Fall in order to apply salvation to himself. Its founder, the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609 C.E.), developed this theory that was eventually shunned by the international church council of Dort in Holland in 1618-19. In essence, the decision to be a Christian rests solely on the person given the choice. God simply assists men in their endeavors. Calvinism (in regard to salvation) is the view that man is totally deprived of any good and cannot respond on his own to the gospel (the "good news" of the Christian faith). Rather, God predestined who will be saved prior to the creation of the world. God then *illumines* those elect to choose salvation.⁽³⁵⁾ Its parental influences, Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, influenced mainline Christianity and gave Arminius a reason to accept some inherent goodness in mankind.⁽³⁶⁾ Calvinism was named after its founder John Calvin (1509-1564 C.E.), the leader of the Protestant Reformation.⁽³⁷⁾ Both schools of thought do agree that salvation is credited to God who either assists or predestines. Also, both agree that Jesus is the only one who can save. With this, salvation may be seen in two respects, historical and future.

Past salvation. Christians are said to *have been* saved in the sense that the penalty for sin has been paid. The penalty is found in Jewish thought where a blood sacrifice is required for the remission of sin inherent in all men. Jesus Christ is said to have been the "sacrifice for sin forever."⁽³⁸⁾ His execution on the cross fulfilled this requirement. Therefore, Christians consider themselves free from sin by recognizing that the penalty has been paid by Jesus, God the Son and messiah.

Future salvation. Christians say that they *will be* saved from the perils of hell. That is, upon the death of the Christian, judgment will occur (Hebrews 9:27) and he or she will enjoy eternal bliss in heaven with God. As a result of the recognition of Jesus as the proper price for the penalty of sin, salvation will occur from hell in the future (see John 3:16; Romans 10:9).

In any event, salvation is something belonging solely to the supremacy of the triune Godhead. As a result of the problem of the Fall, a sacrifice was necessary for the abolishment of the penalty of sin resulting in both a historical and futuristic view of salvation. With the Christian viewpoint being the emphasis on God's grace (or mercy on mankind exemplified in the crucifixion of Christ), it sets itself apart from rival world religions. This has made Christianity the most practical choice for those who understand that moral perfection is beyond the human grasp. It is my hope that the reader will consider Christianity as the favored soteriological world view.

THE LOGICAL INCOMPATIBILITY OF RIVAL THEOLOGIES

Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism differ from Christianity substantially in the context of God's ontological status and soteriological system. But when Christians consider themselves in the tradition of Judaism or of the "seed of Abraham" (Galatians 3:29), they really mean that Jesus was and is the fulfillment of the foundational laws that governed the spiritual well-being of human beings. The conflict between Islam and Buddhism against the Christian world view exemplify the irreconcilable nature of each religion on the nature of God and salvation.

Having said all of this, a logical conclusion must be arrived at. In order to evaluate any particular faith, we must discover whether or not *every* religion must be critiqued. Knowing that this is a tedious task, philosophers have come to understand that logic thwarts such a need to make an individual trek through each professing religion. Consider the following statements:

- (1) There are many chairs in the living room.
- (2) There is only one chair in the living room.
- (3) The living room is one big chair.
- (4) There are no chairs in the living room.

Categorically, each statement is incompatible with the others. It is impossible for all of statements (1)-(4) to be true at the same time. So we are left with the conclusion that either one statement accurately describes a true state of affairs or none of the statements describe a true state of affairs. In this context, we can see how one religion may be excluded (or contradicted) by another religion. For example, Hinduism's sacred text, the *Upanishads*, seems to indicate that more than one God exists. Islam states that there is only one God (as does Christianity and Judaism). The New Age Movement and other sects of Hinduism affirm that everything is God (*pantheism*). In the same vein, *atheism* is the view that there is no god at all. But each declaration from each religion cannot all be true simultaneously. Of course someone may suggest "But Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all affirm monotheism." This is true, but when the ontological status of God is advanced by each respective religion then severe incompatibilities result.

Therefore, we are left with the conclusion that either one religion is accurate in its depiction of a real state of affairs or every religion is wrong in its depiction of a real state of affairs. Now this means that evidence must be advanced in support of a particular theological hypothesis. It is when we have good reason to believe in one particular religion do all the others fizzle out.

CONCLUSION

In each of the mentioned world-religions we saw each system of soteriology, the method of salvation. As seen in Judaism, salvation rests in the periodic sacrifice of unblemished animals to YHWH. Salvation for the Jew is constant. In Islam, we saw how salvation is strictly future. That is, when one submits his will to Allah, he or she through the five pillars will achieve salvation by going to paradise. In Buddhism, salvation exists as future for the "self" that exits the cycle of rebirths. By obeying its principles, one may be enlightened and eventually achieve nirvana. Further, we saw that mainline Christianity accepts the view that salvation is both past and future. In other words, the Christian-claimed messiah, Jesus, died on a cross to pay the penalty of sin. Also, the Christian will experience salvation in the future by being delivered from hell in order to be with the triune God. Finally, we saw how each religion is logically incompatible when it comes to paramount beliefs about God and salvation. When we understand that each religion is mutually incompatible then we can see that either all religions are false or only one is a correct view of the world.

END NOTES

1. Clarification of each religious system will be given for the purposes outlined in this paper.
2. *Religion* tends to be defined as any system of faith and worship.
3. The Hebrew term (*yeshuwah*) and the Greek term *swthria* (*soteria*) connote this meaning.
4. It is difficult to reduce Judaism to a mere religion. Indeed, Jews have been considered a race, a culture, and even a political power. I believe Judaism encompasses all of these things, but some critics maintain that it is strictly one of these choices (i.e. Reformed Judaism).
5. *Monotheism* is the belief in only one God.
6. God is sometimes referred to by the Hebrew tetragrammaton *YHWH*.
7. 1 Kings 8:27.
8. Exodus 20:4.
9. *Sin* has been defined as a transgression of the laws of God.
10. Cf. Genesis 3:17, 24.
11. Unger, p. 882.
12. Jews accepted the idea of "Original Sin" long before Christianity, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalms 51:5; *King James Version*).
13. The practice of ritual sacrifice is much more sophisticated and nuanced than what I am giving credit for. There were many different sacrifices representing different ideas. For more information, see Unger, pp. 942-52.
14. The abode of the Jewish dead was called *She'ol* which referred to some ephemeral underworld where they could await eventual deliverance into heaven upon the arrival of the messiah (see Genesis 37:35; Numbers 16:30; Isaiah 14:9 to name a few).
15. Cf. Genesis 12:1-4.
16. The Qur'an is a collection of spurious revelations allegedly given through the angel Gabriel. The book is assembled in *suras* (chapters) with the longest ones first.
17. Smith and Haddad, p.2.
18. Quasem, p.19.
19. See Suras 2:25; 4:57; 122; 173; 5:10; 13:29; 14:23; 18:107; 22:14, 23.

20. These first two requirements are called the *shahada* or "the confession of faith."
21. Quasem, p. 33.
22. Smith and Haddad, p. 81.
23. *Christian Research Journal* (Spring/Summer 1994), p. 15.
24. *ibid.*, p. 14.
25. *ibid.*
26. The doctrine of the Buddha and the disciplinary regulations concerning conduct, respectively.
27. Humphreys, p. 41.
28. The Buddhist denies the existence of a "soul" or an "immaterial entity" in mankind. Rather, he accepts the idea that there is a grouping of parts in mankind susceptible to rearrangement.
29. I am using *mainline* and *orthodox* in the sense that what is considered basic Christian theology is found in the creeds of the church and in the writings of the early Church Fathers.
30. Joseph Smith-History 1:18-19, *Pearl of Great Price*. Also see Robinson, pp. 31-35.
31. Watchtower, p. 189.
32. *ibid.*, pp 39-41, 58, 81-89; to cite a few.
33. Martin, p. 29.
34. Samples, pp. 41-42.
35. Palmer, pp. 9-67.
36. *ibid.*, pp. 58-60.
37. Ward, pp. 74-75.
38. Hebrews 10:18