



### **Religious Concepts: Salvation**

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A colleague of mine known for his insightful, and often, funny stories, many of them about his own inner life, described a sermon-writing experience at a recent ministers meeting. His sermon title had been *Good Enough*, a statement against the perceived need for perfection. I couldn't get it right, he told us. It was the worst sermon I'd ever written. I couldn't find an ending that satisfied me, so I wrote three endings and then I used them all. Finally, I ran out of time and just gave them what I had.

He had us all hanging on the story. Who hasn't been there? I imagined him taking the pulpit on Sunday morning, bruised and battered from his own discontent. He bore no physical marks, of course, but his ego was sore and his faith in himself was weak. His sermon, *Good Enough*, was far from, in his view, good enough for the standard to which he held himself. I see him speaking more quickly than usual in an attempt to get it over with. Oh, the pain. The ministers at the meeting could all empathize with him. Why, then, were we grinning and suppressing giggles? Was it sympathetic nerves or was it that perverse joy of discovering a shared vulnerability?

And after it was finally over, he continued, more people came to me during coffee than ever before. Everyone told me it was the best sermon I had ever given. We laughed out loud. We laughed in relief. What a happy ending. In that instant, both teller and listeners were healed, enlightened, forgiven, and saved from the hell of insufficient preparation or the limbo of self-imposed standards of perfection.

This morning I want to talk to you about salvation—about being saved. If this story seems a bit of a stretch from what you may have thought about salvation before, let me remind you that this is one in a series about traditional religious concepts and how they might be or have been interpreted in Unitarian Universalism.

Every religious concept has a beginning, as well as a history that changes it in its particular culture. That we might disagree with the culture is not reason enough to discard the concept without our consideration. So we study these religious ideas to

help us learn more about others, but also to learn about ourselves and to satisfy our own spiritual needs.

I went to several sources for text and inspiration. The newspaper article won as a reading because I supposed it would sound more familiar to you, more plausible; maybe even more acceptable than religious texts. There has been much written about this new proof of a link between healing and faith. And we are also seeing a number of stories about the changing trends toward a more spiritual life.

Here are some excerpts from an article that appeared in the *USA Weekend Magazine*. A new book, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium*, highlights 36 new trends that will shape our nation's spiritual life in the coming years. The five most important, according to the authors include these: 1) Doctors prescribe prayer. Studies increasingly show that spirituality generates good mental and physical health. . . . Ninety-nine percent [of doctors] believe that religious faith helps patients respond to their treatment. *Maybe it's nothing more than a spiritual placebo, who knows? But if it works?*

2) Church as health club, child-care center, therapist, and more. Religion's answer to Home Depot, churches now provide one-stop shopping for those seeking solutions to everyday problems. "Such churches may provide practical sermons on relationships as well as salvation" says one writer.

3) More women are in charge in churches. Women are bringing a less hierarchical, more nurturing approach to organized religion. In mainline Protestant churches, the proportion of female clergy is rapidly approaching that of men. . . .

4) People are finding faith through experiences, not institutions. According to a recent poll, 7 in 10 Americans believe you can be religious without belonging to a particular church. . . .The emphasis on experience also is seen in the growth of practices that provide a firsthand sense of the sacred, such as Buddhist meditations centers.

5) We are experiencing more hands-on social action. "Faith still leads to social action. Future social action will be hands-on and voluntary [and] will bring new partnerships between different faiths and traditions. (It seems that we are finally becoming mainstream.) Other trends suggested in the article include more values lessons—those formerly taught in church—are being taught in schools; TV and music increasingly using spiritual themes; and people connecting with like-minded believers by way of the computer.

What these articles and features tell me is that we are not alone in examining traditional concepts and traditional beliefs to try to make them more compatible with our secular lives. But the traditional sources for understanding religion are important as well. To trust the newspapers entirely would be missing the point.

My dictionary had two definitions for salvation—Ba secular one and a religious one. I think it's important to remember them in tandem for a clearer understanding.

On the secular side it reads: *The act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss or destruction.* And, from traditional religions: *Deliverance from the power and penalty of sin.* If you collate them you get this: *Protection from harm, and deliverance from harm's further consequences.*

And, finally, I turned to my favorite theologian of the concise and pithy variety, Frederick Buechner. He writes this of salvation: *It is an experience first and a doctrine second.* At the conclusion of his essay, he adds, *It is a process, not an event.* Those were the two statements I could agree with without re-interpretation. The middle part requires that we do a little massaging of our own concepts. So these are our working ideas: The secular world is once again coming closer to the religious world; and salvation includes protection, deliverance, experience and process.

Because most of us know of salvation from our varied experiences with Christianity, let's look at the context in which the idea was developed there. What was it that the early Christians thought they needed protection and deliverance from? What were the experiences and the processes that gave modern Christians the doctrine they accept today?

We must remember that early Christianity was a sect of Judaism, an outgrowth from that ancient faith. Jesus, the prophet, was a Jew. The Jews had already experienced hundreds of years of religious persecution. Their temples had been destroyed, their communities had been dispersed. They were outcasts from their holy center and dependent upon protection from kings and governments of a more gentle heart. In their experience, anyone who could offer them protection from harm, risk, loss or destruction, would stand high in their admiration. Even if that protection carried a time-condition clause, the afterlife rather than immediacy, it was more than they had had.

Later, those attracted to this group of Christian Jews would be slaves, or those otherwise alienated and disinherited from their place in life and society. Their lives were difficult and it would have been impossible to promise them protection and deliverance from their situation during their life times. But if there were something else, something later that might offer such a hope, is it too difficult to understand their acceptance of it?

Is the yearning for eternal happiness much different from the Buddhist idea that those who find enlightenment will eventually reach Nirvana and not have to return to this vale of tears; or from the Hindu idea of escaping the wheel of life and uniting with the One? All of these concepts were born of desperation and hope--from a very real sense of being threatened, and a very universal human dream that something better might be possible.

In every theological promise, every religious covenant, there is a payment, spoken or implied. You get this, if you do that. The theological covenant of salvation is no exception. To get protection and deliverance, said Christianity, to earn salvation,

one had only to do good, or to *try* to be good. I imagine it would have been spiritually satisfying to dream of a better life, and to strive to accept the harsh one that existed, in exchange for a future promise. Even in our protected lifestyles, we have experienced enough of the vicissitudes of life that we can understand and accept the partnership of desperation and hope.

The process, then, is what happened to the doctrine as the adherents, themselves, evolved religiously. Somewhere along the way, the emphasis came to be not on dreaming and hoping, but on the payment for the heavenly prize. Soon, striving to be good wasn't good enough; one must avoid the power and penalties of being bad—to avoid sin or pay the price. And with this came the astounding conclusion that we—mere mortals—do not have the strength to do it ourselves. We must turn to the gods for this—to the father god, to the son god and to the holy spirit. This is where we, as Unitarians and Universalists, began to part company. Both our Unitarian and our Universalist forebears believed that we did indeed have the strength to be good on our own, and could build our own character sufficiently to avoid evil and evil's consequences. God was a model, not a mediator, our ancestors taught. Education was our salvation said Unitarians. Love, was our salvation, said our Universalist cousins.

And out of the experiences of desperation and hope, they concluded that if we could *imagine* a better life—if we had a vision of a better life—we were capable of working toward it together, within the community of brothers and sisters of faith. God gave our forebears encouragement, but did not intervene or punish failure. Salvation was open to all regardless of religious belief, in the minds of both Unitarians and Universalists. Salvation came out of love for life and love for one another. We *could* have protection. We *could* experience deliverance. Now. In this world. It was up to us to make it happen.

In the early days of Unitarianism and Universalism ignorance, misunderstanding, apathy and laziness were the evils that salvation addressed. But what is it we need to be saved from today? What do we need to be protected from? Delivered from? What are our most basic fears? What are our dreams of a better way?

We, who do not live in desperation daily, who have relative security built into our benefits, who don't believe there will be another Great Depression, although these past three years have been rough, who can find a job, who can eat every day and have a roof over our heads every night; what have we to fear? As a group we live well—above the average at least. What could harm us? What must we guard against?

My candidate is this: we need to be protected from, we need to be delivered from, the danger of *ourselves, our excesses and our vaulted expectations.*

Like my colleague who told the story of his preaching dissatisfaction, most of us—no, I'll say all of us—have a tendency to abuse ourselves—to fail the test of *good enough* when it comes to judging ourselves. Our standards, which are high, are higher yet for our own accomplishments. And even when we know this, have worked on

this, have been previously saved from this very human danger, we catch ourselves succumbing to our own assessing natures, and we need to be rescued from judgmental selves.

Furthermore, if we manage to escape our own judgment, we, in our safe middle class or better worlds, find ourselves becoming complacent. We read the papers; we know that the world out there is far from perfect, not even good enough. But we didn't create the problems; we didn't support the injustices. Insularity is a very real danger in this world of fragmented communities and loyalties.

Additionally, in our stressful, technological societies, we can sicken ourselves unto death seeking the ultimate possibilities of success. Our culture has already named these dangers for us—calling them variably, the rat race, the golden handcuffs or *it's a jungle out there*. Where is our comfort? From whence cometh our safety? Our protection? Our salvation?

And, if these are, indeed, the dangers and fears of life as we know it, what does our faith have to offer us? Is salvation available within Unitarian Universalism?

I say yes. The very nature of our gathering, in fellowship and community, offers hope for each of us. In community we are saved from the dangers of complacency when we are wise enough to emerge our individual identities into community for a common cause. In fellowship, we lose the abusive edge of our self judgment, for our own foibles are seen in a comparative light. As seekers, as people of faith, we look for healing—for ourselves, our companions and for our worlds. Together we do see better ways for the world to be. We acknowledge that the chasm between vision and achievement is enormous, yet, knowing we are not alone, our resolve is strengthened. In a community where we, individually, are accepted for who we are and encouraged to be who we might become, we are part of a covenant of salvation that is optimistic in outlook, universal in acceptance, and flexible enough to change and grow even as we grow in potential.

Having said all that, having convinced myself, and possibly you, that a doctrine of salvation is possible in a Unitarian Universalist environment, I can now read the middle of Frederick Buechner's essay with more assurance than when I first encountered it. Buechner wrote: *Doing the work you're best at doing and like to do best, hearing great music, having great fun, seeing something very beautiful, weeping at somebody else's tragedy, all these experiences are related to the experience of salvation because in all of them two things happen: (1) you lose yourself, and (2) you find that you are more fully yourself than usual.* Buechner then goes on to examine the experience of love as a parallel to the salvation experience. *When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. (You are no longer insulated from life.) You give of yourself so that by all the rules of arithmetical logic there should be less of your self than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more.* (You are part of a religious community of healing and growth.)

*You feel that at last you really are yourself.* (You are safe from your own judgmental assassination.)

The conclusion I reach is that out of our Unitarian Universalist history and out of our shared dreams and visions, we do have what I would call a theology of implied salvation. Hear it in our own words:

*Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;* that's one arm of it. *The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;* that's the other arm. They suggest to me that the formulas for salvation have been laid and are being followed. We are not alone; we can imagine a better way; we can do almost anything together if we apply ourselves. Experience first, doctrine second. A process, not an event.

But still, in the classic sense, *you* must choose to be saved. Each of us must choose our salvation. We must choose to recognize whatever danger exists for us and, as a Unitarian Universalists, choose again to step outside ourselves and, in love, faith and companionship, seek the blessings that are our share of the covenant. Choose salvation. Choose Life. In the darkness of winter, choose to lean toward the light.