A Muslim's View of Salvation

Introduction

If you ask an average Muslim what he/she understands about how we are saved "from sin", you tend to get one of two replies:

- *"Islam is the true religion and it contains everything that Allah has revealed as necessary for salvation."*
- *"Salvation from sin is not an important topic with which Islam concerns itself."*

Islamic scholars have told us what "salvation" means to them and the way to achieve it. And in this area the ordinary people seem to have a good correspondence to the 'scholars' in their understanding.

Salvation in the Quran

The verb 'naja' (to save) and the noun 'najat' (salvation) are used in the Quran. Many have noted that 'najat' only occurs once in the Quran (40:41). To some writers, this is taken as an indication of the importance of the concept of salvation in the Quran. The use of the verb 'naja' is much more frequent. 'Naja' is used 62 times in the Quran with the meaning 'to save' or 'to escape'. Most of these occurrences refer to events also recorded in the Bible.

11 times to the deliverance of Moses and the People of God from Pharaoh

8 times to Noah escaping the flood

8 times to Lot's deliverance from Sodom

8 times to various Pentateuch people (Moses 3 times, Abraham twice, Joseph's cellmate twice and Pharaoh's wife!)

5 times to the apostles and those who believed in them

7 times referring the escape from dangers on land and sea

There is one reference to being saved from the ways of evil people (7:89)

4 times 'naja' is used with reference to the Day of Judgement (19:72; 39:61; 61:10-14; 70:14)

It is from 40:41 and these last four verses that the Quranic concept of salvation is largely derived. The idea of 'naja' conveys to Muslims' minds escape from future punishment in hell. This is reinforced by, *"Allah will deliver* (yunajji) *the righteous to their place of salvation* (mafa'z)*, no evil shall touch them, nor shall they grieve."* (39:62) and also (61:10) *"Shall I lead you to a bargain that will lead you* (tanjeekum) *from a grievous penalty* (adheeb aleem)*?"*

The Quran expands the language of salvation (escape) with the language of achievement and success: 'fa'z' means to get possession of or gain, obtain one's desires, to succeed. So 'mafa'z' in 39:62 perhaps should not be translated 'place of salvation', but 'place where one gains one's desires'. The noun 'falah' (prosperity, happiness, obtaining one's desires) is also used in connection with 'salvation'. It is used in the Call to Prayer, *"Come you to the good* (falah)".

Finally another word used in the Quran is 'fauz' (4:13-14) *"... and whoever obeys God and God's messenger will be admitted to the gardens below which rivers flow, wherein they will abide and that is the great attainment* (al fauz ul azem). *And whoever disobeys*

God and God's messenger and violates God's ordinances will be admitted to a fire wherein they will remain having a humiliating punishment".

Another important word in the Quranic concept of salvation is "guidance" (huda). In 2:38 God promises Adam, *"If, as is sure, there comes to you guidance from me, whoever follows my guidance on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve"*.

In all this there is no strong sense that Allah actively saves people from sin or anything else. The term 'saviour' is not found in the Quran.

Faith and works in salvation in Muslim tradition

Muslims think Islam is the only way of salvation and, as we will see, in practice they live with the concept of saviours. In explaining the way of salvation, our Muslim friends speak in terms of faith and works. In Sura 7:42 we read, *"Those who believe* (manooa) *and work* ('amilooa) *righteousness ... they will be Companions of the Garden"*. These two concepts are not much developed in the Quran but are extensively developed in the Hadith.

The average Muslim is familiar with the six doctrines of belief and the Five Pillars or duties. At the centre of faith is the Kalimah: *"There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's apostle"*. There is no salvation without belief in both parts of the confession. Many of our friends believe that no matter how poor their performance may be in the area of "works", all who believe the Kalimah will be saved eventually, though they may have to suffer in "the fire" until their sins are atoned for.

In terms of works, most Muslims cite the Five Pillars. But many also say these are part of a comprehensive system of law – the Shari'ah and it is the Shari'ah that is the means of salvation. Abdul A'la Maududi, founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami movement, said, "Man must have full conviction that it is the Divine Law and that his salvation lies in following this code alone".

Others advocate the virtues of salat and quote various traditions that Muhammad promises forgiveness of sin and "protection from Allah's wrath" if one performs prayer (salat) regularly.

Another very "good work" for Muslims is "calling down the blessing" upon Muhammad. This is commanded in the Quran (33:56) but is now part of the salat and is even more than that. You see it on stickers on cars, signs in shops and in homes – "Peace and blessings be upon you, O apostle of God". This may be the commonest phrase on the lips of your friends.

The way in which faith and works will be evaluated on the Day of Judgment has developed with whole hierarchies of virtues and vices and with elaborate rewards and punishments. Typically used is the language of merit (thawaab) and reckoning (hisaab). There is the concept of an exact accounting in which good deeds are weighed against bad deeds on a scale. There are probably thousands of traditions that tell the relative merits of various religious duties.

Some scholars have denied that Islam is strictly a religion of law, arguing that in Islam, everything – including salvation – is finally determined according to the will of God. God's will is supreme and there can be no certainty about what will happen on Judgment Day no matter how good the faith and how many the good works of an individual. Encouraged by this, many entertain the hope – supported by the Hadith – that God will, by his own mercy, decide against a strict reckoning and will forgive their sins.

The intercession of Muhammad

There is also a very widespread hope in the intercession of Muhammad. A popular story teaches that on the Day of Judgment, people will stand on the plain before God and will ask, "Who will intercede with us before the Lord?" They go in turn to Adam, Abraham and Moses who all say that they themselves have sinned and stand in need of salvation and so cannot intercede for others. They go to 'Isa, but he says he is afraid of Allah's wrath because people have called him Allah's son. Finally, the people go to Muhammad. Muhammad is allowed to intercede for Muslims and Allah grants his request.

The Quran seems to prohibit this hope in several passages (2:48; 2:123; 2:254; 7:53; 26:10; 74:48). Muslims don't agree on this point, but the majority pray five times daily that Allah would grant to Muhammad the rights of intercession (shafa'at) and mediation (waseelat).
As a result, they are confident that Muhammad has the central influence on the Day of Judgment. Many refer to Muhammad as munjin or munajji – participles from the root 'naja' having the sense of 'saviour' or 'my saviour'.

Everyday salvation

This is salvation or deliverance from forces of illness, curses, activities of evil spirits and jinn and of fate itself – all things that are outside the control of ordinary people. Muslims seek salvation from these forces by going to specialists who are skilled in the practice of occult arts – Folk Islam. These specialists use various techniques – amulets, spells, magic squares, palmistry etc. to bring about a 'felt-need-level' salvation. In Urdu "nijaat" is the word a spiritual healer uses to describe what he does. Some Pirs and Sayyids hold enormous influence over thousands. Many of our Muslim friends think of these people in terms of being "saviours". Even after they have died people visit their tombs in the belief they still continue their intercessory work.

Changes as a result of Christian apologetics

As more and more Muslims are influenced by exposure to various kinds of Christian media, questions about salvation are raised in their minds. The answer by their own apologists is largely in terms of what salvation is not. The Quran has its own guidance on what is genuine versus false religion and true versus illusory hopes. The Quran seems to forbid any idea of an intercessor or mediator between Allah and mankind. There is no room for atonement.
The Quran says that no soul can bear the load for another (2:286; 6:164; 35:18; 39:7).
The Quran also denies the Crucifixion (4:157-158).

Dr Kenneth Cragg summarises the Muslim view as:

"It did not historically; it need not redemptively; and it should not morally happen to Jesus"

So in conversations it is frequently asserted:

- Man does not need to be redeemed, because man is fundamentally good.
- Man has not "fallen". There is no original sin or "alienation from God" or "falling short of the perfection of God".
- Muslims don't need to be saved. They believe man is the Khaltfah of Allah – perfect in form and given all that is necessary to fulfil God's will. So no salvation, but instead 'falah' – positive achievement in space/time of the Divine Will.

Someone has said, "Every Muslim is his own Redeemer. He bears all the possibilities of spiritual success and failure within his heart".

These objections are often raised even in polite conversations – especially among the educated.

Reflections on all this

Here are a few thoughts to ponder:

- Many Muslims hold to the belief that the essential requirement for salvation is faith in the prophethood of Muhammad. What does this veneration mean in terms of the first commandment? How do we think of this in terms of Rom. 10:19 and the wilful rejection of the truth by the Jews? Does this have any connection with Mt. 7:15?
- What does the use of the verb 'naja' in the Quran mean to the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus and, in particular, His suffering obedience and redemptive death? In the Quran it says that Allah always saves his prophets from disaster and so he should. (10:103).

  In **Major Themes in the Quran** Fazlur Rahman says, "It is because of this basic line of thought concerning the final victory of good over evil that the Quran refers constantly to the vindication of Noah, who was saved from the flood; of Abraham, who was saved from fire; of Moses who was saved from Pharoah and his hordes and of Jesus, who was saved from execution at the hands of the Jews (hence the rejection by the Quran of the Crucifixion story). Muhammad must be equally vindicated. He will not only be saved, but his message will be victorious."

  Is this indeed how God works? Is this God's paradigm of power? What about "the Suffering Servant"? What about the ministry of Jeremiah?
- What does the use of the verb 'naja' (to escape) mean for unconditional love? The context of the Quran's most encouraging promise – using this verb – is the condition of *"jihad in the cause of Allah with your property and your person"* (61:14). This verse is followed by the claim that Jesus and His disciples did the same! They *"became the ones that prevailed"* in jihad when Allah gave *"power... against their enemies"* (61:14).
  Certainly Islamists are increasingly promoting the subject of fighting in the way of Allah and its connection with salvation in the Muslim's mind.
- How are we to teach and demonstrate love, forgiveness, turning the other cheek and walking in the way of the Cross? The hymn writer Samuel Whitlock Gandy (1780-1851) described what Jesus did for us:

  "By weakness and defeat He won the throne and crown.
  Trod all His foes beneath His feet by being trodden down".

  Perhaps Shi'ites have some understanding of this.
- Does the way in which Islam sees sin and salvation show that it has come to grips with our human condition and our position before God? The great Dutch missiologist, Hendrick Kramer, found something missing:

  "There is hardly any surmise, either in the Quran or in its standard theologies, about the stirring problems of God and man that are involved in the terms 'sin' and 'salvation'. The whole drama of salvation between God

> and the world – so vivid in Biblical realism from which Islam is an offshoot historically speaking – is entirely absent."

In Kenneth Cragg's book, **Jesus and the Muslims**, he devotes three whole chapters to how "God in Christ" acted to save humanity through the Cross. He goes to great lengths to help Muslims understand a true measure of the sinfulness of man and to help them have an appreciation for the radical remedy that God provided out of His "suffering love".

In reality, we must say that a truly effective demonstration of "suffering love" can only be given by us who know God and especially by our local brothers and sisters who have come to a living faith in Him.