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Mike Polioudakis

Don't Seek Salvation; Instead Act Well

Here are some points of basic belief that are relevant to my main point here about salvation:

- God loves me and everybody. God wants us to do well spiritually.
- God wants us to do the right things for the right reasons.
- God wants us to work hard to make the world better.
- A good guide to doing the right things is the Golden Rule.
- When you die, you face God. God reviews your life. God is more kind than judgmental.
- God decides what to do with you. There is not necessarily heaven, hell, rebirth, or eternal existence (eternal life) although all those are options for God. All options are open for God.
- Many people simply disappear after their talk with God. They had their life. They used their life as they wished. That was a good enough chance. Now it is over.
- I don't know what God does with people who did not have much of a chance to use their lives well such as children who died young or people who lived in bad regimes. That is an issue for God. This issue does not invalidate the points above.

I urge people not to worry about salvation and not to seek it. Instead, follow the points above. If you do that, you will turn out well and have a good relation with God. Try not to follow the points above as a way to get saved indirectly; follow them because it is the good right thing. If you have to think about getting saved, then let your worry lead you to act this way, and things will still turn out alright.

Often we achieve goals better if we do not go after them directly but go after them indirectly through practice, as with sports. It can seem I advocate seeking salvation indirectly by getting you to do what likely will get you saved while not focusing on salvation. I am not saying that. I say you really should stop worrying about salvation and focus on other things. Salvation is not something to be concerned with. If it happens, it happens; it has more to do with God than you; you can't go after it directly, and you can't go after it indirectly; so you might as well not go after it at all. I am not saying this so you can get saved better in a roundabout way. I am not saying this so you will stop thinking about salvation and so better achieve it. I really want you to stop thinking about it and to pursue other activities. Religious

teachers often link other acts to salvation, such as working hard to make the world better, but I don't want you to pursue them with the lingering hope that doing so will save you. I want you to do them for their own sake regardless of whether they save you.

Included in the idea of salvation discussed here are the Christian and Muslim ideas of Salvation, which are nearly the same. Also included are Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, and Zen ideas of Salvation. Forget all about those if you can.

Unfortunately, once we have been infected with the idea of salvation, it is almost impossible to get the idea out of our heads. Almost everybody has been infected. Then, you have to do good acts in the hope that you will be saved. If that is what you have to do, then do it happily. Don't hurt anyone when you seek your own salvation. Don't make other people afraid.

I think Jesus did not teach that we should seek salvation as our highest goal or even seek it directly. Seeking salvation is not the highest goal in Judaism, and Jesus was a good Jew. Jews seek to be "right with God" and "right with neighbors". Jesus taught that we should be good citizens (members) of the Kingdom of God. We should act well. Whether we are Jews or not, we too should seek to be "right with God" and "right with neighbors" while accepting that no fallible human being can be fully right with God and always right with neighbors. When Jews do not feel right with God or neighbors, they have ways to correct the problem. Jesus offered additional ways to correct problems suitable for citizens in his new Kingdom of God. If you do this, then you don't have to worry about salvation in the sense of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, or Zen practitioners. The issue doesn't come up. I think that is what some Buddhists, Taoists, and Zen adepts also teach about not going after salvation.

When I say "don't think about salvation", immediately traditional orthodox Christians, Muslims, and members of other religions think "Horrible. If I do not actively pursue salvation directly, then I will go to hell. Anybody who does not pursue salvation directly along the lines of my religion will go to hell. Mike wants me and other people to go to hell. He is either terribly misguided or an agent of the Devil-Satan-Lucifer-Mara-Maya. I refuse this path." Even if you don't think that I want people to go to hell, even if you only fear falling into hell because you don't actively pursue salvation, then don't follow my advice. You can stop reading if you wish but I hope you read on.

Why do I want people not to focus on salvation but instead to focus on worthwhile activities such as making the world better? Focusing on salvation is not a neutral activity. It harms not only the person who focuses on salvation but other people. Overall, the idea of salvation does more harm than good, although, of course, in some cases, it is a better alternative to a hurtful path such as being a thug, zealot, or "gangster". The idea of salvation leads people to spend time and energy on directly seeking salvation that would be better spent making the world better. The idea of salvation leads to other bizarre ideas of legalism, heaven, hell, sin, sacraments, intervening with neighbors, and preaching at neighbors. It makes more fear than hope. It leads people not to trust God or to fear him in the right way but to fear him in a bad way and to spread the fear. Many of these harmful ways would persist without the idea of

salvation to support them but they would be weaker without the idea of salvation. If I can lessen the bad idea of salvation then I will help people to think for themselves and to find God more naturally.

Now comes a vexing part of the essay. One way to get people to relax about salvation enough to move energy to other activities is to undermine stereotypical ideas of salvation. I have to attack common ideas about salvation. I did that above when I said Jesus did not think in terms of salvation but in terms of being right with God and right with the Kingdom of God. I like guessing what Jesus really wanted but I don't like attacking religious belief. I avoided writing for a long time just because I don't like doing this. Attacking ideas that people have leaned on for a long time makes people uneasy. Rather than lead them to better ideas, it often drives them to worse ideas. If you find that undermining ideas of salvation leads you to fear, anger, or bad ideas, then slow down. Collect yourself. If you can't avoid the fear, anger, and bad ideas, then don't use my ideas. Stay with your traditional approach. Don't hurt people, threaten people, make them afraid, or try to impose your ideas. People who fear have a harder time finding God.

Some of what I say below sounds like an echo of long-standing debates such as "faith versus works" or "would God condemn any good person who happened to be raised with bad dogma?" I don't mean that. If you can, avoid thinking in these terms. If you do hear these echoes, try not to think primarily in these terms.

Imagine a person who already knows and feels the points of belief from above. If you know and feel all that, then how much more salvation do you want? How much more salvation could you get? You can't possibly get any more salvation than that. Wishing more salvation than that is selfish, misguided, and likely to cause harm. Wishing to force God to give you more salvation than that quite likely leads you to badness and to hurt other people. It leads to wrong bad ideas about God.

The lives, teachings, and deaths of some people have helped us to know and feel all this. In that way, they have helped save us.

Jesus' life, teachings, and death helped us know and feel all this. His willingness to die, and his coming back from death if he did come back from death, helped us know and feel all this. I think Jesus taught all the points above and so he gave us a complete lesson. In this way, Jesus helped save us.

But Jesus is not the only person who helps us know and feel all this. All the people who help us to know and feel the points above also help save us even if they did not know and feel the points themselves. There is no value in arguing if Jesus did a better job than anybody else or if other people did a better job than Jesus. Some people learn all this from parents, neighbors, teachers, clergy, friends, spouses, and children. In the West, the life and death of Socrates teaches us most of this. Mohammad taught most of this although he too was infected with bad ideas of salvation. The life of Saint Francis of Assisi helped teach me all this. The good simple decent people I have known in all religions taught me the points above whether they were Christians or in other religions.

Suppose John knows only some of the points from above. John knows God loves him and wants him to do well but John does not know God will review John's life. John simply acts as if the point of acting well is here in this life. John does not know of heaven and hell and so does not worry about them or about being saved. Is John any less saved? Does God love him less or does God not review John's life after death? I think God loves John just as much and still does review John's life. Will God be harsher on John because John did not know one point of the catechism above? I think not. It does not make sense to talk in terms of John being saved. It makes sense to think about what we would like John to know, what we would like to know, what we should do, and what God might do with us.

Suppose Susan knows everything but does not know God loves her. Susan works hard to make the world better and tries to follow the Golden Rule. Because she does not know that God loves her, she is a little afraid of what will happen after she dies, but she doesn't let her fear get in the way of acting well and treating people as persons who are valuable to God. Is Susan any less saved because she doesn't know yet that God loves her? I think not. Will God treat Susan more harshly because Susan was not sure that God loves her? I think not.

It is better to know that God loves us than not to know. Finding out that God loves us can change our lives much for the better. People who trust that God loves them usually lead happier more productive lives than people who worry miserably.

Is "knowing that God loves us" the same as being saved? I don't think so. We still get judged by God when we die whether we know that God loves us or don't know. When we face God, we still have to see our lives and what we have done with them. God still applies the same benevolence combined with rules and authority. If people who believe God loves them do better after they die than people who do not know this, it is because they used the knowledge in this life to make a better life for themselves and others. Many people know God loves them but they do not act like it, and they will not be assessed better by God when they die because they knew God. In fact, if they knew God, and it did not make them act better, likely they will be judged more harshly.

Then what is there to being saved apart from facing God when we die and doing what he appoints for us? I think nothing.

Rather than ask "what must I do to be saved?" instead ask "what can I do to be useful during this gift of life?" There is nothing important you can do to be saved that you couldn't do, and shouldn't do, even if you don't think about salvation. Thinking about salvation adds nothing and can take away much.

Suppose Harold insists there is heaven and hell only, and we go to one or the other only. I could add purgatory to this example but doing so would not make much difference. What if God does not agree with Harold and God doesn't want to send everybody to either heaven or hell? What if God wants to end some people entirely? What if God wants to give some people a vacation in a heaven-like place for a while and then end them? What if God wants to send some people to another life on this planet or another planet? Why can't God do any of that to different particular people? I think God can do any or

all of that. To insist that the only options open to God are heaven and hell is to limit God and limit his Will in a way that most religions would not like. Some Christian sects, such as Calvinism, and the religion of Islam, insist on the total freedom of God's Will yet they also insist on heaven and hell, and insist that people go to one or the other after death. You can't have it both ways. You can't insist on heaven and hell as the only alternatives, and insist on the absolute freedom of God's Will. I prefer not to insist on heaven and hell, and to leave God to do as he Will.

If heaven and hell are not the only two options, but might be among the options, it still makes some sense to wish to go to heaven and avoid hell, and to do the things that might predispose God to send us to heaven but not send us to hell. Yet is it worth obsessing over that possibility? If you obsess, you will not do the things that are likely to get you to heaven and more likely to do the things that send you to hell. Even if heaven and hell are two options, it is still better to simply act well and not to worry about them. In that way, you might get one of the other options, and the other option might be better for you in particular than either heaven or hell.

If we insist God has the options only of salvation and not-salvation, and heaven and hell, then we limit God to two options, and force him to choose between two options. God likely has more options, and God likely does not like to be forced to choose between simply two. We would do well to go along with God's greater diversity.

Eternal life is similar. I find it odd to insist people have eternal souls. I am not sure what a soul is but I believe in something like a soul because I believe we meet God after we die. God made us. God could give us eternal life. He also could end us totally after this life on this planet. He could end us totally at age twelve or at age two thousand. God can do what he wills with us. As far as I can tell, Jews did not worry about eternal life until a few hundred years before the time of Jesus. I am not sure Jesus insisted on eternal life when he imagined heaven or hell. If we insist on eternal life, then we limit greatly the will, and scope for action, of our creator. That is presumptuous, and I don't want to do it. I would like to take what God gives me, including eternal life if that is what God wills, but also I will take the total end to myself if that is what God wills.

We want heaven and hell as the only options, we insist on salvation or damnation as the only options, and we insist on eternal life, mostly for selfish reasons. I do not find these teachings in the Tanakh (Old Testament) or in what I consider the most accurate records of what Jesus said. To insist on heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, and eternal life, makes this life simpler. Seeing that way makes it easier to channel our acts, control children, control neighbors, and devastate enemies. It makes proselytizing easier. Seeing in narrow dualities makes it easier to fool ourselves about ourselves. It motivates us with a kind of crazy fervor that "work hard to make a better world" might not muster. Sometimes it leads people to be good people and do good things. But it is still selfish. Do you think God wants you to go to heaven because you are selfish and seek it as a reward?

If you have been raised in a tradition that insists on heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, and eternal life, then it is hard not to think that way. It takes effort.

Even if you don't automatically think in terms of salvation, damnation, heaven, hell, and eternal life, it is still hard to do things for their own sake because they are good and not to think at all about how happy God will be with us when we die. This self-concern is natural. Don't worry about it. Let those thoughts come and go. Just do what you can and trust God to work it out in the end.

Can we have a religion focused on God, and taking Jesus as leader, if we don't think about salvation or eternal life? Yes.

Can traditional Christianity and Islam continue if they do not think about salvation or eternal life, and if they give up forcing God? Likely they could not. They would cease to be what they are without ideas of salvation, damnation, heaven, hell, and eternal life; and they would become something else. The something else would be a better religion but it would not be what Christianity and Islam have been for at least a thousand years. I don't mind if they change for the better. Preserving your traditional religion alone is not a good reason to cling to your traditional religion if you think other ideas are better. Would you still follow Jesus or Mohammad if they did not offer eternal life and salvation but offered only trust in God? Then why do you really follow them?

Trusting God is more important than salvation or eternal life. If salvation and eternal life get in the way of trusting God, then give them up so you can trust God. If you try to make yourself trust God so as to get eternal life and salvation, then rethink. If you trust God, do as he wishes, and think eternal life and salvation might come along as a bonus, then go ahead; but don't look down on other people who simply trust God and don't try to force him into simple two-way choices.