Are you saved?

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'Are you saved?' is a question you might be asked in the Cornmarket in Oxford by a man brandishing a large Bible. It's a tricky question, usually asked, as is the case with the man and the Bible, by Christians from what would broadly be called an evangelical background. The question feels to many of us rather aggressive, manipulative, accusatory even, making us feel judged or devalued by its assumption that we're probably *not* saved but the questioner is. It isn't meant like that. People who ask you this question want to make sure you get the opportunity to share their own experience of salvation. They want to express their joy in having experienced rebirth, friendship with God through Jesus, and a sense of a new life, by actually claiming to *have been saved*. Like John Wesley they have experienced feeling their heart 'strangely warmed' by a conversion experience, without which no one can claim to be a real Christian or to be 'saved'.

Those who have had such an experience sometimes feel that their own eternal blessedness is guaranteed, and can never be lost. Most Christians will say that they *hope* to be saved, or hope they are being saved, but think claiming that salvation is certain and can't be lost is a step too far. In some ways that claim recognizes the power and grace of God, and refuses to doubt his total commitment to his children, however wayward. But in another way it fails to recognize how even very good people can still go astray—so much so that in the New Testament the Letter to the Hebrews says this backsliding makes the second state of such people worse than the first: they are no longer offered the chance of a second repentance, but are doomed for ever. As the author goes on, 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'. That fear is just as real as the glorious hope and assurance of those who believe they are already saved, and it makes people who feel that fear think that the 'born-again' people are a bit glib.

Some undoubtedly are glib, inclined to give ostentatious thanks that they are 'real' Christians, unlike the 'unreborn'. The vicar in a parish where I once lived signalled what he thought of people who came to church out of convention, and without having had a conversion experience, by calling them 'pew-fodder'. When teenagers, especially, buy into that way of thinking they can become dismissive of and hurtful to their church-going parents, seeing them as just going through the motions of religion without genuinely knowing God or Jesus. At this point the disagreements among Christians can become what nowadays is called 'toxic.' Joy in your underserved salvation can quickly turn into a claim to have God in your pocket, a most unpleasant attitude.

Yet leaving open the question of whether you're saved doesn't seem too good either. It sounds like doubting the power and kindness of God, playing down how serious human sin and wickedness truly are and how much we *need* God to save us from them, and therefore should thank him when he does. It fails to acknowledge how earnestly we should share with others the good news that God really does love us, despite knowing how substandard we are. When you start

unpicking human sin and divine mercy you soon end in confusion, because there seem to be equal and opposite reasons to be *both* ecstatic about 'being saved' *and* terrified about the danger of not being saved.

Some of the sense of muddle this may suggest is clarified by an anecdote mentioned to me recently by Paul Sheppy. It's said that the Victorian Cambridge theologian and New Testament scholar Brooke Foss Westcott, who later became Bishop of Durham, was asked whether he was saved. His response was:

Yes
I hope so
Definitely not

In other words, if the questioner meant, Was there a time when he was saved, that is *rescued*, by God from a prior state of sin and misery? then: Yes.

If they meant, Was he *being saved* day by day? then: He hoped so.

If they meant, Was he finally *in a state of salvation*? then: Definitely not.

According to the anecdote, he showed that in Greek these would be expressed using three different forms of the participle of the word for 'save', meaning respectively 'having once been saved in the past', 'being ongoingly saved in the present', or 'having been saved and still enjoying the experience of salvation' (aorist, present, and perfect, in traditional New Testament Greek grammar). But, even without knowing anything about Greek, we can see the distinctions Westcott was drawing. They show that the question 'Are you saved?' glides over several perplexities in our relationship with the God who saves. And it leaves unclarified many fundamental uncertainties: whether it's past, present, or future, accomplished, promised, or already certain, conditional, unconditional, irreversible, always hanging in the balance, secured through confident faith, at risk from unbelief, offered to all, available only to a chosen few, making human beings serene, angelic, almost divine, and/or challenging them to fight for the preservation of all God's creation. And by the way: what is meant by 'being saved' anyway? Let's pause to consider that.

The meaning of 'salvation'

My guess is that what many people think it means is this: I'll have been saved if, when I die, I go to heaven. One of the central things that made Christianity attractive originally was that it told people that God had raised Jesus, who had been executed on false charges, to new and indeed everlasting life, and that God intended the same for those who followed him. As we see in the New Testament, there were arguments about who would be counted among these people, and (as just discussed) there was disagreement over whether salvation so understood was certain or conditional, and how you could or couldn't be sure you were going to get it, or had already got it. What Christians today want to hear (I certainly do) is that we're heading for endless happiness in the presence of God, together with those we love. If being saved doesn't include that, then do we want

it at all? To put it another way, many Christians are not sure that they are/have been/will be 'saved', but they know what they would like salvation to be. But is this the same as what the first Christians, and especially those who wrote the New Testament, hoped to experience?

This is a typical Agnostics Anonymous question, which could be seen by some as undermining faith; but also, and I hope by most people here today, as bound to arise, however challenging it may seem, once we really think deeply about what we're being invited by the church to accept. And as usual the answer will take the form 'Yes, to some extent, and no, to some extent, but please keep thinking'! And here are some aspects of this that we might reflect on.

Salvation is social and corporate, not individualistic

Because we're social beings, salvation as something that happens only to *me* as an individual makes little sense. A hymn tells us that as we experience resurrection life 'it will be life's delight to say Heaven is not heaven for me alone'. I remember as a selfish child not being sure that would be such a delight, and indeed for most of us the knowledge that we'll have to share heaven with people we may not really get on with may take the shine off the idea of salvation! There's an old definition of the kind of mystical prayer practised in many religions as 'the flight of the alone to the Alone'—just me and God—and we've surely all known times when being with our fellow Christians has been less than a complete delight. But Christianity isn't very hospitable to that attitude. In a Christian context, salvation has to be *corporate* to work meaningfully.

This is actually part of the Jewish heritage of our faith. Nowadays, at least, Jews tend rather more than we do to emphasize the corporate nature of salvation. Sometimes this is exaggerated: not only Christians but many Jews themselves will tell you that Judaism has no belief in life after death, and hence none in salvation for the individual at all as Christians understand it, but only for the human race or, more likely, for 'Israel' (the people of God rather than the land, though the distinction is not always drawn sharply). This may be true today statistically, as many Jews certainly do say this. But it isn't true of ancient Jewish tradition. For example, Jewish daily worship usually includes prayers that clearly imply the salvation, conceptualized as resurrection, of actual individual dead people. Thus in the Orthodox Jewish evening service we find:

> Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who createst changes of day and night; who sustainest all things living by thy loving-kindness, *givest life to the dead by thy great mercy*, healest the sick, loosest the bound, and *keepest faith with them that sleep in the dust*; who makest the outgoings of the morning and evening to praise thee. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who bringest on the evening twilight.

This is a prayer any Christian can happily pray. Nevertheless in recent times many Jews have, it's true, come to think of the salvation of 'Israel', rather than so much of that of individuals. And surely that has come to be true of much Christian faith in modern times too. Many Christian theologians and liturgists

similarly stress the idea of 'the people of God', or 'the body of Christ', to use the extraordinary image we find in St' Paul. 'My salvation' may often preoccupy Christians as they grow older, and specially when they lose loved ones through death. But solitary salvation, if thought through, hardly seems a desirable outcome for anyone!

The 'kingdom of heaven'

Christians hope to 'go to heaven', it seems, even if we retain a sense of solidarity with others and reject the fantasy of reigning in solitary splendour, because we realize that eternal life must be life that is shared. But what do we mean by 'heaven'? In much Christian thinking it's been envisaged as a place—'above the bright blue sky'. Many people think Christians believe that literally. Early Soviet cosmonauts reported scornfully that they hadn't managed to encounter heaven even going as far as they had into space. Most Christians who think about it will tell you that heaven as a place you get to by rising from the earth is a metaphor (despite the rather literal description of Jesus' Ascension in Acts 1). 'Above the sky' expresses the exaltedness not so much of a *place* as of a *state of being*. We can only express this by talking spatially, even though we know that can't be literally true. Being in heaven means being where God is, though even in that way of speaking 'where' is the wrong word. Some medieval theologians and philosophers tried to capture the paradoxical character of God by saying that 'God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and its circumference nowhere'—a deliberately 'meaningless' play on words to remind us that, in talking about God and God's 'location', we're babbling about things that exceed our grasp. But we're showing, at least, that we know they do!

There's an important point about the word 'heaven' (and the words that correspond to it in the biblical languages, *shamayim* in Hebrew and *ouranos* in Greek), a point known to anyone who's done any serious study of the New Testament but generally unfamiliar to almost everyone else. This is that the idea of heaven as *either* a place *or* a state in which people will find themselves after death, occurs very rarely in the New Testament or in Jewish teaching of the time. In the New Testament 'heaven' is where God lives, and perhaps also the angelic beings that form his royal court. But humans don't generally go to live there. At most, exceptionally great people may be shown round it: the classic example is Enoch. Many tales grew up about his heavenly journeys, and were popular in jesus' day.

The most common use of the word 'heaven' in the New Testament is as a polite way of referring to 'God' without using the word— a euphemism we still recognize when we say 'good heavens' or 'heaven forbid ', instead of 'good God', 'God forbid'. In the Gospels the phrase 'the kingdom of heaven' doesn't mean a kingdom, something like a country, that can be found in heaven. It means the royal rule (the king*ship*) of God. When parables begin 'the kingdom of heaven is as when a king does X or Y', it means 'when God is in charge, it is like what would happen in a story such as the following'. It isn't about 'heaven', in our sense of the word, at all.

When John the Baptist and then Jesus and his disciples proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, they didn't mean that heaven was about to come into being, or that it was 'up there' and coming down—not even metaphorically. They meant that God was about to take charge of the world he seemed to have lost interest in. A new Age was about to dawn, in which God would be more obviously in control, and human beings, and specially his own chosen people, would need to commit themselves to God's ways. Hopes for that kind of transformation were around in Jesus' day: you can see them, for example, in many of the Dead Sea scrolls, from about the same period. They weren't hopes for heaven, in t he sense of the after-death restoration of individual dead people to life, somewhere away from his world, so much as hopes for the re-creation of a community obeying God's laws. There was to be a holy people, in an improved version of this world, rather than souls in a distant 'heavenly' realm.

Recently that contrast has been pointed out afresh by the famous New Testament scholar N.T. (Tom) Wright, who was bishop of Durham. It was hearing him on this subject on a podcast that gave Susan Scott the idea that we might have this session about what 'salvation' actually meant to the first Christians. This is how Wright spells out the point I just made:

> Most western Christians think that the aim of Christianity is for my soul to go to heaven when I die, that's what most believers believe, it's what most unbelievers unbelieve. But they are all wrong. The whole point is not for my soul to go to heaven, but for God's Kingdom to come on earth, which is after all what Jesus taught us to pray.

Wright is in this very much a student of his doctoral supervisor George Caird, Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford in the 1960s, a Congregationalist who was one of the minds behind the *New English Bible*. Caird already emphasized that in speaking of the kingdom of heaven Jesus was talking about the *transformation of the world order*, not the creation of 'heaven' as a place or state unconnected with this world. Neither Caird nor Wright denies the reality of a life after death, which was already part of mainstream Judaism, as we've seen. But they did want to say that that hadn't been the main focus of Jesus' teaching. if true, that's important.

What seems to have happened is that the disciples were convinced by Jesus's life, teaching, miracles, and above all resurrection, that God had indeed, as predicted, asserted his rule as king of the world—or, as they put it, that the world was now, or was becoming. the place where the 'kingdom of heaven' could be discerned. God had taken charge of his world. You could see that because he had raised one person, Jesus, from the dead, a sure sign that the kingdom was arriving, and that all those who put their faith in Jesus would share in that experience. That was going to mean those people enjoying a life after death, just as many Jewish teachers had said it would, though in a future only rather vaguely imagined. The new thing that Christians added to that belief was that *this process had at last actually begun*. St Paul said that Jesus' resurrection was like the first sheaf cut when the grain was ripe—a clear promise that the harvest was under way.

None of this therefore invalidates Christian hope for what *we* call 'heaven', our transformation into a new reality, but it shifts the focus. Thinking about it with the New Testament means having a frame of reference that's quite different from the assumptions most of us have today. It all presupposes seeing the history of the human race, perhaps even the history of the entire universe, as having a goal that God wants to bring it to. The salvation of individual men and women makes sense only as part of a task God is carrying out: designing a better world order. For St Paul that involved not just a reconciliation, within Christ's 'body', the church, of Jews and Gentiles, though that was his own special concern (see Romans 1 and 9—11). It also involved the setting right of the cosmos, the universe, which the sin of human beings (but probably also of angels) had corrupted and ruined. That is the source of much later Christian speculation about what is called The Fall, and about how God can, might, and probably will, reverse it, and make everything right again.

All this means that we can't really take our own 'salvation' out of context and interpret it entirely in our own way, ignoring the fact that it originally belonged in a certain 'package deal', interpreting what the New Testament calls 'the signs of the times'. If it makes sense to feel that we belong for ever to a gracious God, that isn't just one isolated fact in a kind of void; it makes sense as part of a coherent set of beliefs and religious practices that add up to a system. This background involves what biblical specialists call an 'eschatology', that is a scheme or schedule of the events of the end-time (Greek *eschatos* means 'last'.)

We may want to say that we believe what the New Testament teaches about salvation. But then the question arises of how far we can square its ideas of the goal God may be aiming at with our own musings on the future—the future of ourselves, the human race, the planet, and the universe. Do our ideas about the future of our planet, and of us on it, agree with the eschatology of the Bible, or clash with it? Or do they belong in completely different worlds of thought, making them mutually irrelevant? The assumptions the first disciples had may not directly contradict ours. But—which may be worse!—they may not really connect with ours at all. The two ways of thought may be 'incommensurable', as in the proverbial 'comparing apples with oranges'.

So, 'Are you saved?' is a question not just about you or me as individuals seeking 'a personal relationship with Jesus' (another favourite phrase in the Cornmarket). It's about God's whole relationship with the created world. When St Paul wants to explain the blessings of the resurrection life he sets it in that kind of global, indeed cosmic context. See Romans 8, where he looks ahead to a new age arriving after cosmic 'labour-pains' as it comes to birth—a popular image in ancient Jewish portrayals of the new age, one that goes back into the books of Hosea and Isaiah, centuries earlier:

> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its

> bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.
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> We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Is 'salvation' the centre of the religious quest?

As I've just argued, in the New Testament 'salvation' generally implies the restoration and renewal of the world order, not just the giving of eternal life to individuals. The earliest Christians believed this great change was imminent. But they were mistaken about that. Soon they had to cope with (another Greek technical term) 'the delay in the *parousia*'—meaning God's 'arrival'. These, our earliest ancestors in faith, thought that very soon, at the second coming of Christ, their salvation would become apparent to all men and women—perhaps even to all angels and the heavenly host. But they had slowly to adjust to the fact that nothing seemed to have changed after all. Salvation had *not* arrived, at least not in the way they'd expected.

Thus there's at least one thing that these spiritual ancestors of ours believed that we may need to deny: salvation might have *begun* to dawn, as the first disciples had recognized, but it wasn't yet present in all its fullness. Yet surely we do still agree with them that salvation is what our faith is about. We, like them, believe that sooner or later salvation will arrive, for all Christ's people (however exactly these are defined), and in due time for every being in the whole of creation capable of praising God. All will unite in rejoicing that God has saved them from the disaster their sins had brought upon them. In claiming this, we tend to think, Christians were starting from what is common to all religions—the awareness that because of its sinfulness and rebellion against God, the world is doomed. What was distinctive was their conviction that God had stepped in to reverse this danger. Other religions, we may feel, had seen the problem, recognizing the flaws in the human heart, in the political and social order, even in the whole physical universe. Each religion then proposed its own solution—its own recipe for the salvation that was so much needed. Christians thought, and think, that they have experienced the one true solution to the world's pain and anguish.

Virtually all versions of Christianity are indeed founded on a belief in God as savior and redeemer, the one who through Christ delivers us and keeps us safe. But we should beware of generalizing too readily, as though all religions ask the same questions while differing in the answers they give. The question 'Are you saved?' assumes that you share the questioner's fundamental awareness that the world, and you in it, are in a mess. The difference is that, unlike you, he knows the answer, and longs to share it with you. But there's an underlying assumption that we do all need to 'be saved', and that various religions are different ways of

achieving this. Salvation is thus central to the universal human religious quest, which finds its final goal in Christ—so Christians generally think.

But in fact not all religions are about how problems that come between us and God can be fixed. Salvation, as we understand it, isn't central to all faiths, and the Christian template I've been describing is not the only possible one. Talking to church-goers who haven't formally studied Theology I'm often struck by how little they speak of salvation and how much, instead, they emphasize ethical standards, love of neighbour and stranger, and Jesus as a model to imitate—rather than as leader or judge, or indeed saviour. And the technical language of atonement, redemption, and sacrifice leaves them rather cold.

We can of course say simply that such people have missed the point of the gospel message. But this can easily turn into a devaluing of the wisdom of ordinary people, an insistence on the pronouncements of 'experts'. There are many areas where people can be experts and should be respected as such, not ignored out of a foolish (and rather English) anti-intellectualism that honours only the University of Life. But no mere information about Theology confers wisdom, and what good people make of the Bible and Christian teaching even though they've never 'studied' should be taken very seriously. Often their take on the faith greatly downplays 'salvation', conversion, inspiration, even spiritual experience, in favour of 'living a Christian life'. Such an approach can always be criticised as less than the whole deal. But it is a serious and important type of religion, and deserves more than patronizing sneers.

But in any case there is a mature faith (with its own experts and its own ordinary believers) that shares a great deal with Christianity, yet is also far less focused on 'being saved'. Christians can learn a great deal from it . I'm thinking, of course, of Judaism. Like Christianity it's available in varied forms, but always centred on ethics, in the shape of obedience to *torah* (the system of precepts that regulate and define an authentically Jewish way of living in God's world. And it stresses that God wants Jews to live in that way, and that he always makes it possible.

In a Jewish synagogue, such as those in what is now Turkey, where Paul grew up, you could (still can) certainly hear words of repentance and forgiveness. But you wouldn't (and won't) hear it suggested that God is *so* insistent on forgiveness and the mending of what's broken that he might, as Christian prayers and hymns suggest, actually change course and make a *fresh* intervention in human history. To generalize, in mainstream Judaism God is certainly a teacher, a guide, a companion on the way. But he's the saviour only in the sense the word has in the Old Testament, someone who 'delivers' in a rather literal sense—rescues, and in *that* sense 'saves'. For example, armies loyal to the God of Israel, or persecuted prophets, find God 'saving' them. This 'salvation' has nothing to do with forgiveness of sin or eternal life, but just means having God 'at my right hand'.

God isn't expected to remodel the whole of humanity, so as in effect to replace the flawed world he originally made with a new model. Orthodox Judaism isn't primarily about the *salvation* of humanity from a cosmic disaster; it's about perseverance in a way of life.

Could we imagine a version of Christianity not, or at any rate far less, fixated on sin and salvation than it now is? It's sometimes claimed that eastern Orthodox Christianity is 'better' (= at least a bit less harshly moral, but also spiritually gentler) than western Christianity has been; and within western Christianity, that Catholicism is better than Protestantism; and within Protestantism that Lutheranism is better than Calvinism. This kind of competition may best be left unadjudicated by mortals! But salvation is a theme in them all, and the contrast with Judaism and some other faiths is quite marked. *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* are titles that tell us the plot of John Milton's two great poems, and show how he, and most other Christians, read the Bible.

Yet the Old Testament read on its own terms isn't nearly so much about sin and redemption and salvation as Christians think. It's much more about God's intimate relationship with the world he created, and above all with one particular people within that world, which is not seen as hopelessly marred by sin. Therefore though certainly it may need divine help, forgiveness, improvement, this created world does not require the complete rebuilding from the ground up that Christians mean when they say 'salvation'. From many Jewish perspectives the world is surely bad enough, and its inhabitants will never perfect it however they try; but even so 'salvation', as Christians have understood it, is an exaggeration of the kind of remedy that's needed.

For anyone who sees the human condition in this more characteristically Jewish way, the answer to 'Are you saved?' is neither 'yes' nor 'no', but 'Please rephrase the question into a form I can answer.' In this, as in so much else, Jews and Christians do not disagree head-on, but start from different thought-patterns and are therefore often at cross-purposes, their dialogues usefully reminding us that an idea that looks reasonable in one framework can seem quite inappropriate in another. Salvation is one such idea.

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