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A Road Less Traveled:

Soteriology in Islam

Research Honors Essay

Brian Christopher Smith

1993

I. SOTERIOLOGY, BROADLY DESCRIBED.

Soteriology and Salvation

When constructing a general description for “soteriology,” one must be aware of the potential scope of the term. The word “soteriology” means “doctrine of salvation” or “way of salvation.” Generally understood, one can speak of “soteriologies” and imply that there is more than one way to understand salvation, more than one doctrine of salvation. It should be noted that all religious systems do not share a universal soteriology. If soteriology is not universally understood, how may one study it? A particular religious system may hold that its contentions are singularly veridical and that other understandings are false, while another religious system may have a different, less rigid understanding of salvation. One might take a single religious system’s understanding of salvation and test all other concepts of salvation against that “standardized” concept. But the elevation of one religious system’s understanding does not allow one to observe what is unique about other religious systems. The study of religions should assume that all religious systems can stand on their own. One must assume that everything is true.

When one begins to observe multiple religious systems it becomes evident that multiple understandings of “salvation” exist. The question persists: how does one study soteriology as a category in religion if there is no universally accepted interpretation? Another approach to soteriologies, then, involves broadly describing salvation so as to attempt to include the variety of possibilities. This broad, inclusive approach opens wide the door that allows for a responsible and genuine study of a particular people’s understanding of salvation. In such a way, the student of religions examines various religious beliefs in their own context rather than judging them by incongruent external standards. The advantage to the broad approach is understanding oranges in the terms of oranges—not in terms of apples or nectarines.

Even the broadest, most inclusive definition, however, is potentially incomplete or flawed in some way. The definition may not be universally applicable, or it may not be completely inclusive. It may contain elements that exist in one system but not in another. Perhaps the very

idea of “soteriology” is not a universally shared category. It is possible that not all religious systems even have a recognized concept of “salvation.” Only with caution may one study soteriology as a category in religious studies that has been observed cross-culturally, however uniquely expressed within particular contexts. Forward, then, with open eyes to observe the variety of possibilities for the concept of soteriology.

Soteriology is derived from the Greek word *soteria*. Its Greek root is intimately related to the word *soter*, which means savior. The students of religion employ “soteriology” more broadly, straying somewhat from a strict etymological connection to a savior figure. One might approach soteriology looking exclusively for a savior figure. In the interest of a broad, inclusive description of salvation, however, this overlooks the several soteriologies lacking the idea of a savior.

If a soteriology is a doctrine of salvation, what is salvation? Compared to soteriology, the etymology of “salvation” is less enwrapped with the concept of a savior figure, as the following definition indicates:

Salvation may be understood as the state of being safe from destructive forces, natural or supernatural, and as the act of deliverance from destruction, pain, loss, death, sin, curse, punishment, or suffering. The Latin *salus* and the French *salut*—“whole,” “healthy”—imply the notion of salvation as healing, a metaphor found in many religious traditions. The human predicament of sin, death, ignorance, and impurity is an “illness” from which salvation brings “healing.” This meaning also is evident in the German *Heil*—healing or salvation—and *heilig*—the holy or sacred, the source of salvation. Salvation implies such concepts as whole, healthy, strong, vigorous, enjoying well-being, or bliss (*Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions*, s.v. “salvation”).

At its simplest level, one can think of salvation as a change in condition. This change may be from a state of brokenness to a state of repair, sickness to health, imperfection to perfection. This change is necessarily an improvement from the present condition. Therefore, salvation, when it is a category in a particular religious system, is always desirable.

At least three distinct concepts of salvation are found among religious systems. One concept of salvation might be thought of as a rescue from the evils that threaten people. Those who think of salvation in this manner would regard temporal comfort or prosperity as a sign of salvation. Another concept of salvation may be an escape from a cycle of rebirth. This concept emphasizes a disruption of one’s continuous return to various temporal existences. This

disruption leads to a new, spiritual existence. A third concept of salvation, similar to the second concept, is life beyond death. After temporal death in linear time, salvation is realized in some kind of unearthly existence (Braunthal, 1-8). In summary, salvation might be found in this world. It might be a post-mortem condition involving a strictly spiritual existence, or the resurrection of physical bodies. Or, it might be a combination of both worldly and other-worldly consequences.

How is salvation achieved? Responses to this question vary from one religious system to another. In some cases, one earns the improved condition of salvation as a result of one's actions. In such a case one earns salvation through self-effort (for example, personal good deeds) or group-effort (for example, participation in a collective ritual). Often in soteriologies one finds that whatever a person or group does affects the realization or attainment of salvation. For example, a community might engage in rituals or ceremonies or follow a specified moral code. An individual might lead a life of asceticism or submit himself or herself to a divine power. Whatever the specific action(s), if performed, then one can expect to achieve salvation. In other cases, the gratuitous help of another, like a savior or intercessor, might be the source of salvation. In other cases, salvation is a matter of coupling actions with specific beliefs. In order to attain salvation, therefore, one might be required to accept certain propositions.

Indeed, salvation is a many faceted diamond in religious studies. The following description seems to shimmer a representative array of colors from the various facets of the diamond of "salvation":

Salvation may be this worldly or other-worldly; it may be individual or social; it may be attained once and for all, or it may be conceived as a process of growth; it may be dominantly an escape, salvation from something, sin, fear, danger, or it may be conceived of as something chiefly positive, saved to or for something; it may be conditioned or it may be absolute and eternal. Salvation may be won by self-effort, or by the aid of a savior. It may be attained through *works*, something that one does, asceticism, performance of ceremonies, moral effort, self-surrender; it may be won through *faith* in a savior, sometimes vicariously, or it may be won through some kind of saving *knowledge* . . . (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "salvation").

With this broad understanding of salvation, one can explore the degree to which soteriology exists or does not exist within a particular religious system.

Many students of Islam do not readily identify the idea of salvation with Islam. Because of the lack of overt associations between soteriologies and Islam, the adventure of looking for hidden associations becomes a walk along a “road less traveled.” It will be critical to walk unassumingly but to ask questions that may be inappropriate. The responses may be simple, or intricate and complicated. Perhaps some questions will have no answers. But if one does not travel this road, one sacrifices an appreciation for the beauty that might be seen. Beauty can be found in embracing something new and in realizing what one holds close already. Regardless of the final destination, regardless of the conclusions, the walk of a study of soteriologies in Islam will prove to be a healthy stretch away from arrogance and ignorance.

II. SOTERIOLOGY IN ISLAM

Introduction

“The Islamic vision of what [humanity] might be has been seen and interpreted variously: no one ideal has ever fully prevailed among the Muslims” (Hodgson, 71).

From the first it is crucial to note that students of Islam often find that, like the concept of “salvation,” Islam is not limited to one single interpretation. Many forms of Islam exist. Its expression is varied like the spectrum of light and sometimes, just as a color like teal may be arguably closer to green or to blue, the lines that demarcate the differences between various sects of Islam can be difficult to discern. Not all Muslims agree on all points. In fact, one Muslim may not believe another to be Muslim on account of the latter’s beliefs. One should scrutinize Islam and its multiple forms of expression with keen eyes—beginning with comparison of points of agreement and disagreement.

Fundamental Concepts

In order to observe the presence or absence of any soteriologies in Islam one must first explore the fundamental concepts of Islam found in most Muslim sects. It will be necessary to begin with the nature of God. Muslims understand God to be the One, the merciful and compassionate Creator and Judge, and therefore God’s connection to soteriology may be irreducible. One cannot speak of Islam without, secondly, looking at the role of Muhammad, the Prophet, since he was the liaison between God and humanity, though not necessarily an intercessory liaison. It also will be important to look at the relationship between God and humanity, and the nature of humanity in God’s world.

Unity of God

The first and most fundamental concept in Islam is the reality of the Oneness of God. Fierce is the Muslim’s devotion to the idea that there is no god but God. Muslims express this

monotheistic belief in reciting the statement called the *shahada*, the confession that there is only God and a critical step in becoming Muslim:

The first [*shahada*—witnessing to the divine Unity—is the fountainhead of all Islamic doctrine, as it is of all Muslim practice. ‘No divinity but God’ indicates that nothing is entirely real other than the Reality which is One and indivisible; for how could things come and go in time—like pictures flashed briefly upon a screen, here today and gone tomorrow—be considered ‘real’ in the full sense of the term? It follows that nothing which exists, whether for millennia or for a fraction of a second, does so except by participation in the One or, to use a different imagery, by the will of God, who ‘says unto a thing “Be!” and it is’ (Eaton, 52).

Muslims believe God to be the Creator of all that exists (Sura 36.82). Other Suras contain the affirmation that God is supreme over that creation: “To God belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth, and God encompasses everything” (Sura 4.125). Nothing is untouched by God’s influence, and that influence shapes and colors everything.

God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Anyone who seeks to take the Qur’an—the written revelations from God—seriously cannot deny the Islamic belief that not only is God the Creator of all that exists, but that God is loving. Practically every Sura of the Qur’an opens with “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” The frequency of this phrase shows that God’s mercy and compassion are foundational to Islam. Through this mercy and compassion one finds forgiveness. It is written in the Qur’an: “pray forgiveness of God; surely God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate Whosoever does evil, or wrongs himself, and then prays God’s forgiveness, he shall find God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate” (Sura 4.106, 110). It is with relative ease that one has access to God’s compassion and mercy in the forgiveness of God.

God as Judge

Another aspect of God’s nature is the role of Judge. Muslims believe that all people will come before God in order to be measured. The idea that people will be judged implies that “there must be . . . a moral reckoning where dire punishment awaits the disbelievers and the evildoers

while immense recompense will be bestowed on the righteous” (Rahman, 15). The Qur’an teaches that the time of this moral reckoning will be the Day of Judgment. At this time God examines one’s deeds and one’s beliefs. According to the Qur’an, there is nothing that can be hidden from God on the Day of Judgment: “On that day you shall be exposed, not one secret of yours shall be concealed” (Sura 69.18). Everything is laid before God because God is All-knowing and All-wise (Sura 4.111).

In the Islamic view God is the source of all things, and nothing is exempt from God’s volition. And because God’s will envelops all things, one’s fate is under the influence of God as well. Evidence of God’s role in human fate is found in the opening Sura of the Qur’an which says, “Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate, the Master of the Day of Doom” (Sura 1.2-4). Thus, in light of God’s role as the exclusive judge, Muslims know that their entrance to the Garden will fall under the scrutiny of God’s judgment. God as Judge is not feared by Muslims as a deity whose begrudging wrath obstructs forgiveness. There is a Muslim saying which clarifies the import of God’s forgiveness against God’s wrath:

God wrote a script a thousand years before the creation of the world. Then He put it on His Throne and exclaimed: “O community of Muhammad, look, My mercy precedes my wrath. I give you before you ask, and forgive you before you ask my forgiveness. Everyone of you who meets Me and says ‘There is no deity save God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God’—I shall lead him to Paradise” (Schimmel, 86).

It is true that Muslims believe that God is the Judge of all humankind. The significance of God’s role as Judge is secondary to God’s mercy and compassion.

Muhammad—the Prophet

The reason that one can know anything about God in the first place is because of God’s divine revelations. The primary channel for revelation was the Prophet Muhammad. The first part of the *shahada* affirms the belief in the Oneness of God; the second part states that Muhammad is a prophet of God. Over a period of years, the Prophet Muhammad received God’s final revelation, now known as the Qur’an. As scribe for the Qur’an and as the first charismatic leader

for the religio-political movement(s) that has become Islam, the person of Muhammad and his image among his followers are important to this study.

Muslims affirm the prophetic voices of all the prophets of Israel—even Jesus of Nazareth. Muhammad is a continuation of the line of prophets who preceded him, but God chose him to receive the revelation of the Qur'an. According to Muslim beliefs, there is nothing extraordinary about Muhammad or any of the other prophets, including Jesus. He is believed to be a man just the same as any other man.

As any other person would, Muhammad lived in a particular region in a particular era within a particular cultural context. He grew up surrounded by the polytheistic culture of Mecca on the Arabian peninsula where the belief in the Oneness of God was not yet common. After receiving God's revelation, Muhammad became a religious and political leader. Upon moving to Medina the emphasis of his career changed as he became more actively concerned with matters of this world.

In Medina, Muhammad's prophetic career shifted from preaching toward consolidation of power and exercise of temporal authority In order to establish civil authority, he had to deal directly with socioeconomic issues; to pursue a political policy, he needed to build a strong fighting force" (Vaziri, 28).

Extolling the Oneness of God in a land that knew many gods, Muhammad and his followers developed a way of life based on monotheism. This entirely new way of thinking and behaving threatened the way of life that the merchants of Arabia had known so long. Tensions arose, and Muslims (as Muhammad and his followers came to be called) drew strength from the solidarity of their movement. Religious beliefs and practices were not separate concerns from political, economic, and social matters.

Various offshoots from the movement developed after Muhammad's death. Interpretations of Muhammad's legacy conflicted. The question of leadership split the solidarity of the movement. And people began to remember Muhammad differently. For the most part Muhammad is universally remembered as a combination of the ideal religious leader and the ideal political leader.

Why did God choose Muhammad if he was an ordinary man? One particular Sura of the Qur'an is a reference to Muhammad's fallibility: "Did He not find thee erring and guide thee?" (Sura 93.7) This may be a reference to the possibility that Muhammad held the Meccan religious perspective of polytheism during his early childhood. If not that, it certainly remarks that even the Prophet is not beyond need of God's mercy and compassion. One record of Muhammad's life quotes him as having said, "Thou art my God, I Thy servant. I have wronged myself and I confess my sin. Forgive me then all my sins, for there is none that forgiveth sins save Thee!" (Schimmel, 58-9). Muhammad's own penitent humility before God rings clearly in this prayer.

However, some explain Muhammad's confession as simply a model meant to serve as an example to those who are truly sinful. Some commentators have maintained that Muhammad was free from immorality. If this were the case, then it leaves open the question, what was his status before he was called to be a prophet? In some circles of Muslims, Muhammad is believed to have avoided playing games with neighbors because there was nothing that Muhammad hated more than the Meccan idols (Schimmel, 58).

To press the issue of Muhammad's supposed innocence, it is worth noting that there is a word which carries the connotations even further. The word '*isma*' denotes the belief that Muhammad is sinless, that he was protected from error and sin. Some believe that this idea is extended to the design and evil intentions of others onto or against Muhammad (Schimmel, 58).

To counteract the purifying veneration of the Prophet others have held that '*isma*' is not so strong a term. Another Islamic viewpoint which does not seem to be prevalent, but which is nonetheless interesting to note is that to be '*isma*' does not mean to be sinless. Emphasizing that one values the message more than the messenger, Islamic theologian al-Baqillani contends that '*isma*' denotes protection from the desire to intentionally distort the message. He resists the urge to raise Muhammad so high that the worship of Muhammad replaces the worship of God.

Because he is viewed as the ideal leader for the *umma*, the global community of Muslims, Muhammad has been granted protection against those who would think less than the best of the Prophet. Throughout Islamic history the reaction to slander against Muhammad has been a

generally forgiving one. As long as a person renounces his or her slander against the Prophet, then he or she is embraced by the Islamic community once more. However, there have been times when the community has shown less mercy to those who would defame the name of Muhammad. Some have been killed by the lynching judgment of mobs. Some have been legally executed. Even those who have spoken against excessive veneration of the Prophet's footprints have been sentenced to heavy punishment (Schimmel, 65).

Human Condition

God's identity as Creator is at the center of understanding the human condition. Without God there was, is, and will be nothing. Everything owes its existence to God. As a result of the absolute nature of God as Creator, "human activity can progress and improve; however, only within the perimeters of the 'fixed axis' of God's established cosmic order" (Choueiri, 122). Therefore, there are limits to what one can do, and God has set those limits.

The idea that humanity is bound in some way is a critical component to Islamic interpretations of what it means to be human. The word *islam* means submission. The word *muslim*, derived from the word *islam*, denotes one who submits. The notion of submission is pervasive, even all-inclusive:

As the Qur'an tells us, there is nothing that does not submit, 'willingly or unwillingly,' at any moment—also in its origin and in its end—to the God other than whom there is nothing; no thing, no being, no light, no word, no breath (Eaton, 52).

Therefore, according to the fundamental belief in God as Creator, one may say that all people are *muslim*.

However, all people are not "Muslim." A second ingredient to the foundational mortar of Islamic interpretations of the human condition is free will. Although one may argue that all submit to God and are thought of as *muslim*, Muslims are those who confess the reality of God's Oneness and adhere to a series of subsequent beliefs and practices. One's beliefs must be consistent with the reality of God, and one's actions must be consistent with the will of God. The freedom to change what is inconsistent with the revealed reality and will of God makes humans

accountable before God at the time of Judgment. As a result, it is possible to conceive of *muslims* as well as Muslims whose beliefs or actions may violate the reality or will of God and put them at risk at the time of Judgment.

For example, one may choose to deny the Oneness of God in two ways: polytheism and atheism. Disbelieving God's existence at all is known as *kufr*. Believing in more than one god, or denying the Unity of God, is known as *shirk*. In terms of salvation it is written in the Qur'an that God forgives all but polytheism (Sura 4.48, 110). Because one has control over one's convictions and one's actions (free will), God can hold one accountable for them. Freedom of will is a vital component of the interplay between God as Creator and Judge.

The degree to which one's convictions is expressed seems to be important. One can be *muslim* (one who submits) without being *mu'min* (male true believer) or *mu'mat* (female true believer). The Qur'an speaks to this distinction between *muslim* and *mu'min*:

The Bedouins say, 'We believe.'
Say: 'You do not believe; rather say, "We surrender";
for belief has not yet entered your hearts.
If you obey God and His Messenger,
He will not diminish you anything of your works.
God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate (Sura 49.14).

The distinction between *muslim* and *mu'min* is found mostly in the connotations of the two words. Someone who is *mu'min* is one whose life exemplifies faith in the Unity of God. *Mu'min* denotes a person of faith who is truly sincere in his conviction and whose actions reflect that sincerity. Therefore, one who is *mu'min* is necessarily *muslim*; however, the converse is not necessarily true. In the final analysis, however, one will be judged by God according to God's mercy and compassion. Achieving salvation does not require being known as one who is *mu'min* as opposed to simply *muslim*.

Islamic Soteriologies

Having explored the fundamental relationships between the nature of God, the Prophet, and humanity, one can examine the ways in which soteriologies may be found in Islam. It will be

important to consider the nature of salvation as it is expressed explicitly and subtly in the Qur'an, in Islamic beliefs about the nature of the Hereafter, and in differences found among various Islamic sects. Finally, the various Islamic responses to the idea of intercession will show even more diversity in Islam relating to soteriology. To begin, it may be helpful to trace a historical interpretation of Islamic soteriology.

The most common historical interpretation of Islamic soteriology ignores the plurality of Islamic perspectives and assigns a single description of Islamic soteriology. This interpretation has understood Islamic soteriology largely in relation to God's expectations for ritual behavior. It has focused heavily on "works" when considering salvation. The following is one such interpretation:

The [Muslim] ideal has from the first been other-worldly and the emphasis seems to be strongly upon the idea of the escape from judgment of [God]. The method of salvation is predominantly that of doing, that is, works; the performance of the five or six obligations that rest upon all [Muslims], repeating the creed, repeating the five daily prayers, fasting, alms giving, making the holy pilgrimage, and heeding the call to the holy war, though the latter two seem not to be universally demanded" (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "salvation").

One can glean from this description that God has prescribed ritual behavior to humans in the form of the pillars of faith. The interpretation has the flavor of God's potential fury if Muslims do not live by the pillars. In other words, this particular view of Islam holds that salvation is possible by staying in God's favor by doing certain things. One reason for this may be found in the relatively narrow meanings of words related to salvation in the Qur'an.

Salvation in the Qur'an

Throughout the Qur'an words such as mercy and forgiveness are found abundantly. However, the actual word for salvation (*najah* in Arabic) is only once used in the Qur'an. Muhammad is recorded to have said, "O my people, how is it with me, that I call you to salvation, and you call me to the Fire?" (Sura 40.44). The term *najah* conveys the idea of escape from future punishment in hell. Another Arabic word, *khalas* or "deliverance," has a similar connotation, as

in deliverance from the sufferings of hell. Thus, the Arabic words that are directly related to “salvation” do not seem to denote escape from the power of sin in this world; rather they denote an escape from punishment after the Day of Judgment. At any rate, they show that the concept of salvation does exist in the Qur’an.

Perhaps the connotations of *najah* and *khalas* (escape or deliverance from hell) have influenced historical interpretations, such as this one:

The Islamic conception of salvation, then, is purely legalistic; it is not a moral change in the heart now, leading a man to have power over sin to repress it, but a release in the next world from the punishment of hell, in virtue of certain good acts done in this life. It is not a becoming, but a receiving (*Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. “salvation”).

The tendency might be to see a legalistic approach to salvation. It should be noted that since *khalas* and *najah* are not used often in the Qur’an, their connotations may not be central to Islamic beliefs. In fact, overemphasizing them may distort more pervasive ideas surrounding Islamic soteriologies which may not be represented by a specific word or phrase.

Because the concept of salvation may not be limited to specific words, one may find it in other aspects of Islam. Therefore, with the description of salvation previously discussed in mind, it will be useful to look at key concepts in Islam which might be related to salvation. For example, a serious analysis of the nature of heaven and hell and the nature of human accountability before God may reveal insights otherwise ignored by exclusively studying an Arabic word. Who goes to heaven? Why? Is heaven the only result of salvation? The answers to these questions show that Islam does not legalistically conceive of salvation.

Nature of Salvation

Given that salvation in one form exists in Islam, it is necessary to explore other forms it might take. Because of the Islamic view of God as the divinity who is the merciful and compassionate Creator and Judge, one can deduce that salvation ultimately comes from God. Who receives salvation? Is salvation collective? Or is it individual? Perhaps groups of people experience salvation. Perhaps God grants salvation to individual people.

On the one hand, God may hold a group of people accountable for the group's behavior. The Qur'an shows that God does respond to groups of people. It is written that "God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves" (Sura 13.12). Clearly, the emphasis of this Sura is not one person, but a group. Sura 24.38 reveals that God will reward more than one person: "God may recompense them for their fairest works and give them increase of His bounty". Another Sura records Muhammad as asking God for forgiveness for the living believers (Sura 47.19). This Sura implies that forgiveness may be granted in this life and that it can be granted to all Muslims as a blanket might lie across an entire bed. Furthermore, there are *hadiths*—stories and traditions ascribed to the Prophet—that say that Muhammad is the intercessor for the whole community (Smith, 26).

Is God only interested in the behavior of Muslims? One Sura warns those who are guilty of *shirk*, "You [the children of Israel] took to yourselves the Calf after [Moses] and you were evildoers; then We pardoned you after that, that haply you should be thankful" (Sura 2.48). This Sura shows that God's forgiveness is collective, and that God's mercy is greater than God's wrath. If the latter were not true, God would have never pardoned the polytheism of Israel's children.

On the other hand, God may pay attention to the behavior of individuals. The Qur'an clearly states that "no soul bears the load of another; and if one heavy-burdened calls for its load to be carried, not a thing of it will be carried, though he be a near kinsman" (Sura 35.18). Each individual's accountability for her or his deeds, beliefs, and actions before God cannot be overemphasized. Not even a relative will suffer because of another's actions. Further evidence of an individual's accountability before God is found in the following tale:

"One of the saints saw in his sleep a hideous form and said,
 'Who art thou?'
 It answered, 'I am thy misdeeds!'
 He said, 'And how can I be delivered from thee?'
 It said, 'By much calling down of blessing on the Prophet!'"
 (Schimmel, 97).

Does God forgive groups as a whole or individuals according to their deeds? The distinction is clear. God is so merciful that the guilt of one will not be extended to another, and God is so forgiving of groups that individual deeds may be ignored.

Students of Islam tackle the relationship between divine and human wills—discussions of this relationship are predestined by any serious exploration of fundamental Islamic concepts. The relationship between divine and human wills presents a conceptual tension. If God is the source of all that is, and nothing comes to pass without God's willing it, then is there such a thing as a free human will which should be held accountable for its actions? On the one hand, nothing exists without God's direct action or passive allowance. The tension increases when one asks why God judges individuals according to their actions if those actions are not possible without God willing them to happen. It's God's fault, isn't it?

Humans are not fated to powerlessness before this question. One possible response to this reminds Muslims that no one is held accountable for another's actions. God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, will not hold someone accountable for God's actions. The driving comfort (or perhaps curse) is that humans have the ability to choose to act according to God's desires. God's divine will provides space for human freedom. Within the fishbowl of that freedom humans move as they choose, and God judges according to the chosen movements of humans.

Nature of the Hereafter

The Islamic concept of life after death offers hope in the possibility of an improved existence. In addition to the possibility of an improved existence after this life, there is the threat of an other existence. These two dichotomous options are heaven and hell, and that

simple alternative provides the ordinary believer with as much information as he needs for his salvation. It is obvious that any given state of experience elsewhere must be 'better' or 'worse' than the life we experience here, and it is sufficient that men and women should seek the 'better' and strive to avoid the 'worse'" (Eaton, 224).

Also known as Paradise (or the Garden) and the Fire, these realms of existence are occupied after people have come before God in judgment. Those who pass inspection enter

heaven. Those who have fallen short because of their disbelief in God or the Oneness of God as well as those whose deeds were less than righteous will suffer in the flames of hell. A time will come when, according to the Qur'an, the earth will be destroyed:

When the sun shall be darkened,
 when the stars shall be thrown down,
 when the mountains shall be set moving,
 when the pregnant camels shall be neglected,
 when the savage beasts shall be mustered,
 when the seas shall be set boiling,
 when the souls shall be coupled,
 when the buried infant shall be asked for what sin she was slain,
 when the scrolls shall be unrolled,
 when heaven shall be stripped off,
 when Hell shall be set blazing, when Paradise shall be brought nigh,
 then shall a soul know what it has produced (Sura 81.1-14).

This time of destruction ushers in the Day of Judgment. Begun by the blast from a trumpet, the earth and its mountains will be crushed, heaven will split, angels will carry God's throne, and all will be brought before God (Sura 69.14-18).

When one does not measure up as one who deserves the rewards of Paradise, punishment can be expected. Punishment in the Fire is suffering in its least desirable form. It must be noted that this period for punishment is not eternal for the Muslim. God's mercy "takes precedence over His wrath, and to suggest that it could be entirely absent from hell would be to suggest that hell has an independent and self-sufficient existence, beyond the reach of His prevailing mercy, and that is unacceptable to the Muslim" (Eaton, 236-7). Therefore, although one suffers in Hell, God relieves a person's suffering eventually in the coolness of Paradise. One can conclude, as a result, that Paradise is a place for all people, and that Hell is a place for some people as a cleansing purgatory. The threat of agonizing punishment—no matter how temporary—and the lush comfort of Paradise entices believers to structure their lives in such a way that they will benefit. Salvation is also tied to this, for

the Qur'an although it defines the *kafirun* primarily as those who actively deny God and His self-revelation, defines them as those who disbelieve in the 'Hereafter' and in the Judgment which precedes its unfolding. Faith in God cannot be separated from the conviction that we shall one day stand before Him, and this conviction virtually guarantees salvation (Eaton, 224).

All will come before God. The universality of God implies that God is supreme over all, not just those who are Muslim. Furthermore, God will judge all people, Muslim or not. Non-believers and those who do not properly structure their lives may suffer in the hereafter. God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, decides and there is a tension, as noted above, between the accountability of one's actions and the embracing forgiveness of God.

Within the Islamic expectation of life after this earthly life is the belief that one's existence will be more than spiritual. The rewards of the Garden and the punishments of the Fire are described in terms of physical pleasures or pain. The resurrection of the body is an element in Islamic teachings about the hereafter. Modern scientists have questioned the possibility of resurrected bodies. Some have asked how resurrected bodies are possible if atoms and molecules are passed from a dead organism to a new organism. The "solution" to this "problem" can be attributed to the power of God:

Some contemporary writers . . . testify to the exact relation of the earthly and resurrected bodies. The second life is by reconstitution of the same body as its non-being, says 'Abd al-Hamid Tahmaz, and He who created creation the first time is capable of bringing it back again. Tahmaz recognizes that many have raised the question of the dispersion of atoms and molecules of the human body into plants and then eaten by other humans, thus becoming part of new bodies. All these mixtures of atoms, however, are distinct in the eyes of God, he says, and He will reconstitute them in the original forms at the day of resurrection (Smith, 132).

Further evidence of this notion that God reconstructs physical bodies—even one which has been seriously damaged—is found in folk tales about judgment:

The tale is told of a man whose life had been so wicked that, when he was dying, he ordered his son to have his body burned and the ashes scattered so far afield that not even God would be able to reassemble him. When, none the less, he was brought before the supreme Judge he was—so we are told—forgiven his sins, because the greatness of his fear testified to his great faith" (Eaton, 224-5).

Here one finds not only the power and forgiving mercy of God, but the notion that God has the power of repairing one's body, even if seriously damaged.

The nature of the "rewards" of heaven provide additional evidence of the belief in the physical aspects of life after death. For example, among the various pleasures that believers will find in the Garden are beautiful maidens or *hur*. Described in the Qur'an, the *hur* are yet another

example of the physical aspect of an existence in the hereafter. One of the most interesting rewards of Paradise, the *hur* provide a physical (sexual) pleasure. It is written that believers will be joined in marriage to these celestial sexual creatures (Suras 44.54 and 52.20).

The word *hur* literally denotes eyes which have a marked contrast of black and white. The Sura with the most complete description of the *hur* is Sura 55.56-76. This Sura describes them as virginal, lovely as rubies, and beautiful as coral. They are pictured as reclining beauties in cool pavilions. They are also described as having eyes like pearls (Sura 56.22).

Information about the *hur* is not limited to the Qur'an; some *hadiths* give much fuller accounts of their nature. According to certain *hadiths*, the *hur* do not sleep; they do not get pregnant; they never get sick; and they do not menstruate, spit, or blow their noses. All of these are activities which would make sexual intercourse with them unpleasant, undesirable—even impossible. It is important that one understands the distinction between *hur* and Daughters of Eve. Daughters of Eve are women who live or have lived on earth; the *hur* have not lived on earth. *Hadiths* describe the *hur* as wearing between seventy to seventy thousand gowns, through which the marrow of their bones is visible. They lie on couches of red hyacinth which are encrusted with jewels (Smith, 164).

Certain *hadiths* describe the calico composition of the *hur*: "They are generally said to be composed of saffron from the feet to the knees, musk from the knees to the breast, amber from the breast to the neck, and camphor from the neck to the head" (Smith, 164). Thus the *hadiths* provide a spectrum of browns, yellows, orange, and grey as a visual stimulus as well as a stimulus (musk, camphor) for smell and taste. These olfactory manifestations further demonstrate the physically pleasurable aspects of a life hereafter in Islamic view.

It may be taken for granted that the *hur* are generally thought to be rewards for male believers. In the absence of any mention of an equal, heterosexual reward for women, Islamic texts like the Qur'an and certain *hadiths* which refer to the celestial beauties reward male believers disproportionately. If this is the case, then female believers receive a less than equal reward in Paradise. Western students of Islam have long been fascinated with the apparent gender inequality

which the matter of the *hur* seems to sustain. Insofar as the rewards of Paradise are an expression of Islamic salvation, one might question why one gender is predisposed to enjoy greater rewards than another. Maulana Muhammad 'Ali proposes an apologetic solution to the "problem" of this inequality. He writes:

Even if the *hur* are taken to be a blessing of Paradise, and not the women of this world, it is a blessing for men as well as for women. Just as the gardens, rivers, milk, honey, fruits, and numerous other things of Paradise are both for men and women, even so are the *hur* ('Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 298).

'Ali thus offers an alternative explanation for the question of gender inequality in heaven. His idea may be baffling if one is limited to cultural understandings of gender and sex roles. It may not be appropriate to impose roles found in this world on the hereafter. 'Ali leaves some questions unanswered. How is it that both men and women are rewarded beautiful virgins? Is Paradise a place where heterosexual and homosexual (lesbian) activity is legitimate?

Eaton responds to these questions by relying on old Islamic stories told about the pleasures of heaven. These stories are extracted from the primary collections of *hadiths*. He argues from a perspective which describes heavenly conditions which transcend the possibilities of this world.

Eaton makes the following case:

In Paradise, we are told, the blessed—both men and women—will be provided with seventy garments, everyone of which will change its colour seventy times each hour. If we bear in mind that, in this world, the body and the personality are 'garments' of the spirit, the significance of this hadith is clear enough. It is said that there is in Paradise a market 'in which there is no buying or selling, but only the forms of men and women'; the spirits of the blessed enter into whatever form they will, for they could scarcely be content with any lesser freedom of expression, and this is the Place of Contentment (Eaton, 239-40).

If women and men can command their own sex-change at will in Paradise, it seems inappropriate to think that sexuality in Paradise will be like sexuality on earth. Some contemporary commentators hold that the earthly body is the same as the resurrected body; however, Eaton suggests that the possibilities for the resurrected body in heaven are greater than on earth.

Beyond the technical explanations for the rewards of Paradise, it is important to remember the theme: it is a good place to be. Focus on the question of gender inequality in Paradise may

exceed what the average Muslim believes, and expressions of spirituality are intertwined with cultural biases. Attempts to reconcile the gender inequity, as Eaton has shown, can be further complicated when one asks

whether the 'average Muslim' actually thinks in terms of such complex symbolism, in which case the answer must be that such things do not need to be spelt out analytically in order to be understood (though not necessarily conceptualized) by those whose minds, imagination and sensibility have been shaped by Islam. Only when certain questions are asked does it become necessary to spin out words in explanation, and the 'average Muslim' does not ask these questions, but knows that all will be well in Paradise; and this is enough (Eaton, 240).

The central idea of the rewards of Paradise is that one finds pleasures similar to those on earth, but they are found to be without the limitations of earthly pleasures. The pleasures of Paradise are inconceivably great. It is more than everything anyone could possibly want—female or male. If the *hur* are a test case for the nature of salvation in Islam as it relates to gender, it is clear that there are overtones of inequality according to gender, even sexual orientation. However, it is also clear—insofar as each person (male and female) is judged by God who is merciful and compassionate—that salvation in Islam is available to both men and women.

Salvation in Islamic Sects

If a Muslim is one who confesses the Oneness of God and adheres to a series of subsequent beliefs and practices, then whatever form a community gives to those subsequent beliefs and practices falls under the religion of Islam. Recognizing the plurality of Islam, those subsequent beliefs and practices take different forms which result in various sects. There are scores of Islamic sect, each one with its own interpretation of what it means to be Muslim. One could choose sects that are Sunni, Sufi, or Shi'i (Twelver, Niner, or even Sevener). In order to manage the magnitude of surveying many sects in depth, two will be chosen. Sunni Islam and Twelver Shi'ite Islam are the two most common versions of Islam, and ample information is available about these two sects. Sunni soteriology has a remarkably different emphases than Twelver Shi'ite soteriology.

Salvation through Divine Community: *Sunni Islam*

Sunni Islam is the largest sect of Islam in the world. Its influence has dominated historical interpretation of what is Islam. Sunni—or *Ahl al-sunna wa al-jam'a*—denotes the way of the Prophet. The foundation for anything Sunni is that the Prophet did it or said that it should be done. Sunni Muslims place great emphasis on the revelation of God to the Prophet, the Qur'an. The limits for behavior (what one ought to do, what one must not do, and what one is able to do) is defined by the divine law, or *shari'a*.

Literally meaning “the path to the watering place,” the *shari'a* is composed of various parts, all of which return to the Prophet's influence. First, reliable *hadiths*, the best of the collected sayings or stories attributed to the Prophet, provide guidelines for behavior. One may secondly rely on *Idjma*, the consensus of recognized scholars on the interpretation of the Qur'an and *hadiths*. The last component of the *shari'a* is *Idjihad* which is the product of analogical deduction from Qur'an, *hadiths*, and *Idjma*. Thus, the combination of the text of the Qur'an, traditions of the Prophet, official interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadiths*, and the logical implications of all of the above parts comprise the law for Sunni Muslims (Braunthal, 247).

The supremacy of the law is manifest in two ways. First, it is pervasive in jurisprudence in religious training. Second, it insists that Islam is comprehensive (Khuri, 29). There is no aspect of a Sunni Muslim's life which is untouched by the divine legitimacy of the law. For, the Qur'an reveals that “one of the main tenets of Sunni Islam is the belief that the *shari'a* for man's society is exclusively and comprehensively contained in the revealed text: ‘Government rests in none but God’” (Khuri, 31). The community of believers governs itself because everything proceeds from God through the Prophet.

Furthermore, the decisions of the community are infallible. The *hadith* related to the Prophet that states, “‘My community does not err in consensus,’” according to Khuri, “is taken to mean that consensus (culture and custom) establishes religious validity or, better, divine legality” (Khuri, 32). The preservation of culture is then imperative and deviations from what is “divinely” acceptable must be resisted when they veer from the Prophet's example. Youssef Choueiri

contends in *Islamic Fundamentalism* that the community of believers must be dedicated to “the moral, political, and economic aspects of all societies The function of the human being is to receive, respond to, adapt and apply the immutable character of divine rules” (Choueiri, 121). A Sunni Muslim, then, might say that the *umma* defines temporal harmony as reflecting God’s will for life on earth.

Salvation can be attained by participating in the divinely appropriated way of life found in the *umma*. The composite influences of God (the Qur’an, *hadiths*, etc.) give one the basis upon which one can live as one should through the security of the *umma*. For,

if [Sunni Islam] is a legalistically oriented religion, a formulation of public policy sent by God to organize human society, it follows that religious specialization must concern itself with matters of marriage and divorce, inheritance and ownership, commercial transactions and contractual dealing, government banking, investment, credit and debts. The proper execution of these contractual matters according to the dictates of the *shari’a* constitutes the way to salvation” (Khuri, 30).

Salvation through a Savior: *Shi’ite Islam*

One of the main distinguishing aspects of the Shi’ites from other Islamic groups is the belief that God gives the community of believers continuous divine guidance. This guidance is manifest through a continuous, unbroken line of religious leaders, called imams. According to Shi’ite Muslims, the imam is designated by God in the texts of the Qur’an; furthermore, only the imams from the household of the Prophet can accurately interpret the Qur’an (Sachedina, 15). The name of the sect is derived from a root word that means “from the line of ‘Ali.” The first imam was the Prophet’s brother-in-law. In Twelver Shi’ite Islam each successive imam designates his successor in an unbroken line until the last and twelfth imam. The twelfth imam is known as the Hidden One, the Expected, the Owner and Possessor of Time, in other words, the Timeless. Because the community of believers will always need divine surveillance in order to perfect religion, the imamate cannot end or be broken (Khuri, 123).

Shi’ite Muslims believe that because the imams are divinely guided they must be infallible in order for the community to receive the correct direction. What the imam says, goes. Because

the imams are '*isma* , the Prophet who is their great ancestor (the bearer of Divine Light) must also be exempt from sin (Schimmel, 59).

The "genealogy" of imams is critically observed in Twelver Shi'ism. Twelvers believe in the infallible imams who are direct descendants of the fourth caliph 'Ali b. Abi Talib by his wife Fatima, who was the Prophet's daughter. The first imam was followed by his two sons, al-Hasan and al-Hussayn. Nine other infallible imams ensued, according to the Twelvers, ending with the disappearance of the twelfth, while still a boy. This final imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, is believed to be in a state of Occultation (*al-ghayba al-kubra* in Arabic). While it was still plausible that he was alive, his disciples claimed that they maintained secret communication with him. Eventually the Mahdi broke all communication with the temporal world and began his occultation. Now he is waiting for the right moment "to return, sword in hand, and fill 'the earth with justice, as it is filled with oppression'" (Choueiri, 26).

Shi'ism began as a protest against the Sunni Muslims in power who ignored what the Shi'ites believed to be the legitimate rights of 'Ali and the appropriate leadership of the community, and "the earliest politically active Shi'ites engaged in movements of protest, including socioeconomic protest, which often heralded a messianic [figure] who would bring back justice and equity after the current reign of injustice and oppression" (Cole, 4). Shi'ism is one of the religious minorities of Islam which has been trampled on by the dominant Sunni Muslims which have tried to snuff out non-Sunni variations of Islam. As an oppressed religious minority, Twelvers believe that something better is sure to come. Unlike Sunni Muslims whose soteriology focuses on allegiance to the (Sunni) community, Twelver Shi'ites must recognize the rightful, divinely chosen rule of the imams who have descended from 'Ali. Moreover, anyone who does not believe that the Twelfth imam (Muhammad al-Mahdi) will arise to rule again does not possess faith sufficient for salvation (Sachedina, 6-7). The Twelver expectation is not rooted in some other-worldly existence. Twelvers refuse to wait for heaven. Salvation may be expressed by Twelvers as the restoration of justice on earth:

Al-Barzinji . . . understands this time of the *mahdi* to be when the low morality earlier displayed will be replaced with high standards and harmonious circumstances: the wolf and the ram will dwell together, children will play harmoniously with scorpions and snake, lives will be longer, and, (perhaps causally) usury, plague, fornication, and the drinking of wine will disappear, evil ones will be destroyed, and none will remain who despise the people of Muhammad” (Smith, 67).

Twelvers do not rely on the stability of the community’s own decision-making processes. They look to God for divine direction in the form of a divinely chosen, infallible individual. The hope-filled expectations for the “second coming” of the twelfth imam give Twelver Islam obvious messianic overtones that Sunni Islam does not have.

Intercession vs. God’s Judgment

Although one is singularly held accountable for one’s actions, God alone decides who enjoys salvation. So, ultimately one may receive salvation, despite one’s wickedness, because God decides to give it. In a certain light God’s mercy and compassion can be viewed as a circumvention of the anticipated outcome. That is, one may not necessarily suffer in hell on account of one’s poor record. Likewise, can someone besides God circumvent such an expected outcome? Is intercession a possibility in Islam?

Shafa’a is Arabic for intercession, denoting the idea that there is someone or something which comes between God and humans on behalf of humans so as to ease God’s judgment on the people. An intercessor may intercept a negative judgment altogether through appeasement. The Qur’an’s revelation in several Suras explicitly denies the possibility for intercession by some outside agent. For example, God addresses the Jews saying,

Children of Israel, remember My blessing wherewith I blessed you, and that I have preferred you above all beings; and beware of a day when no soul for another shall give satisfaction, and no intercession shall be accepted from it, nor any counterpoise be taken, neither shall they be helped” (Sura 2.43-45).

According to the Qur’an, therefore, even the children of Israel, the people whom God favored, are denied any hope of intercession in this verse. Intercession is not exclusively denied to Jews: “O believers, expend of that wherewith We have provided you, before there comes a day wherein shall be neither traffick, nor friendship, nor intercession” (Sura 2. 255). According to this, no one

shall benefit from the intercession of another. The Qur'an articulates this belief further: "No soul laden bears the load of another; and if one heavy-burdened calls for its load to be carried, not a thing of it will be carried, though he be near a kinsman" (Sura 35.18). No one, not even family members acting on behalf of other family members, can take the heat for the actions of another.

The text in Sura 6.51 specifically denies intervention between God and each individual: "And warn therewith those who fear they shall be mustered to their Lord; they have, apart from God, no protector and no intercessor; haply they will be godfearing." Without the mercy of God there would not be any use in seeking forgiveness for sin. It would make no difference if one sought forgiveness directly in prayer to God or if one sought forgiveness with the help of some outside agent (a saint, a loved one who is *mu'min*, or Muhammad). If God should decide to withhold mercy from judgment, no intercessory efforts would be successful.

Having re-established the belief that God alone decides one's ultimate fate and having shown Qur'anic evidence which denies anyone the possibility of intercession (even the need for it), it is necessary to look at what exists beyond fundamental theology and the legalism of sacred texts. Even though intercession does not really make sense within the constructs of fundamental Islamic concepts, and even though there are Suras which exclude the possibility for intercession, there are Muslims who believe that intercession is possible. First, one should examine the various forms which intercession take. And second, one should analyze the relationship between what stands on the books officially and what people really believe. The second exercise will explore the relationship between "official orthodoxy" and "folk belief."

First, then, there are at least two types of intercession. One is intercession on the Day of Judgment when all come before God bearing their lives. Intercession of this sort is a unique event because one need only survive one Day of Doom. The other type of intercession is divine intervention for daily sin. Some may desire intercession for the mitigation of punishment for daily sin instead of mitigation of punishment for all of one's sins on the Day of Judgment. In addition, intercession may be desirable when one seeks protection from daily sin.

A variety of “faucets” tap into the waters of intercession. Muslims who believe in *shafa’a* may individually use the Prophet’s name for intercession. For good fortune one may speak the *tasliya* (a blessing for Muhammad and his family). Some individuals believe that simply by asking God to bless the Prophet and his family, Muhammad will intercede for them (Schimmel, 97). Other traditions hold that the Prophet can intercede for the *umma* as a collective whole:

One of the most famous of the [hadiths] concerning this function is that in which Muhammad is reported to have been offered by God the assurance that half of his community would automatically enter the Garden or else be given the privilege of intercession: the Prophet opted for the latter, symbolic of the general feeling that intercession would result in a more positive end for the Muslim *umma* as a whole (Smith, 27).

The notion that Muhammad will have an influential role at the end of time on the Day of Judgment finds keen popularity among those who view Muhammad as the ideal educator and supreme leader of the community.

Intercessory agents are not limited to the Prophet. For example, certain pious individuals who believe that the Qur’an itself will intercede for them repeat verses of the Qur’an over and over (Schimmel, 83). Sometimes people look to saints and angels as intercessors. The “orthodox” position maintains that intercession by the saints is nothing but *shirk*. Nevertheless, there are cults in upper Egypt, for example, who believe that with the aid of the saints that one can enter Paradise (Smith, 184). There is a Sura which suggests that angels appeal to God on behalf of believers (Sura 40.7). In addition to the Prophet, the sacred text of the Qur’an, saints, and angels, some people believe that the children of believers can intercede for their parents (Schimmel, 84).

Secondly, now, other Muslims have furiously argued that intercession is not a legitimate topic for Islamic theology. They claim that when considering intercession one must remember the nature of God. Without regard for the many folk beliefs about the Prophet’s role in the eschaton, certain Muslim theologians hold that Muhammad will not act as judge, since “prophets—no matter how close to God he or she is—cannot change the law of God . . . To God alone is intercession—none can intercede except by God’s permission” (Smith, 141-42). Here we revisit the very strong Islamic theme of human accountability coupled with fundamental beliefs about

God. Some hold that if God the Creator were not merciful as Judge in the first place, then even human repentance would be inconceivable. Such people rely on religious simplicity: nothing is exempt from God's volition, and one's fate is subject to God alone; intercession is a moot point.

Despite the groaning disapproval of some Muslims, there are other Muslims who hold fast to the belief that someone or something can intercede for them. Shi'ites, for example, believe that the Mahdi will reverse the powers of the world to restore justice on earth. Intercession is so fundamental that without it hope would cease to exist. Back and forth Muslims will argue. Wars have been fought and will continue to be fought as a result of the tension. The bottom line turns out to be this: religious tension will remain fiercely taut among various Islamic communities so long as different people have different, and somewhat opposing concerns.

III. CONCLUSION

Conclusions about the nature of soteriologies in Islam begin with consideration of whether Islam contains the core elements of the description of salvation . Recall the description of salvation:

Salvation may be this worldly or other-worldly; it may be individual or social; it may be attained once and for all, or it may be conceived as a process of growth; it may be dominantly an escape, salvation from something, sin, fear, danger, or it may be conceived of as something chiefly positive, saved to or for something; it may be conditioned or it may be absolute and eternal. Salvation may be won by self-effort, or by the aid of a savior. It may be attained through *works*, something that one does, asceticism, performance of ceremonies, moral effort, self-surrender; it may be won through *faith* in a savior, sometimes vicariously, or it may be won through some kind of saving *knowledge*.” (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “salvation,”).

First, one should ask: according Islamic teachings, is salvation this worldly or other-worldly? The Qur'an shows the belief that there is life beyond this earthly life. On the Day of Judgment God will determine whether one is deserving of entering Paradise or if punishment is first needed. Where salvation means exemption from punishment in hell (*najah*) , then salvation is an other-worldly escape.

Both Sunni and Twelver Shi'ite sects of Islam showed evidence that salvation may exist in this world as well. The security of the *umma* under the law provides well-being to Sunni Muslims. The restoration of justice at the return of the twelfth imam gives hope to Twelver Shi'a. Therefore, the concepts of the *shari'a* or the restoring Mahdi, suggest a less desirable existence in the absence of the law or the savior.

Second, one should ask if salvation in the Islamic mind is individual or communal. On one hand, God revealed to the Prophet the writings of the Qur'an. This revelation was not meant for Muhammad's sole benefit. Instead, it was to be shared. Insofar as Muhammad received God's revelation for the collective body of to-be-believers, the *umma*, and insofar as this revelation leads the community to submit before God, salvation can be thought of as a shared experience.

On the other hand, Muslims believe that each person is accountable to God for her or his actions. Even if one considers intercession as a fully legitimate possibility, Muslims still believe

that God deals with people as individuals. This individual emphasis reveals the seemingly paradoxical belief that soteriology in Islam can be conceived as individual and communal.

In terms of the rewarding of salvation (whether it be of the once and for all or of the result of continuous growth varieties), one should look again at the nature of the Garden and the Fire. Once a person enters the Garden, she or he is in to stay. Again, this is not the case for the Fire, which is not eternal or everlasting, but more like a temporary (and still painful) process of cleansing. If one thinks of the time spent in the Fire as a period of purification for the Garden, it becomes evident that salvation can be achieved gradually as punishment is executed until God allows a person to enter Paradise.

Some students of Islam have held that Muslims conceive of salvation in legalistic terms. The reason for this misperception is rooted in a non-Muslim understanding of Islamic rituals. Some non-Muslims have concluded that if Muslims perform the five pillars of faith then they are assured of salvation. The acts become means to salvation in this sense. Others have emphasized the Muslim's obligation to do good deeds by which she or he will be judged. In these legalistic interpretations of Islam, one might say that salvation is achieved by works—that which one does. Such a statement may be true of Sunni Islam but that interpretation distorts the essence of that majority sect. The legalistic approach ignores a fundamental tenet: the belief in the Oneness of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. God as merciful judge has the singular power to grant or deny a person salvation. Whether a person performs a certain ritual or lives a life full of good deeds is immaterial to that individual's salvation. It is God alone who decides who will achieve salvation.

On the other hand, a Muslim might ask why it is important to follow Qur'anic teachings, to follow the example of the Prophet by observing the pillars of faith and doing good works. If God might forgive anyone for any reason God chooses, and if punishment is not eternal (that is, if everyone will enter Paradise eventually anyway). Why be Muslim in the first place? The answer: it is the will of God that people submit to God by recognizing the nature of God's Oneness. Now, this may be an unconvincing and insufficient answer to some, particularly those who might be

concerned about the chaos which might result from no one submitting to God. Such people might demand a more threatening reason to obey God. But for the Muslim, who already “knows” the nature of God’s Oneness, it is enough.

Finally, one might ask about the existence of a savior in Islam as it relates to Islamic soteriologies. Indeed, it applies to Islam. Is Muhammad considered to be a savior? On the one hand, Sunni Islam does not teach that Muhammad is a savior. He is the final prophet of God, not a savior—unless you believe that your prayers for the Prophet’s well-being will cause him to intercede for you.

Twelver Shi’ism does teach, on the other hand, not that Muhammad is a savior, but that Muhammad al-Mahdi will return to restore justice on earth. Insofar as the restoration of justice is the function of a savior, the twelfth imam, the Mahdi, could be considered a savior. In light of the intense expectation which surrounds Shi’ite hope in the twelfth imam, it is more appropriate to say that the Mahdi is more a savior in the eyes of the Shi’ites than is Muhammad, whose work is overshadowed by their focus on the former.

It is crucial to ask if a Twelver Shi’ite Muslim would call the restoration of justice a manifestation of salvation. If the role of the Mahdi is not related to any concept of salvation, then Islamic sects, like Twelver Shi’ism, which have a belief in a savior whose presence will restore justice do not have a unique form of Islamic soteriology. However, if bringing divine justice to earth is a manifestation of salvation (certainly not in the sense of *najah*), then faith in a savior holds significant importance in Islamic soteriologies, specifically in those forms of Islam which adhere to the hope in al-Mahdi like Twelver Shi’ism.

In Paradise or on earth. Now or at the time of Judgment or sometime in between. Under divine law or divine leadership. Orthodox or folk belief, personal or societal—the variety of soteriologies in Islam are almost innumerable. Any one of them may be considered “heretical,” or “illegitimate” by those whose beliefs are different. However, this walk down a “road less traveled”—for all its twists and turns and switchbacks—shows the myriad of perspectives which are found under the broad umbrella of Islam and ideas of salvation therein.

The conclusions of this study raise some additional questions. While the original definition of salvation successfully revealed the complexities of Islamic soteriologies, one might ask if it was appropriate for the Islamic context. An unbiased perspective is essential for a study of Islamic soteriologies, but one might still inquire whether the questions asked in this essay would be recognized as relevant by Muslims. Do their answers hold any import for the believers' understanding of Islam? Or is it possible that the original definition—which served well in this study—imposes foreign categories and interpretations onto what Muslims hold to be truly “Islamic,” thereby distorting our understandings?

A series of more focused studies may help to ascertain whether the original description of salvation is appropriate and useful in all Islamic contexts. For that work, an increased number of primary sources would significantly help, since they would best disclose what Muslims have believed to be true of salvation and would at least undercut the potentially biased non-Muslim interpretations. Fluency in Arabic would undoubtedly make the Qur’anic study more complete, but such work is beyond the scope of this particular study. The biases of secondary sources and interpretations and the possible inaccuracies of the English translations of primary Arabic texts may have crippled the ability of this study to determine the appropriateness of the original description of salvation. It is to be hoped, then, that the recognition of the limitations of this study may lead to the footpaths of other studies designed to address these final, unanswered questions.

Glossary

<i>hadiths</i>	recorded sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.
<i>hur</i>	one of the rewards of heaven, described in the Qur'an as a virginal maiden.
<i>Idjma</i>	the consensus of recognized scholars as to the "correct" interpretation of the Qur'an and <i>hadiths</i> .
<i>Idjihad</i>	the analogical deductions of the Qur'an, <i>hadiths</i> , and <i>Idjma</i> .
<i>imam</i>	in Shi'ism, a divinely guided leader of the Shi'ite religio-political community
<i>islam</i>	submission.
Islam	a monotheistic religious system.
<i>'isma</i>	often denotes a sinless condition, usually said of the Prophet.
<i>kafirun</i>	those who commit <i>kufr</i> or <i>shirk</i> —rejecting the nature of God as revealed in the Qur'an.
<i>khalas</i>	deliverance (from the sufferings of hell).
<i>kufr</i>	atheism, disbelieving God's existence.
Mahdi	a savior; the Shi'i imam who will rise to restore justice on earth through his
divinely	guided leadership.
Muhammad	the venerated Prophet of God through whom God's revelation (the Qur'an) was made known. Muhammad led the religio-political movement that became Islam.
<i>mu'min</i>	denotes a devout male Muslim (<i>mu'mat</i> = female).
<i>muslim</i>	one who submits, particularly before God.
Muslim	a member of one of the sects of Islam.
<i>najah</i>	Arabic for salvation (denotes escape from sufferings of hell).
pillar of faith	any one of the five or six ritual obligations for Muslims.
Qur'an	the sacred text of God's revelation to Muhammad.
salvation	improved change in condition, usually associated with spirituality.

<i>shahada</i>	the first pillar of faith, the confession of the Oneness of God and the Prophethood of Muhammad.
<i>shafa'a</i>	intercession.
<i>shari'a</i>	Islamic law.
Shi'ite Islam	any number of sects who claim 'Ali, the Prophet's brother-in-law, as the rightful successor of the Prophet. In Twelver Shi'ism the twelfth leader after Muhammad will rise to restore justice on earth.
<i>shirk</i>	polytheism, denying the Oneness of God.
soteriology	the way to salvation in a given religious system; the study of salvation.
Sunni Islam	the Islamic sect which emphasizes the practices of the Prophet Muhammad as found in the Qur'an and hadiths. Roughly 80% of all Muslims are Sunni.
Sura	a chapter in the Qur'an.
<i>tasliya</i>	a blessing for the Prophet Muhammad and his family.
<i>umma</i>	the community or fellowship of all believers. <i>Umma</i> usually denotes a strictly Muslim membership; however, sometimes the notion includes other monotheists (Jews and Christians).

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