

SOTERIOLOGY IN ISLAM AND ITS APPLICATION TO CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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Introduction

Soteriology, the theology of salvation, has been throughout history a major component of the world's religions and philosophies, including Islam, which has its own concept of the subject. This paper examines the structure and nature of the Islamic theory of salvation and its implications for the propagation of the faith in today's non-Muslim states, especially Japan.

Typology of Soteriology

Religions that look to God as the basis for morality, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, tend to view salvation as a process of being redeemed from sin in the afterlife by divine grace. By contrast, in a tradition that places the most value on awareness, insight, and wisdom, such as Buddhism, salvation generally means liberation from "suffering" in this world through one's own effort.

There are, of course, some exceptions to these general tendencies: Islam acknowledges the concept of achieving freedom from delusion through conversion, as discussed in al-Ghazālī's (d.1111) *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl* (Deliverance from Error), while the Jodo sect of Buddhism (Pure Land Buddhism) offers the promise of deliverance from the "impure land" and hell by the grace of a humanized divinity called Amitabha Buddha.

It may also be worth noting that the religious concepts of "sin" and "suffering" are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There are some teachings that equate "sin" with "suffering" or define the former as a cause of the latter, and others that hold that "sin" brings "suffering" to the perpetrator in the form of a punishment. Where "sin" and "suffering" are regarded as the same, or even as correlative

to each other, "salvation from sin" may be considered simply as a variant of "liberation from suffering."

The Day of Judgment and the "Garden" as a Salvation from the "Fire"

The Islamic faith shares with Christianity and Judaism a belief in a single, almighty God, as well as the concept of the Day of Judgment. In Christianity and Judaism, however, the idea of punishment by God on the Day does not seem a major part of the doctrine. By contrast, Islam places great emphasis on the Day, as can be seen from the fact that it is the subject of one the Six Doctrines of Islam, discussed along with God, Angels, Scriptures, Prophets, and Predestination.

The opening chapter of the Qur'an, which is considered to represent the very essence of the scripture, addresses Allah as the "Master of the Day of Judgment." This all-seeing and almighty judge will notice every little sin committed, uncover the true motive behind every action performed, and never compromise in His decisions. Humans cannot evade this torture in their own right, which means that they need salvation.

The Arabic word for salvation is *najāh*, derived from the series of consonants *n-j-w*. The noun form of this word with a definite article, *al-najāh* (the salvation), refers specifically to a "salvation from the fire (hell)," as indicated by the contraposition of "salvation" and "the fire" in the following quotation from the Qur'an:

And, O my people! How is it that I call you to salvation
(*al-najāh*) and you call me to the fire? (40: 41)

The "salvation from the fire," meanwhile, means admission to the "garden," or heaven, as can be seen from the following verse, which precedes the one quoted above:

whether male or female, and he is a believer, these shall
enter the garden... (40:40)