

What do UU's have to say about "salvation/wholeness?"

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The word "salvation" is one that is likely to make many UU's cringe. It is fraught with negative meaning from faiths many of us left. However I would like to remind you that the Universalist side of our heritage promoted "universal salvation" meaning no hell for anyone. This was a welcome message two hundred years ago. More recently UU abandoned the idea of an afterlife of any kind, preferring to focus our spiritual life in this plane of existence. And it is from that frame that I will speak today. Before I get to the current UU perspective of salvation I want to give some background to the concept.

People who study religion know salvation as the question of "soteriology." It comes from the Greek meaning, deliverance, or reintegration. All the major religions address the issue of "salvation." The main question religions are supposed to answer in this area is: What is the reward for living the life directed by the faith one has chosen? Some associated questions include: Why do we humans exist? Who or what is responsible for "redeeming" or saving our souls? What are we being saved from or for? What brings me happiness, wellbeing and fulfillment? What is the most important element in my redemption or salvation? Who and/or what can make me whole? Is my salvation in my own hands or an or that of a outside force? These are obviously big questions regardless of what faith one follows. I will try to respond to some of them in this talk. For traditional Christians, Muslims, and Jews one lives one's life to serve God. Each of these religions specifies exactly what a person needs to do to attain salvation, and salvation is the purpose of living. All three Abrahamic faiths, in terms of my understanding of them, refer to salvation at least in part, as a reward that comes in an afterlife to those who have fulfilled the requirements in this life. The religion I grew up in was Judaism. I was taught that a Jew was saved from the evil of the world by following the laws of Moses. That is what kept you from the evil in the world, provided you with a path to heaven. And when the messiah will come you will be resurrected here on earth. In fact the Hebrew word "ma-she-ach" means savior. As you can see traditional Jews are and have been very invested in salvation. I will discuss Christianity a bit later when I contrast it with contemporary UU.

Buddhism doesn't use the term salvation but instead talks about overcoming suffering or "samsara," by avoiding "attachment" and "aversion," and attaining "equanimity." Meditation leads to nirvana and an end to the karma of having to be reincarnated into a world of repeated suffering. Equanimity is accomplished by the practices of meditation and following the "Eightfold Path."

Many UUs tend to think as the Existentialists do, that it is up to each of us individually to determine what meaning or purpose life has. In other words for those with a more liberal bent "salvation" is in our own hands. UUs also proclaim

that we “stand on the side of love.” Thus we are “saved” by promoting compassion, justice, peace, and democracy, and by caring for our earth. This is what our 7 Principles are about.

In the book, A House for Hope; The Promise of Progressive Religion for the 21st Century, Rev. Rebecca Ann Parker writes at length about what salvation can mean in a liberal religious frame. The book as a whole uses the analogy of a house to describe different aspects our UU faith. Each chapter refers to a different part of the house. The “roof” of our tradition, which shelters us from harm and evil, which “saves us,” is our belief in the power of love. Parker asks, when our hearts are broken by the injustice we see around us, how are we restored? How do we as UU’s confront the evil we see in our world? People need a framework of meaning to address evil. Such a framework informs us as to what is evil and how to respond as a people of faith.

The Christian story of salvation begins in the Garden of Eden. The original humans, Adam and Eve are tempted by the devil appearing in the form of a snake, to disobey God’s commandment not to eat the forbidden fruit. The Bible goes on to recount numerous other transgressions including murder, orgies, wars, idol worship, etc. Because humans were shown to be incapable of avoiding sin, God sent Jesus into the world to absolve us of our sinful ways. His crucifixion became his sacrifice for our sins, in the Christian faith. Those who believe in Jesus are saved from sin for an eternal life. Belief in Jesus replaced the need to follow the laws of Moses.

Parker points out some problems with the Christian salvation doctrine. First, the story has led to more, not less, violence. The story of the violent death of Jesus cannot possibly guide us towards love, justice, the salvation of humanity, and the care for our earth. Consider for example the crusades and centuries of the persecution of Jews motivated by Christianity. Perhaps these cruelties would have been less likely without the crucifixion story? Second, if the devil is to be blamed for evil, as is the case in Christianity, doesn’t that let believers off the hook? Do we want to encourage people to not take responsibility for our actions?

Parker offers an alternative, and in my view, more reasonable perspective on salvation than the Christian one. Human beings need to save **one another** from “sins.” In the liberal religious context “sin” means injustice, violence, or any action that cause harm others. We can’t expect “God” to prevent us from the harm we cause to others. We religious liberals are more inclined to believe that “salvation” comes from the “powers of life present within and around us,” not from an old man in the sky. It is **we** who behave unjustly on our own, not because of the devil, and we who need to repair the harm ourselves. Jesus can be a role model about how to behave towards each other in an effort to heal the world. On the face of it, Jesus’s life is more inspiring to constructive behavior than his crucifixion. UU’s believe sin and salvation occur by human actions and without any influence on the part of a supernatural deity. This is a core principle of our

liberal beliefs and practices. Again, I point you to our 7 Principles. We are encouraged to work for justice, equity and compassion, democracy, world peace and liberty. As I see it, our 7 principles call on us to help save the world and ourselves. Would you agree?

Liberal theology including UU does not support the idea that humans should suffer as Jesus did. It does not support the belief that salvation comes from suffering. It does not believe that salvation is in the hands of a supreme being. It does not believe that suffering occurs because of a divine purpose. In liberal theology sin is not rebellion against a despotic, paternalistic God. Rather for religious liberals, sin is the betrayal of one another. Sin in the UU context is the harming of relationships. Sin leaves broken hearts in its wake; it undermines justice and love. Sin is the result of selfishness. Salvation comes from unselfish love of humanity. When we give up or “sacrifice” for the well-being of others it must not be in support of white supremacy or male supremacy, the injustices that have been elevated in our time. Rather we seek to undo these prevalent forms of inequality and injustice. Parker defines evil as that which “exploits the lives of some to benefit the lives of others.” I quote Parker:

Evil springs from ignorance and the denial of the goodness and beauty of life. It chooses ways of living that destroy rather than sustain the delicate chain of relationships that make life possible...Evil is manifest in sexism, racism, and militarism, and in patterns of exploitation and abuse. Its harm reaches our innermost being and our relationships with one another and the earth. Evil corrodes our inner lives manifesting in self-hatred, powerlessness and fragmentation of the soul. Its effects are present in hunger, homelessness, and refugee camps, in the suffering of soldiers experiencing posttraumatic stress, or the wrenching grief of families who have lost love ones to war. The consequences of evil are displayed by trouble in the earth's ecosystems, disappearing species, melting ice caps and thinning ozone.

That these “sins” exist we cannot doubt. We, not the devil, are the cause of these injustices and we, not the God of the Bible, are responsible for their salvation, redemption or amelioration. If we don't work to decrease these devastations they will continue. Sometimes evil and evildoers are obvious. At other times many of us are fooled. As an example of the latter, many believe in the goodness of President Trump in spite of countless examples of actions that have hurt innocent people and our planet: separating families at the border, praising White supremacists, seeking to restrict a woman's right to end her pregnancy, attempting to deny people medical insurance because of a preexisting condition, denial of climate change, etc. Those of us who stand on the side of love and justice must concentrate our energy and resources to recognize evil, call it out and defeat it. We can take guidance from leaders of the past and present who have confronted evil: Gandhi, King, Rosa Park, James Reeb, and Robert Kennedy, to name a few. I quote Parker again:

Salvation manifests in wisdom, persistence, in not allowing evil to operate in its habitual patterns. It manifests as a solid sense of “enough,” in gratitude for life’s goodness, showing a humble capacity to be part of the web of life. The blessings of salvation are evident in those who hold tragedy and beauty together, integrating life’s complex and difficult counterpoints within a strong heart that beats reality with love and moral clarity.

Parker believes that we are most effective in confronting evil, and in promoting our own salvation, when we simultaneously maintain a vision of goodness. We are vigilant in the face of evil while at the same time seeing the grace and beauty of life. Good people can follow the example of Jesus, and of Buddha, “to love rather than hate, to heal rather than hurt, and to counter injustice through love.” I quote Parker again:

Life is protected and saved by those who embody presence, wisdom, resistance, gratitude and humility. These are the gifts people can bring to one another and can foster through long participation and practice as members of religious communities, humanity’s divine capacities can be honed in the service of life and be trained to unmask and resist evil...Resistance to evil through acts of love and protest is more possible when people ground their lives in more than outrage and grief: in a deep affirmation of life’s goodness, in celebration of life’s beauty and in receptivity to grace. Albert Camus observed in *The Rebel* that underneath the “no” of every protest there is a deeper “yes.”

It is because we experience beauty, goodness, and right that we feel moral outrage when we bear witness to those who engage in evil. Some people understand salvation as an inner, personal journey leading to an escape from hell and a reward in heaven. This Judeo-Christian perspective takes little notice or responsibility for the ills of the world created by evildoers except to try to convert them. In contrast, those from a liberal faith perspective see our responsibility to address evil as central to our shared salvation and journey towards wholeness. For UUs and other religious liberals, salvation is the hope not of a life hereafter but rather the attainment of a healthier planet and a more supported human community. Again, the 7 Principles, as I see them, are an outline for saving the world and ourselves.

We are “saved” by living with awareness and engagement in our world full of beauty and grace that we appreciate, as well as the evil that we commit ourselves to oppose. We join forces with and draw upon the wisdom of champions of liberty of the past and our sisters and brothers who share our vision. I quote Parker again:

Salvation is fully arriving in this life, turning our faces toward its complex realities and engaging our whole being in creative, compassionate, loving interaction with what is at hand. Salvation is the birth of full aliveness, the incarnation of divinity in the flesh of human life together. Salvation is not something one possesses individually: it is something one participates in in communally, including communion with those who have come before.

For Parker then, we find salvation in our shared hope and work for a better world here on earth. We envision a better world and we strive together with others to bring that vision into reality as much as we can in our daily lives. Salvation for us is tied to the awareness that our earth is sacred, that life is sacred, that all beings have inherent worth and are part of a precious order. So the liberal religious answer to the question of how we are saved and made whole is by working for a better world. We do this not because we are ordered to by a supreme being. Not out of a desire to absolve "original sin." Not because we seek a reward in heaven. Instead we find moments of heaven on earth especially when we feel connected to the larger whole, the interconnected web. We "atone" for our "sins," meaning the harm we cause others, by making amends and seeking to repair and improve the lives of others. This is where we find meaning, wholeness and salvation. And in this time of the Covid19 pandemic we can find opportunities to be service and participate in salvation.